

Stranger on the steeple: Lessons from a homeless man

by [Bradley N. Hill](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

Over the years, the ten-foot-high fiberglass steeple had gradually weakened. The hot sun and brutal winters had changed it into a streaked and stained obelisk. Its coat of paint was flaking and splintering and its cracks widening. The “case of the stained steeple” went on the council agenda. After a year of debate it was decided that it should be removed from the church roof, even though it was the one visible identifier that distinguished the building from the dentist’s office to the east and the funeral home to the west. Perhaps by becoming more anonymous the church would attract some drop-ins.

So the steeple came down and was carted off to a field just to the south of the building. The council neglected to decide on its disposal, so there it rested, just on the other side of a small berm. The grass grew high (natural landscaping) and soon the steeple was forgotten.

Years later I was called to this church as its senior pastor. It was an exciting time (my first pastorate): the church was growing, new ministries were flourishing, and our preschool program was burgeoning. Time went by, but no one mentioned the steeple. Then one day Suzanne, the director of the preschool, said to me, “Pastor, we have to do something about that man out there!”

Envisioning a predator of some kind lurking beneath the window, I jumped up. “What man?”

“Why, the man on the steeple.”

“A man on a steeple? What steeple?”

So she told me the steeple story and we walked outside to take a look. The steeple was hidden by the grass and weeds, and there seemed to be no one near it. We cautiously walked closer and saw that someone had hung a blanket at the base of the steeple.

“Hello!” I said. “Anybody home?” We pulled back the curtain, and found a long, narrow space furnished with a sleeping bag, toiletries, some books, a radio, an electric lantern and a backpack. Snug as a bug in a rug.

“He scares the preschool mothers,” said Suzanne. “He sits on top and watches them bring their children in.”

“Suzanne, I’ll keep an eye out and when I see him, I’ll come over and talk to him.”

The next morning I saw the man sitting on the steeple brushing his teeth. He sported an unkempt beard and wore an old T-shirt. He smiled and jumped down when I came over.

We talked for a while. His name was Mac. His story was typical and heartbreaking. A combination of disease, divorce, unemployment, estrangement and possibly some mental imbalance had landed him in the no-man’s-land of the homeless. He hated the shelters and the mission downtown.

Finally we got to my purpose.

“Mac,” I said, “you can’t live here. There is no provision for sanitation, and frankly, the moms are a bit frightened of you.” Not me, of course. “You’ll have to move on. We can help you find a place.”

He took a step toward me and declared, “This place is just fine. I am not leaving.”

We tried several more times, but eventually we had to involve the police. They arrived one morning about 8 a.m. The preschool kids watched wide-eyed as the police hauled Mac off.

The issue came up at the next council meeting, with each person there eager to exercise his or her particular gifts:

“Where is our compassion? Jesus would not have had him arrested and carted off!”

“Who decided to just leave that steeple out there anyway? The grass should have been cut so we’d notice it.”

“Pastor, how come it took you so long to handle this?”

“We need to figure out what to say to our preschool parents.”

“We need to make a plan for how we handle the homeless who come through here.”

These church members, like most others, tended to form their comments around six focal points:

There are always some in a leadership group who immediately wonder whom they can blame, who is at fault. Perhaps the chairperson is to blame for not appointing a steeple disposal follow-up committee, or the pastor is at fault because he should have done something earlier. The solution for these people is to designate a scapegoat and let the system off the hook. And sometimes they're right: a problem is just a matter of somebody having messed up.

Some seem to find comfort in knowing the details. They want to know why the steeple was left out there in the first place and why the grass wasn't cut. They examine the old minutes to find clues. They ask why the preschool waited so long to tell someone about the situation. They get bids on the cost of removing the old steeple. There is comfort in being able to solve something immediately!

Some become preoccupied with process and ask, “How should this have been handled?” They trace the sequence of events that resulted in this debacle. They want clarity on the preschool security policy. They question whether the pastor was really the one who should have dealt with the situation. In other words, all would be well if we would only follow proper procedure.

Some want to work on communication. Why didn't anybody know? The preschool should not have waited so long to communicate its concern. The properties committee needed to tell the council about the old steeple. Somebody should have talked to Mac a long time ago! If we would just *talk* to each other, they insist, most problems would diminish.

Some want to reach out, however belatedly, to the person excluded. Forget all the above, they say. What about this child of God—we need to reach out to this man! We need to reassure the moms. The church can do better in its care for the needy. If we just cared enough, that would *be* enough.

Some want to slow down and get some perspective. Let's step back, they say, and ask how a man could end up like this. Let's examine the system meltdown that put him into the streets and ask how the medical system and the county social services safety nets failed. They remind us that we live in a fallen world and that we are just

part of the larger context.

The good news is that all six approaches are needed to shape the response of Christ's Body. Each approach offers some truth, and individuals focus on these perspectives according to their own experiences, personality and gifts. Fortunately, in our case the chairperson was attuned to this process of discernment (some of us need more training). He encouraged the council in this conversation and didn't try to abort opinions that needed to be expressed. With his gentle and steady direction, a plan emerged. We mowed the grass, we removed the steeple, we talked to the moms. We also discussed Mac's resistance to staying at the Lighthouse Mission with the people there.

Until this point, there had been no procedure in place for caring for those who came to our doors in need. The church began to develop and implement a more thorough care process.

Mac was gone. We kept his belongings for a while in the hope that he might return, but he never did. Apparently there is only one thing we can do to make up for having failed to relate to Mac in a meaningful or long-term way: we can offer a more informed, realistic and compassionate response to the next stranger we meet.