

Creative idea:

Outside prayer stations – walking with the homeless

This resource works as a kind of cross between a prayer walk and prayer stations – using a series of different locations in your town/city to prompt prayer for those affected by homelessness.

But it will also help you to gain reflective, empathic insights into some of the situations people face today, by imagining yourself in their shoes to some small extent... and helping you catch God's heart for them as you connect how you feel in response to this with how he feels in response to this.

The walk and reflecting process is designed to be done individually to help it be more of an immersive prayer experience, but works best if a group meets before hand to pray and afterwards to share reflections and pray again. (To help with this we have included some discussion questions at the end... although you could work through these on your own too).

Depending on the size of the town/city centre you are in, you will need to allow anything between 30 minutes and an hour to work through all eight of the 'stations' and then depending on the nature of your group, some time afterwards to discuss and pray through your reflections together. But you could choose to do only a few, or to divide the locations up between you and then share with each other on your return.

If at any point during your prayer walk, you see someone who you think might be homeless, ask God for the words to speak hope and love, and for him to make clear any actions he might be asking you to take – but please do interrupt your prayer walk to chat to them, pray for them, get them something... or perhaps even tell them what you're doing today and ask them what they think needs to change for people in their situation, as well as for them.

1. Go to a park or recreational area...

The total figure of how many people are homeless today is very hard to calculate because it includes many different categories, some of which are hard to measure. But every December the British government does initiate an official count of the much smaller number of people within that elusive total number who are sleeping rough in any one night across all its authorities – roughly two thirds of the authorities go out and count and one third estimates the number based on their day to day experience.

December 2016's numbers had not yet been released at time of writing, but 2015's for England alone were 3, 569 rough sleepers – up 102% from 2010.

Numbers are rising because of a complex range of factors related to the recession and changes in government policy, including:

- cuts in services that help prevent vulnerable people from reaching a crisis
- less provision for those who do reach an emergency
- more private landlords with less flexibility when things go wrong
- an increasing proportion of people with mental health combined with a lack of places able to manage additional needs.

It's not surprising at a time when many people are seeking emergency help from food banks, many are also in need of shelter.

Charities believe the number actually sleeping rough to be much higher, because the count only looks in obvious places – such as park benches or shop doorways, rather than derelict buildings etc.

Ask yourself:

- **How cold is it today?**
- **How would you feel if you had to sleep out in town tonight?**
- **Where would you choose – somewhere near people or somewhere more remote?**
- **What would you make/use for shelter?**

Pray:

Thank God that he knows the name and location of all who slept rough last night, and all who will be in that situation tonight. Thank him for his total love and the future of hope that he offers – to those affected and to us in praying and helping practically in all sorts of different ways. Pray for a more accurate picture of how many people are affected – by rough sleeping specifically, and by homelessness in general – and for more compassion towards every person affected from our society as a whole, as well as in you.

2. Find a bench to sit on...

Homelessness charities estimate that if someone is on the streets for just three weeks they are significantly more likely to become 'entrenched' – this is because other issues tend to become a problem quite quickly, such as ill health, bad company, alcohol, drugs or even crime.

Creative idea:

Outside prayer stations – walking with the homeless

Ask yourself:

- **If you became homeless, where would you go for help?**
- **Where could you imagine yourself turning to for comfort in if help wasn't easy to find?**
- **Many current or former rough sleepers have some amazing stories to tell about God saving their lives and some have a strong faith... how do you think your faith would be affected if you found yourself in a situation like theirs?**

Pray:

Pray that those being made newly homeless would be found by, or find, those who can help them quickly. And thank God that help and change is always possible. Pray that every time you see a person who could be homeless sat on a bench or in a doorway from today on that God's love will lead you to pray for them and show you when to stop and what to say/do... thank God that he is an ever present help, comfort and deliverer to those in desperate need, and ask for more rescues and strengthened faith for those who need this today.

3. Walk towards some shops or restaurants and stand on a street corner...

For many people sleeping rough, in temporary accommodation or in assisted housing it can be a struggle to make ends meet to get enough food, clothing and shoes... and even when these things are provided, a huge sense of choice and freedom can be lost. What would it be like to smell your favourite foods in the air, or to see something that could keep you properly warm in a shop window.

