Amid tech wealth, ministries aid the homeless

by Yonat Shimron in the September 14, 2016 issue

Tucked behind a light industrial area of self-storage warehouses and auto parts stores in San Jose, California, is a small encampment of homeless people who live in tents along the banks of a creek.

Few people know or care about this encampment or an estimated 150 others scattered all over this Silicon Valley capital of 1 million people. But every so often, a beat-up 1985 RV called the Mercy Mobile pulls up along a dead-end curb and a motley crew of homeless advocates bearing water, food, or clothes and shoes hops out.

Among them is Scott Wagers, 50, a Disciples of Christ pastor who has dedicated the last 25 years of his life to ministering to the homeless.

“Hey man, you doin’ OK?” he asks a homeless man waiting to see what the Mercy Mobile might distribute one Saturday in late June. Wagers gives him a bottle of water, some energy bars, and his card and encourages him to get in touch.

“Text me and let me know if you’re getting swept up or something’s going down,” he said.

Among the homeless at the encampment that day are James “Tripper” Turner, a Canadian native who has been homeless for years and makes a living collecting aluminum cans for cash, and Ajanae, a transgender woman from Somalia whose family has disowned her.

Unlike most brick-and-mortar ministries that require the homeless to come to them, Wagers meets the homeless on their turf. He doesn’t urge them to seek shelter or get counseling or even come to Jesus. He simply inquires about their well-being and lets them know he’s there to help.

His larger goal is to get his community—one of the country’s wealthiest—to face up to a gnawing problem: more than 4,000 people in San Jose with no place to call home.

Every chance he gets, Wagers brings people with him on his rounds, whether it's fellow clergy, interested scholars, students, or business executives.

"What's driving me is the human crisis," Wagers said. "People are living under overpasses and going to the bathroom outside in one of the richest nations of the world. The church has to be a witness."

California has the highest percentage of homeless people living in unsheltered locations, according to a 2015 study of homelessness by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

San Jose tops the state's list of cities where homeless people live outdoors—the forecast for the city is about 70 percent. Santa Clara County, where San Jose is located, also has the nation's highest median household income; nearly half of its residents earn more than $100,000 a year, mostly at tech companies such as Adobe, Cisco, and eBay, which are headquartered in the city. Google is nearby in Mountain View, and Facebook is in Menlo Park.

San Jose's median home price was $980,000 last year. And 16 percent of its residents are among the nation's top earners.

The wealth generated by the tech industry has created an acute housing crisis for people on the lower end of the income spectrum who cannot find affordable housing in a city where renting a single room in an apartment might cost between $800 and $1,500 a month.

For years, homeless people took refuge in the Jungle, a 68-acre camp along Coyote Creek. It had the dubious distinction of being the nation's largest homeless encampment.

Wagers used to visit the Jungle's 300 homeless residents until the city evicted them and barricaded the area two years ago.

After that, he bought an RV for $5,500 and together with homeless advocate Robert Aguirre, a former resident of the Jungle and a onetime engineer, began driving from one encampment to the next.

They avoid downtown, where services to the homeless are more plentiful, and instead drive to remote areas where people live along a creek bed below street level, obscured by cottonwood trees, shrubs, and other vegetation.

Wagers and Aguirre rail against the sweeps—the city refers to them as “abatement activities”—that have come to define homeless living in the San Jose area. According to the city, the abatements are needed to avoid environmental hazards and public safety concerns.

The drill is all too familiar: as soon as too many homeless people congregate in one area, the city drives them out—forcing people to trek to a new location, losing many of their possessions in the process.

The roving ministry takes in donations from churches, nonprofits, and individuals. Those, say Wagers and Aguirre, are easy to come by.

“I can fill the RV three or four times a day if I wanted,” Aguirre said. “People will donate food, water, hygiene kits. We need to get people to understand there’s a financial need.”

That financial need is steep. The longer people live outside, the more likely they are to show up in emergency rooms, in the county jail, or in need of acute psychiatric treatment.

A recent study showed that persistently homeless people cost the county $13,661 per person per year. But frequent users of medical and other public services can average $100,000 a year.

In November the city’s government will ask residents to approve a $950 million bond to pay for the construction of housing, the vast majority of it for the homeless.

In the meantime, church-based ministries provide various forms of assistance.

The Cathedral Basilica of St. Joseph allows homeless people to use its address as a way to receive mail.

Grace Baptist Church offers space for homeless people to shower, do laundry, and sit indoors in its downtown sanctuary. Last winter, it got a permit to house 15 homeless people for 35 nights. This year, the congregation won permission from the city to house 30 people for 90 of the coldest nights.

“What we’re doing, honestly, is putting a Band-Aid on things,” said Liliana Da Valle, pastor of Grace Baptist Church. “We’re feeding people today but saying, ‘Sorry. Tomorrow we may not be able to.’”

Wagers is more blunt in pinning the blame. He has few kind words for tech executives such as Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook or Tim Cook of Apple.

“Their policies create an environment of survival of the fittest,” Wagers said. “The people who built the valley can’t afford to live here anymore.”

In Silicon Valley, the theory that tax incentives for powerful tech companies will “trickle down” into middle-class wealth has not played out.

Companies such as Apple are often willing to match employee charitable donations to an ever-expanding group of nonprofits. And last month, Facebook agreed to construct 1,500 new housing units, of which 15 percent will be reserved for low- and middle-income residents, regardless of whether they work at Facebook.

But some local leaders think that the tech giants don’t fully realize the problems they’ve created for middle-class and lower-middle-class families.

“Companies need to open their eyes and take responsibility for pushing people into homelessness,” Da Valle said. “Asking for their charity is not enough.” —Religion News Service

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