

A flawed model for helping

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A few years ago, I spent some time in Williston, North Dakota, [to witness](#) the social effects of the oil boom on this small town. While I was there, I went to Concordia Lutheran Church and [talked](#) with then-pastor Jay Reinke about his Overnights program. This was an attempt by Reinke—we can't quite say it was an attempt by the church—to provide a space where people could sleep.

In Williston, I learned that Jesse Moss was working on a documentary about the program. Recently I finally watched that award-winning film, [The Overnights](#). I have been haunted by it ever since. It is a film about what it means to help other people.

The film opens with the social context. Between 2011 and 2013, thousands of people came to an ill-prepared corner of North Dakota in search of work. There was nowhere for them to stay. The housing the oil industry provided for workers was inadequate. Every RV park and camping spot filled up immediately. People slept in their cars and trucks, anywhere they could park them, in any kind of weather.

In an attempt to mitigate some suffering, Reinke spontaneously opened the doors of the church. Over two years, hundreds of people slept in the hallways, Sunday school rooms, fellowship hall, and sanctuary. Thousands parked in the lot, hoping to gain a space on a cot inside.

On the fly, with the magnitude of the problem pressing in on him, Reinke tried to invent social services from scratch using a quirky blend of religiosity and naiveté. He quickly alienated the church council, neighborhood, community partners, and even the people he asked to help him run the program. By the end of the film, it is clear that Reinke, with the best of intentions, had participated in creating a nightmare.

When I visited Williston, I admired the work that Reinke was doing, his courage, and his desire to open his own heart and those of others. I work with a lot of transient people. I recognize the look of sharpened hope that comes with making a fresh start,

combined with the vulnerability of being a stranger in a community where you are not sure you are welcome. My own attempts to help people have come with plenty of mistakes and failures. And I haven't learned my lesson. But while I am sympathetic to Reinke's attempt to do something in the midst of so much need, I found myself questioning two aspects of his ministry.

The first is who is doing the helping. Reinke relied on what we might call a salvation model. He believed that if he presented people with some basic services (a la Matthew 25) and a healthy dose of the gospel as he understood it, they would meet Jesus Christ through him and be saved. Buried in this model is an assumption about who needs what. Person A (the provider) is not in need and can meet the needs of Person B. Person B is transformed by this act of kindness and becomes someone more like Person A.

But Reinke's motivations got tangled up disastrously with the needs and desires of the Overnights. As time went on, he recognized that he was putting almost everything he treasured at risk for a need of his own that he could not quite articulate. But having recognized his need so late, he had long since alienated anyone who might have helped him meet it.

This brings me to the second question about helping that the film raised for me. If you were in his situation—you see an enormous social problem, you have some resources to address it, and you quickly realize that your community is not behind your solution—what would you do? Try to convince them? Move forward anyway? Look for alternative solutions?

The film presents this dilemma as Reinke's "Christian" values in conflict with his closed-minded church members and neighbors. And I am sympathetic with Reinke in this standoff. He wants his church and neighborhood to see the Overnights as fellow human beings. He is the one who bears the brunt of rude comments, has many a door slammed in his face, and ultimately loses much that is precious to him.

But unlike the filmmakers, I am skeptical of such Lone Ranger approaches. Could it be that church members had valid concerns and were not simply being reactionary? Were the needs greater than one person with a few volunteers could manage? Did Reinke fail to grasp the depth of the problem, devising a solution that could not solve it? He never once, on camera anyway, asks for help from anyone who might be sympathetic. He never goes in search of new resources. He seems to think that he must do this on his own or not at all.

Neither of Reinke's approaches leads to social change, and neither seems to “help” except in the initial stages. Hearts and minds are not moved or transformed. The heartlessness of the oil boom goes on unabated. Helpers are relentlessly scammed. Neighbors are more fearful than ever. And at the end of film, Reinke is alone. *The Overnights* is a tragedy and a cautionary tale—an excellent film, but a terrible model for how to help.