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# The Gospel Imperative to House the Homeless and the Challenges Facing Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in Systems Approaches

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In the Christian ethical tradition, there is a moral imperative in the teachings of Jesus to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, shelter to the stranger, clothing to the naked, and care to the sick (Mt 25:31-36). As a central theme in gospel teaching, reaching out to society's marginalized populations has been the basis of the Church's ministries oriented to people experiencing poverty, hunger, sickness, and homelessness. It has also been a prominent theme in Pope Francis's pastoral theology and outreach.<sup>1</sup> For instance, on September 24, 2015, just shortly after his historic speech to members of the United States Congress, Pope Francis delivered a speech to Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Washington that focused on the moral imperative to provide housing for those who are experiencing homelessness. "I want to be very clear," the pope declared. "There is no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing."<sup>2</sup>

In practical terms, Pope Francis's declaration is consistent with what is variously called "supportive housing," "rapid rehousing," and most recently "Housing First." It is an approach that has become an increasingly attractive option for politicians and social activists wanting to address the problem of chronic homelessness because it essentially promises to "end homelessness."<sup>3</sup> However, the Housing First approach, when put into practice, has created rifts between political leaders, division among homeless advocates, and uncertainty within communities wondering if it is the right approach.

## Housing First and Shelters

Housing First, or "supportive housing" as it was first called, emerged in the 1980s in the United States and Canada in response to two problems.<sup>4</sup> The first was the general failure of traditional shelter facilities to provide the necessary support to keep the homeless from returning to the streets. Countless studies have shown that many shelters did in fact operate as nothing more than warehouses that provided few services beyond a place

to sleep. Among its critics, sheltering approaches are sometimes dismissed as "warehousing" schemes.

The second problem was associated with the widespread closure of psychiatric hospitals during the 1970s and 1980s, which left a growing number of people with mental illness on the streets and with little hope of finding stable housing on their own. In response, a number of early housing models sought to combine psychiatric and addiction treatment, as well as sobriety conditions, for obtaining and keeping housing. This approach led to a "continuum" or "staircase" model whereby individuals would, with the permission of a social worker or another professional, move through various levels of housing and treatment. Housing First advocates claim this continuum model essentially removes the person's consumer choice about where to live. It has also contributed to the instability of at-risk individuals by uprooting them from their living situations as they move through the continuum.

Housing First initiatives typically operate with a core set of principles, which reflect their historical opposition to sheltering and continuum models: Housing is a basic human right. Homeless individuals should have immediate access to housing with no housing readiness requirements, such as being drug or alcohol free before being placed. The homeless are consumers who should have housing choices and must be able to exercise self-determination, which can be enabled through the granting of a rent subsidy. Services must be individualized and recovery oriented. There should be a separation of housing and services to ensure that housing remains permanent even if a client chooses not to participate in, for example, drug treatment, psychiatric care, or job retraining programming. And the goal is community integration.

Critics of Housing First say that it's a one-size-fits-all solution that fails to acknowledge the need for emergency and low-demand shelters as a first step off the streets. Critics also say that some chronically homeless are in fact better off in transitional housing that is tied

to coordinated and integrated support services. Housing first, okay. But what's next? If our attention and funds are focused on housing, and we don't address the other needs of the chronically homeless, then overcoming addiction, improving mental health, remaining housed, and integrating into the community won't happen.

So which is it: Housing First or shelters? It's a polarizing question that forces elected officials, homeless advocates, and communities to take sides. And based on our observations of various approaches to homelessness, it's the wrong question.<sup>5</sup> The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness has documented a number of cases in which a successful Housing First initiative draws on low-demand or come-as-you-are shelters to serve as an intake portal for permanent housing.<sup>6</sup> In these cases, the shelter serves as an important first step in assessing, supporting, and placing clients.

Cases studies have shown that a shelter with integrated support services can play a crucial role in providing temporary housing while a client works with a coordinator to navigate the local housing system. In many Housing First initiatives, wait lists are common. There is often more housing demand than supply. This is particularly true for younger clients, those between eighteen and 21 years old, because landlords tend to shy away from having them as tenants. This is also true for challenging clients, such as those who have a history of violence or arson. So instead of Housing First or shelters, a better question would be this: How do we coordinate and integrate shelters, one-stop centres, law enforcement, support services, and housing resources in a system that helps the chronically homeless transition as quickly as possible into secure housing and back into the community? Answering this question can raise difficult challenges for faith-based organizations accustomed to working outside highly coordinated and integrated systems.

