

FOUNDED 1876

Isn't there room in Orlando for the homeless?

And there was no room for Him in the inn.

How often those of us who are Christians are moved by that "get lost" account of the Christmas story. But this holy family did find a stable open to them, and there Jesus was born.

On the occasion of the three-day Orlando Conference for the Homeless last week, I was confronted with how often that resounding rejection is repeated today: "Please, get lost."

The homeless come to Orlando, hugging their high hopes, which are too often dashed against a brutal reality here. One story had it that a family, after being turned away from the Coalition and the Salvation Army shelters because it was past closing time, found a policeman who said, "Do the best you can, but don't let me see you." Again, in other words, "Get lost."

The Orlando conference was a marvelous effort to address this deplorable situation in our community. The city employed a skillful team to help us move through the impasse. I heard voices raised from church representatives, business owners and from the homeless themselves, searching for genuine solutions.

I joined the breakout session titled, "Who are the homeless?" We were about 20 people unafraid to address the damaging stereotypes that surround homeless people. One educated and yet homeless woman said it well: "We're considered dirty, shiftless, dishonest, criminal, and are to be feared." Many in

the group related personal stories. After an hour and a half, story after story, one by one the homeless emerged, with voice and face, not so different from our own.

The next day, I joined the Drop-In Center group. Here the hope was to design and build and fill in where other services leave off, giving the homeless, for example, simply a place to shower and change clothes. With a single dollar bill, right there and then, we launched the dream. We collected \$29.

Sure, there are homeless men and women who are mentally ill, drug dependent and maybe even criminally bent. As far as we saw, these are not at all representative. What I saw mainly were decent folks who had lost jobs, lost homes, lost hope and wound up destitute.

My heart is full of gratitude to the leadership of Glenda Hood and the city of Orlando for addressing this thorny problem. This issue touches my heart because I am truly a witness to homeless stereotyping. Most of my thinking had been: "Hey, you bum, get a job!"

Then, all of that thinking exploded. I met and married a homeless man myself. That was 10 years ago. My life with him has never been so rich. And, truth to tell, not long ago, I would never have been able to tell this part of my life publicly. But I've learned that riches often come to us disguised.

If we allow ourselves to risk the unexpected, we discover that there is "room in the inn."

My WORD

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