

No sprinklers required

By [Linda Kaufman](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco is getting bad press this week over a sprinkler system it installed to keep homeless people from sleeping on church grounds.

People are outraged that a church would treat the poor so callously. But St. Mary's isn't alone. Many houses of worship all over the country face the question of how to keep safe, welcoming grounds while being compassionate to homeless neighbors sleeping on porches and in doorways.

Here's what we tried at Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.

A couple of months ago, we started a dialogue around how to move people off the porches of the church and assist them in moving on. Over the years, the protected and secluded porches had become sleeping quarters for a dozen or so folks, and it was now out of hand. People were using the grounds as bathroom facilities; others were leaving their belongings in plastic-covered 4-foot high mounds.

The conversation, held in a church committee meeting in January, was contentious. Some felt we had an obligation to offer a place to stay if our neighbors were homeless; others felt it was time to reclaim the building as a place that was clean and safe.

It took us hours to arrive at a decision, but we did. On March 1, no one would be allowed to stay on the porches or use the grounds for storage. We would hire security to help us enforce this decision. And here is what made our decision different: We would meet weekly with anyone who had lived on the porches to help them make the transition.

The good news was that the church has resources to support the changes we were imagining. If anyone wanted to go home, we had the money to buy a bus ticket. If folks needed something, we would do what we could to provide them with it.

So every Tuesday at 7 a.m., a small group of us met with our homeless neighbors for breakfast and discussion. We talked about what it would take to find permanent housing and kept track of commitments.

Six weeks in, when it was time for everyone to be moved to someplace else, we decided that we would continue the community we had formed beyond the March 1 deadline. At our meeting the first week of March, some miracles occurred:

- * Dominique came for the first time and told us he had a job if he could get a bike helmet. (Bob, a parishioner, left the meeting, went to his nearby home and arrived back moments later with a bike helmet.)

- * Ivy told us she had had an interview for a job at Starbucks.

- * Stephen said he was going to interview later that morning for a restaurant job.

Several folks needed help with transportation, so after the meeting Kris, a very committed and active parishioner, put more money on their church-provided transit cards.

After six weeks of support, no one is living on the porches anymore. It wasn't easy, and we did have challenges. We did have to call the police when Eddie refused to leave his place on the porch. Having to call the police was the single sour note in the trajectory to reclaiming the porches and building an amazing community.

As a pastor, I have had to move people off property in the past. It has always felt punitive and mean. This time it felt different because we gave ample warning; we formed a team to get to know and support everyone individually; we consistently enforced the rules; and we used the resources of the church and the neighborhood to help.

I am convinced that those individuals who were sleeping on the church porches are better off now than they were in January, before we started.

There is a way to keep safe, clean grounds while helping our homeless neighbors — and it's both easier and harder than installing sprinkler systems or putting up

fences. It requires the investment of time and resources to build relationships, listen and help. The community we formed still gathers at 7 a.m. each Tuesday.

I recently saw Dominique, with his bike helmet. He told me he got the job. Later that day I heard that Ivy got a full-time gig. Herbert and Sonia have a place to live. The miracles keep rolling in.