### **Case Study: Developing a System in a "City without a Heart"**<sup>7</sup>

In late December 2006, more than a hundred homeless people erected a tent city on four acres of vacant land owned by the St. Vincent de Paul Society South Pinellas in Florida, a popular centre providing some 500 meals a day to Pinellas County's, hungry, homeless, and working poor.<sup>8</sup> Just three kilometres (two miles) west of downtown St. Petersburg, and next to the heavily travelled Interstate 375, the vacant lot had become overgrown with weeds and was, before the newly settled

residents cleaned it up, full of trash and debris. Early on, residents had established rules for the tent city, and each resident signed a contract that outlined the duties people would carry out while living there, including spending at least four hours a week picking up trash, cleaning the portable toilets, and working in the tent city office.

From the outset, residents believed that their makeshift city was only a temporary measure addressing the lack of housing and adequate services while a longer-term solution was worked out by city, county, and state officials. During the 1990s and early 2000s, downtown St. Petersburg had experienced tremendous growth, with multi-million-dollar condominiums going up and ambitious plans for economic development projects along the city's picturesque waterfront. But along with revitalization, the city saw a rise in the number of people living on the streets, which was attributable to a lack of affordable housing, inadequate government support services, and a slowing Florida economy. St. Petersburg and Pinellas County officials began to express their concerns over the increasing concentration of visible homeless persons near the city and the need for "containment."<sup>9</sup> The tent city only exacerbated those concerns.

In early January 2007, Pinellas County officials called an emergency meeting to address the tent city and problems created by the concentration of homeless persons near St. Petersburg. At this meeting, officials agreed that St. Petersburg's homeless situation constituted a crisis, and immediate measures were needed. Although city officials could not force the residents off the site, since the tent city was on private land owned by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, law enforcement could intervene, they argued, because the tent city violated a number of city ordinances, including those related to public hazards and safety. City officials made it clear that St. Vincent de Paul would be fined anywhere from \$1 to \$250 a day if it did not evict the tent city residents and remove their tents by Friday, January 12. St. Vincent de Paul conceded, stating it would comply.<sup>10</sup>

Although residents of the camp requested more time to make alternative arrangements, St. Vincent de Paul chose to comply with city ordinances and closed the site as requested. Uprooted once again, many of the former residents moved a few blocks away to two different locations. Tragically, a few days later, two homeless men were found beaten to death; one of them had been a resident in the tent city. The tension between the homeless and St. Petersburg city officials immediately escalated, and city officials declared the homeless situation a state

of emergency. On January 19, 2007, approximately two dozen police officers raided the impromptu tent cities, citing numerous public hazard and safety code violations. They destroyed the tents with box cutters and knives, even while many of the residents were still in their tents.<sup>11</sup> Online videos of the tents being destroyed by the police went viral, sparking national outrage. It even prompted Fox News to call St. Petersburg “the city without a heart.”<sup>12</sup>

Although the tent city had been destroyed, the homeless situation was far from resolved. As city and county political leaders, police departments, the sheriff’s office, the homeless, and homeless advocates considered a variety of options to resolve the homeless crisis, Catholic Charities of St. Petersburg came forward in Fall 2007 with a stopgap proposal to donate ten acres of land on the outskirts of Clearwater, Florida, and to establish a “tent city” emergency shelter on the donated land. Catholic Charities offered to set up tents, feed people, and provide various social and health-related services. In return, St. Petersburg and Pinellas County would donate approximately a million dollars to run the shelter as a six-month pilot project. Known as Pinellas Hope, the “shelter” (or the “bureaucratized and controlled tent city,” as skeptics initially called it) opened its doors on December 1, 2007, with the support of the City of St. Petersburg and Pinellas County. What was supposed to be a six-month pilot eventually turned Pinellas Hope into the second-largest emergency shelter currently operating in Pinellas County, with a program for almost 300 homeless men and women, and a mission to provide a safe living environment and support to become self-sufficient.<sup>13</sup>

