

Our ragged church: A homeless mission in the city

by [Deb Richardson-Moore](#) in the [October 31, 2012](#) issue



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I once nailed the doors of my church shut. I didn't exactly hammer the nails. But I brought the plank and hammer and nails from the basement and held the listing wooden doors while a police officer hammered in the nails.

Afterward, no one could enter, including the burglar who had splintered the door frame. When we found cleaning supplies scattered across the floor, the officer and I were fairly sure he had been searching for something to huff.

Still, nailing the doors shut seemed so *antigospel*, so unlike the pastor I thought I'd be when I graduated from seminary five months earlier. I stood uneasily in the brick breezeway just off the stalwart old sanctuary, and smelled the urine left behind by parishioners. I wondered wearily, What kind of church nails its doors shut, even temporarily?

That would be us: the Triune Mercy Center. And I was its exceedingly ill-equipped pastor.

Triune is the nondenominational church in which I'd landed, an inner-city mission church to the homeless in Greenville, South Carolina. I was a middle-aged professional, tacking from a career in journalism to ministry. Two months in I'd

already fired one staff member for buying prescription meds from a homeless man. Here was my nightly prayer: One year, Lord! Surely you can't ask more of me than one year!

Because I knew I wouldn't stay long, I hesitated to make any changes. Instead, I tiptoed through the three floors of jumbled furniture, leaky air conditioners, and men sleeping off the crack and alcohol from the night before. I didn't want to be the pastor who cleaned house and then fled, leaving the ministry even more tattered for the next poor sucker. Instead, I gritted my teeth and counted the days until I could quit without being labeled a quitter. And I watched who God brought in the door.

There was Jim—childlike and not only mentally challenged but mentally ill. He often recited lists of words to me that he was learning to read: *fox, box, dog*. Sometimes we found him undressing, or worse, in the hallway behind the sanctuary. One Sunday morning he sat in the front row (fully dressed). As I was approaching the main point in my sermon, I heard a loud burp. I tried to ignore it.

Then it came again, only longer. *Buuuuuurp*. Heads began swiveling to see where the noise was coming from.

BUUUURP. Louder. And longer. *BUUUURRRRPPPP*.

Giggles and murmurs spread through the congregation. I could no longer pretend nothing was happening, so I stopped in midsentence.

"Jim," I said. "That's enough."

"But Pastor," he called, "I swallowed some wind."

Oh, great, I thought. Not only was my sermon disrupted, but now I was going to get into an argument from the pulpit. Luckily, my associate, Alfred, came swooping down one aisle and a helpful parishioner down another. Each man took one of Jim's elbows and gently propelled him to fellowship hall for lunch.

I limped through the rest of the sermon. My concentration—and everyone else's—was shattered. No matter. That morning's real sermon was about how we accept everyone at Triune Mercy, even those who can make no sense of the spoken word. I was a big fan of the mission's theology even if I wasn't holding up well in its practice.

One rainy Saturday I came into the dining hall at lunchtime to find a drunken drifter seated at one of our long tables, the seats on either side of him empty. Alfred explained that the man had been cursing and yelling at people; he wouldn't leave quietly, so the police were on their way.

I walked over to the man, who was slightly built, ponytailed, with his chin slumped on his chest. "Sir," I said gently, "the police are on their way. Perhaps you'd like to leave before they get here."

He started awake, a mad look in his eye, then leaped to his feet, flinging a metal chair against the wall with an unearthly clatter.

"You BITCH!" he screamed. "Haven't you read Paul? You're not even supposed to be here!"

There was a time in my life when I would have burst into tears over this. There was another time when I would have picked up the chair and crashed it over his ponytailed head. But this time I just sighed and muttered under my breath, "Get in line, buddy."

Unfortunately, the homeless men whom I pastored didn't take this insult lightly. Five of them lunged for the drifter. Alfred, an imposing former police officer, got to him first. He lifted him by the back of his T-shirt and carried him, feet dangling, out the door. Once outside, the man slumped to the sidewalk, the drizzle plastering his white T-shirt to his slender frame. One of our men got in two swift kicks before Alfred could pull him off.

"Alfred, we can't leave him out here," I said. "Believe me, he's safer out here than inside," he replied. We looked at each other and started to laugh. I ushered the men back into the building. "Lord," I said, pulling the door open, "I think it's time for a Sermon on the Mount."

Months later, I decided that we needed to move the food pantry from the second floor to the first before we all sprained our backs lugging banana boxes up and down the stairs. One Saturday, a partner church cleared out a first-floor room, assembled new shelving and moved the provisions. I was in my office, finishing for the day, when one of our parishioners ran in, shouting, "Pastor, Pastor, you have to see this!"

Fearing another altercation, I followed him to the new pantry, where I saw a window shattered and lying on the floor. Through the below-street-level opening, we could see the legs of someone walking by on the sidewalk. Apparently, someone had kicked in the window, intending to raid the pantry after we'd left. Alfred and three other men were already hammering plywood into place. "Can you believe someone would steal from the church?" one asked shrilly. "That's not right."

"Some people just don't know how to act," another grumbled.

"Stealing from the Lord's house," murmured the third. "Who could do that?"

I walked slowly back to my office, remembering the first time I'd nailed up a board after a break-in and how alone I'd felt on that day. Now there were others far more incensed that I at the damage inflicted on their church. Our church.

"Our church," I repeated to myself. "Our church."

The year I'd set as a deadline slipped by, then another and another. August 2012 marked my seventh anniversary at Triune. I'm pretty sure I've been ruined for any other church. As my husband says, "Once you've seen a drug addict sob through his baptism, it's hard to go back to a big-steeple church."

We do most of the things one expects a homeless mission to do—hot meals, groceries, clothes, laundry services, drug rehab, computer training, employment counseling, housing, mental health counseling, community nursing and bike repair. But we've done other, more counterintuitive things too. Volunteering. Gardening. Art. Music. Improvisational drama.

This spring we had professional opera singers perform act one of a concert—and our men played guitars, drums and piano during act two. "I've never heard opera before and sure didn't think I'd like it," one young man told me during rehearsals. "But I love it." A week later he joined the church. Four days after that he was arrested for indecent exposure. When I visited him in our county jail, he had just one question: "Am I still a church member?"

"It takes more than that to get kicked out of Triune," I assured him.

When you visit our worship service, you will be greeted by homeless parishioners. They lead the responsive reading, take up the offering, show their art beside the pulpit, sing and help me serve communion. As our congregation has grown and

expanded to include middle-class worshipers, we are insistent that the ragged and less-than-fragrant not be shoved aside.

Despite our best intentions, however, we will probably always be the best-represented church in the detention center.

One step forward, we say. Six steps backward.

The last time I got a call from the police about the sanctuary alarm going off, it was in response to a staff slipup: we had left the door unlocked. I arrived to find three of our men on the front stoop.

“We just wanted to make sure no one went in before you got here,” they said. “We don’t want anyone hurting our church.”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said. “Our church.”

This article is adapted from Deb Richardson-Moores's book The Weight of Mercy: A Novice Pastor on the City Streets (Monarch Books, distributed by Kregel Publications).