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# Disruptive Theology and Homelessness

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Laura Stivers, *Disrupting Homelessness: Alternative Christian Approaches*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011. 176 pp.

Laura Stivers' theological reflection on homelessness in the United States is an important and timely study. The 2008 economic crisis saw a dramatic increase in homelessness in the United States. As a result, Christian individuals and Christian communities have struggled to respond. Stivers' book is an attempt to critique traditional Christian responses to homelessness and to offer an alternative approach to homelessness, an approach she calls "prophetic-disruptive."

Stivers draws on the work of Christian ethical theorist Traci West for her methodology. Using West's "resistance" or "disruptive" ethics, Stivers focuses on the Christian call to resist and confront oppression and injustice. According to Stivers, disruptive theology "refers to our Christian calling to conflict, just as Jesus did, that which denies human well-being and community" (7). Stivers maintains that a true Christian response to the homeless should have three aspects. First, it "must affirm the needs of those who are homeless for community, connection, and meaning" (8). Second, it must "celebrate the agency and spiritual vitality" that emerges with the resistance to oppression (8). And third, it must "entail building just and compassionate societies in solidarity with the homeless and poor, not on behalf of the poor" (8). Using a method of strategic resistance and disruption of individual and communal ideologies of homelessness, Stivers advocates engagement in a participatory process of creating just and compassionate communities. Consistent with liberationist approaches to theological ethics, she calls for a social movement that starts with the experience of the marginalized and oppressed. From this point of departure, the disruption of homelessness must address and transform the structural inequality of power and privilege; as well as promote economic practices and policies that are more just.

Stivers has both a deconstructive and constructive agenda, which sets the stage for the structure of the book. The first part of the book, the deconstructive, focuses on deconstructing traditional Christian ideologies about homelessness to demonstrate how these oppressive ideologies perpetuate inequality and oppression. She provides an overview of Traci West's ethical

method of resistance and disruption, and then uses this methodology to address dominant ideologies of homelessness through a brief historical and social analysis of homelessness. Consistent with the liberationist tradition, Stivers provides historical context, and explores the current realities and experiences of homelessness in the USA. She offers a fairly rich discussion of the dominant ideologies that frame the issue of homelessness and demonstrates how they reinforce power, privilege, and social domination by shaping both perceptions and responses to homelessness. One such example is the idea of the homeless person as a "deviant." She shows how the idea that the homeless are homeless because of a personal fault or choice, such as laziness or alcohol addiction, is reflected in policies that focus on empowering people to take better control of their lives through job-training or self-esteem building. The problem with this approach to homelessness, Stivers argues, is that there is no structural analysis. The problem is defined as the individual person, thus the solution has to be found in correcting the individual person's defective character.

Stivers identifies two typical Christian responses to homelessness in the United States. The first response is the direct-service approach, also known as the charity approach. This is an approach that provides immediate relief in the form of shelter, food, and basic services. She calls the second approach "a structural Christian response." (6) According to Stivers, this approach focuses on a "more structural approach of building low-income housing." (5) She concludes the deconstructive component of this book by providing a case study for each approach in order to highlight the common themes and ideologies she sees emerging from typical Christian responses to homelessness. The Association of Gospel Rescue Mission (AGRM) is the case study she uses for the charity approach. AGRM is a national religious organization with over three hundred affiliates that offers "direct charity" in the form of emergency shelter and soup kitchens, among other services. And she uses the case study of Habitat for Humanity to demonstrate the structural approach. Habitat is an international Christian

organization with over 1,700 affiliates and is open to various theological and religious perspectives.

The second part of the book, the constructive, begins by assessing and analyzing the two case studies. Stivers concludes that *both* AGRM and Habitat for Humanity fail to disrupt and challenge oppressive policies and practices of institutions and the political economy. Indeed, although she refers to Habitat for Humanity as a more structural approach, she does acknowledge that it fails to address structural injustice. In spite of this lack of structural critique by these two organizations, Stivers suggests that they can and do have liberating aspects. By focusing on these liberating aspects, Stivers begins to outline her alternative Christian approach to homelessness, which she calls "prophetic disruption." This disruption means that the churches can address homelessness by confronting poverty and inequality and offering structural solutions to homelessness. The policies and practices that exploit and exclude people, as well as ideologies that justify exploitation and exclusion, need to be disrupted. Moreover, a social movement that addresses the structural causes of poverty and homelessness would lead to the creation of a community of compassion that works to alleviate homelessness.

This book is written in an accessible style and conveys pastoral tone. The book includes discussion questions at the end of each chapter, making it an excellent choice for undergraduate classes, church groups, congregations, and religious organizations.

There are, however, two main weaknesses in Stivers' book. The first is her use of case studies. As the title and thesis of this book clearly indicate, this book is about

homelessness. Stivers' entire purpose is to disrupt homelessness, yet the cases she has selected for this book are weak. Indeed, there is only one case study that actually deals specifically with homelessness, and that is AGRM. Stivers herself admits that Habitat deals more specifically with low-income housing and not homelessness (88). So essentially Stivers only has one case study, and it is not evident that one case study can prove that the charity response to homelessness is different from the structural response.

The second weakness is that she is not consistently true to her liberationist methodology. The liberation tradition starts with the experience of the poor and marginalized. In the interviews Stivers conducted, she primarily spoke with the people who work at the two organizations she profiled, which means we only occasionally hear the voice of the homeless who use the services. The result is that readers do not know what the homeless want and what they think ought to happen to disrupt homelessness in the United States.

Still, this is a book worth reading. Stivers has identified a three-step approach that may actually disrupt homelessness. While this book is incomplete, readers will likely see ways in which Stivers could respond with another book that includes a fuller application of her approach. I look forward to that second book.

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