The Great Recession of 2008 and its fallout only ratcheted up tensions as the homeless population in Pinellas County increased. According to the US think tank The National Alliance to End Homelessness, by 2011 the Tampa-St. Petersburg metropolitan area (which includes Pinellas County as well as neighbouring Hillsborough County) had the highest rate of homelessness in the United States.<sup>14</sup> By 2012, there were about 16,000 homeless people in the Tampa area, and one in five of them were children.<sup>15</sup>

In an attempt to address the homeless crisis in a systematic way, the City of St. Petersburg, with the support of Pinellas County, hired an outside controversial homeless-policy consultant, Robert Marbut of San Antonio, Texas, to draft a plan to address the crisis. A former White House Fellow in the George H.W. Bush adminis-

tration and a former chief of staff to San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros, Marbut delivered the central phases of his eight-phase “Strategic Homelessness Action Plan” in March 2011.<sup>16</sup> In essence, the plan was a proposal to create a system of coordinated and integrated homeless services in Pinellas County. At the core of the plan was the creation of a county-wide system designed around an “entry portal” service facility (i.e., a one-stop shelter) for chronic homeless men and women. One of Marbut’s recommendations was to convert an empty jail facility, which would be known as Pinellas Safe Harbor (PSH), into the county-wide hub that would align the “service magnets” (e.g., food, bathrooms, showers, shelter, and safety) for the chronic homeless and as the hub for service providers, including case management, health-care, and legal assistance staff. According to critics, it was a sheltering system that harkened back to warehousing schemes of the past. To supporters, it was a positive development intended to transition people experiencing homelessness into more permanent and stable living situations. Additionally, for some qualified supporters, the system around PSH was a compromise approach, given that the political and economic climate (including the cost of housing) essentially precluded any significant Housing First project.

### **Faith-Based Organizations in the System**

In Pinellas County, faith-based organizations (FBOs) play an essential role in efforts to provide shelter, housing, and services, especially food services. According to *HUD’s 2014 CoC Homeless Assistance Programs Housing Inventory Count Report*, the largest emergency shelter for adults in Pinellas County is Pinellas Safe Harbor, with a maximum of 470 beds. The next three largest shelters are run by FBOs: Catholic Charities of St. Petersburg has 294 beds; Homeless Emergency Project (HEP) has 136 beds; and St. Vincent de Paul has 77 beds. Of the nine main emergency shelters for adult individuals in Pinellas County, five are run by FBOs. Pinellas County has 1,131 beds available for emergency shelter for adult individuals, and 559 of these beds are run by FBOs. Furthermore, a number of FBOs, including Pinellas Hope and HEP, have been integral to efforts in the county to provide permanent or semi-permanent housing. In fact, in November 2014, Pinellas Hope announced that it would be creating permanent housing for an additional 76 people, bringing the total permanent supportive housing capacity on its ten-acre campus to just a little more than 150 units.

FBOs have taken the lead in feeding street-involved people in Pinellas County. According to the HLB's *Pinellas County Homeless Resource Guide*, of the fifteen organizations in the county that provide meals, fourteen of these are run by FBOs. A local FBO called Metropolitan Ministries is responsible for managing food services at PSH. Based in Tampa, in Hillsborough County, Metropolitan Ministries has been working with homeless people since 1987, providing food, shelter, and services to families. In 2004, the ministry adopted a distributive model of feeding the hungry, which meant that it provided food to local churches so the churches could feed the hungry and homeless in their own communities. One of these outreach partnerships was with Pastor Brian Pierce, who ran a non-profit organization called "Taking It To The Streets Ministry" in Pinellas County. When PSH was founded in 2011, food service was initially managed through the jail commissary, which meant that feeding the residents of PSH was relatively expensive. Operating on a tight budget, the Pinellas County Sheriff began to reach out to the community for support. In response, Pierce offered to give up his ministry so that Metropolitan Ministries could provide food services at PSH. Seeing value in a coordinated food service plan, Tim Marks, the CEO of Metropolitan Ministries, met with then Deputy Sheriff Gulateri and eventually agreed to take on this responsibility.<sup>17</sup> Remarkably, though, a significant number of highly influential FBOs in Pinellas County have largely chosen not to participate directly in the system developed around PSH—a group including Catholic Charities of St. Petersburg, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Pinellas County, HEP, the Salvation Army, and Pinellas Hope (the large tent city facility directed by Catholic Charities).<sup>18</sup>

The lack of integration of these large faith-based service providers has put stresses on the system and created a number of serious problems, which can adversely affect homeless populations in the county. For example, an FBO in Clearwater provides meals from 9:30 to 11:00 a.m., 365 days a year. It proudly promotes the fact that it serves more than 200 people each day. When we asked stakeholders in the area about why this ministry continues to offer food at this time, knowing that few, if any, of those they fed would be able to access the many programs and services offered during this time, a common response was "this is the time that their volunteers are able to serve meals" and "they believe they are meeting the homeless 'where they are.'"

## Challenges Facing FBOs in Coordinated and Integrated Systems

We are sympathetic to the many challenges that face this organization and other similar FBOs. Let us highlight three of them: first, many FBOs with a homeless ministry tend to focus on "activities" or "outputs"—for example, how many meals they serve, how many individuals they engaged, the number of beds, and so on. It can be difficult for an FBO to think in terms of "objectives" or "outcomes"—that is, once we have provided food, drink, shelter, clothing, and care, how do we assist this person in moving from a state of crisis to a more self-sustaining state, all while preserving the person's human dignity? One reason why this is so difficult is that many FBOs have not historically been able to provide the necessary suite of services required to address the wide range of issues facing people experiencing homelessness. Another reason is a related second challenge.

Second, many FBOs have not had an opportunity to consider how their activities or outputs are contributing to long-term and broad-based change (or, in the parlance of strategic planning, they have not developed a "theory of change"). It is difficult for some FBOs, particularly those that are smaller or prone to working independently, to get a clear sense of what role they are playing in making changes in the culture, in relation to other providers, and in individual lives. By participating in a system, FBOs become part of the planning process around coordination and integration—they see firsthand how their activities or outputs contribute to system-wide agreed-upon objectives or outputs. In Pinellas County, there is a tremendous amount of potential for this type of collaborative work through the formal structures of the HLB and Providers Council (comprised of service providers) and especially through the system built around PSH.

And third, it can be a challenge for FBOs with homeless ministries to operate under a government-run umbrella organization, such as a sheriff's department or a secular lead agency, perhaps a privately funded one-stop centre or an organization like Goodwill. There are many potential factors at play: for instance, concern over the loss of autonomy, concern over the quality of the outreach programming, anxiety over the loss of revenue if activities are not unique, and, most fundamentally, concern over a shift in identity. In many respects, these factors are common to all service providers contemplating participation in a systems-level approach. But for

many FBOs, it can be especially difficult to align their mission with any changes to the way they engage not only homeless people but also one another. If an FBO's executive director or board is unable to see this alignment, this will be enough to persuade an FBO to opt out of a system.

## Conclusion

In April 2016, at a homeless summit in Fresno, California, sponsored by the Fresno Catholic diocese, we drew on our research into the role of FBOs in approaches to homelessness to help civic leaders, advocates, and policy makers consider ways in which they can collaborate to establish stronger systems-level responses to the homeless situation in the Fresno region. Fresno, much like Pinellas County, continues to have relatively large numbers of people experiencing homelessness, including a number of large encampments.<sup>19</sup> Tensions between Housing First advocates and supporters of a one-stop shelter similar to PSH are palpable. Moreover, Christian ministries continue to play integral roles in service delivery. However, these FBOs often find themselves in isolation as government-led agencies take increasingly central roles. Our objective in bringing our research to the Fresno Homeless Summit, and indeed the underlying objective of this short article, is to make the case for developing a collaborative system that coordinates and integrates services—that is, a system developed from the bottom up, with service providers working together with government agencies to ensure that the system meets the needs of the local community. In most locations, FBOs will end up playing an integral, if not leading, role in the development of any such system. Ultimately, FBOs and others involved in efforts to address homelessness need to recognize that if we are to put an end to homelessness, it is going to take multifaceted, coordinated, and integrated responses on the part of service providers to meet the many needs of homeless people.

1 See Drew Christiansen, "A Pastor to His People" *America*, April 8, 2016, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/pastor-his-people> (accessed October 6, 2016).

2 Pope Francis, Speech to Catholic Charities (September 24, 2015).

3 For example, see the case of Medicine Hat, Alberta, which intends to end homelessness by 2019. <http://www.mhchs.ca/housing-development/the-plan-end-homelessness> (accessed October 6, 2016).

4 Much of this section was published as an opinion piece: Scott Kline and Megan Shore, "Use Both Homeless Shelter and Housing First," *Herald Tribune* (Sarasota, Florida), August 3, 2015, <http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/LK/20150803/Opinion/605201283/SH> (accessed October 6, 2016).

5 We are currently examining the role of faith-based organizations' approaches to homelessness in Sarasota, Florida; Daytona, Florida; San Antonio, Texas; and Austin, Texas.

6 See the organization's website and publications, which operates under the title The Homeless Hub. <http://homelesshub.ca> (accessed October 6, 2016).

7 Much of this section appeared in a longer form in Megan Shore and Scott Kline, "A Response to Homelessness in Pinellas County, Florida: An Examination of Pinellas Safe Harbor and the Challenges of Faith-based Service Providers in a Systems Approach," in *Exploring Effective Systems Responses to Homelessness*, eds. Naomi Nichols and Carey Doberstein (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016), 74–89.

8 Pinellas County has a population of 900,000 people. It includes 24 incorporated cities, including St. Petersburg, Clearwater, and Pinellas Park. St. Petersburg is the largest city in the county.

9 Alisa Ulferts, "Tent City Makes Officials Focus on Homeless Needs," *The Tampa Bay Times*, January 7, 2007, B1, B4.

10 Ibid.

11 Abhi Raghunathan and Alisa Ulferts, "Police Slash Open Tents to Roust the Homeless," *The Tampa Bay Times*, January 20, 2007, [http://www.sptimes.com/2007/01/20/Southpinellas/Police\\_slash\\_open\\_ten.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2007/01/20/Southpinellas/Police_slash_open_ten.shtml) (accessed October 6, 2016).

12 David DeCamp and Stephen Nohlgren, "Homeless Find Hope in Pinellas Charity-run Complex," *The Tampa Bay Times*, July 23, 2010: <http://www.tampabay.com/news/humaninterest/homeless-find-hope-in-pinellas-charity-run-complex/1110672> (accessed October 10, 2016).

13 See David DeCamp, "Measuring Pinellas Hope Project's Success is Proving Difficult," *The Tampa Bay Times*, May 9, 2009: <http://www.tampabay.com/news/localgovernment/measuring-pinellas-hope-projects-success-is-proving-difficult/999390> (accessed October 6, 2016).

14 National Alliance to End Homelessness, *State of Homelessness in America, 2011*, 50 <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/state-of-homelessness-in-america-2011> (accessed October 6, 2016).

15 Phil Hirschhorn, "Tampa Area Has Nation's Highest Homelessness Rate" (video), *CBS News*, August 26, 2012: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/tampa-area-has-nations-highest-homelessness-rate> (accessed October 10, 2016).

16 Robert Marbut, "Strategic Action Plan to Reduce Homelessness in Pinellas County: Final report Presented to City of St. Petersburg" [http://www.stpete.org/socialservices/homelessness/docs/StPetePhase1\\_8FinalReport.pdf](http://www.stpete.org/socialservices/homelessness/docs/StPetePhase1_8FinalReport.pdf) (accessed October 6, 2016).

17 Tim Marks, personal interview, April 29, 2015.

18 In spite of largely indirect participation in the system organization around PSH, these FBOs do play a role in a county-wide administrative body, the Continuum of Care, which acts as a funnelling body for HUD and other federal grant monies. Catholic Charities, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, HEP, and the Salvation Army have chosen to play a role on the Homeless Leadership Board (HLB). In fact, Michael Raposa, executive director of St. Vincent de Paul South Pinellas, is a two-term chair of the HLB, a position he holds until the end of 2016.

19 John Walker, "Fresno County Task Force Working to Clean Up Homeless Encampments," *Fresno Bee*, August 23, 2016: <http://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article97467837.html> (accessed October 10, 2016).