Some people who are in these situations ask for money to get bus fare, afford food or get a small amount needed to access particular kinds of accommodation – many cannot work currently because of a lack of an address or because of complex issues that need to be addressed. Some obviously also ask for money because they are addicted to alcohol or drugs. Understandably the government and charities in the field suggest you give money to help the cause rather than to individuals, but sometimes this can inadvertently re-enforce stigma and distrust too:

Ask yourself:

- **What it would be like to have people walk past or avoid eye contact... perhaps even for some people to appear frightened of you?**
- **What it might be like to be offered or bought something you don't want or need instead of something you do, or to never be trusted with being given money?**
- **How hard might it be to ask strangers for help, to receive this help when offered, or to have it withheld from those who seem to have so much?**

Pray:

Pray for all those anxious about having, or making enough for, the bare essentials, and ask that they would get more than enough for today. Ask for wisdom for yourself, others, charities and the government over who to stop for, how to speak to them and what help to offer... pray that stigma would end and that we would all respect the dignity of those we come across in difficult situations, rather than assuming pre-judging their situation or character.

4. Find an estate agent shop with houses for sale or rent on display...

Most homeless people used to have houses – and you would be surprised at the houses some of them had... lawyers, teachers, film industry officials, ex-army service men and women. There lots of different types of people who end up in desperate situations – often it's because of losing a spouse, coming out of a structured life and having no sense of purpose, or work problems that people struggle to make the mortgage/rent and/or turn to comfort in something like alcohol... which turns out to be anything but helpful...

Look at the houses in front of you and imagine you are in the shoes of someone who has lost theirs and is on the streets or staying in a hostel. Ask yourself:

- **How do you feel?**
- **What would you miss most?**
- **How it might feel if most people seem to forget you had a different story once?**

Pray:

Thank God that every person who becomes homeless at some point in their life is not a statistic but a unique individual with a specific story, unique talents and different struggles. Pray that we would get better at telling and hearing these stories so we are filled with compassion and a new resolve to act. Pray for healing for those who have lost so much and for a sustaining hope that a new home will be possible.

5. Walk up the beginnings of a residential street near town...

Most homeless people today are not actually on the streets – they are in hostels, shelters, move-on accommodation... and waiting to be housed. Or they are hidden because they are 'sofa surfing' – moving from friend's house to friend's house...

Look at a few houses and remember that things are not always what they seem from the outside – in people's homes or in their lives.

Ask yourself:

How would you feel living in this precarious circumstance – surrounded by so many people whose lives and homes seem so secure?

Pray:

Pray for all those who are struggling largely unseen and ask God to bring people into their life who will see them and help them find a permanent place to call home. Thank God for all who are struggling who still have some support network in place with friends and family that is keeping them out of the worst situations – pray that this provision doesn't run out before a permanent, life-giving solution is found for them.

6. Stand outside a council or municipal building...

Statutory authorities have a duty of care to help those who are made homeless in this country – thank God – and many council workers are committed, kind and do everything they can. But the system is complicated, whilst often still not recognising the complexity and particularity of different people's needs...

Creative idea:

Outside prayer stations – walking with the homeless

You could be in for a long wait for help, especially if you are discovered to be ‘intentionally homeless’ (the categories for which include defaulting on your mortgage) and it’s hard to register for services without an address. Even when you are helped, benefits are difficult to manage on and precarious... if anything is suspected to be awry at any point, your benefit payments are suspended whilst the matter is being investigated, leaving you with little or nothing to survive on in the meantime.

Ask yourself:

- **How would you feel walking up to the door of a local authority service, knowing everything was riding on the assessment meeting you would have with them?**
- **Would you find it easy to ask for help, or difficult?**
- **What would you hope for? And what would you be frightened of?**

During the 2016/2017 winter, 120,000 children (almost all with families) were homeless... priority and additional help are given to families with children – so they do receive assistance – but the system is groaning under the numbers needing help and many are in highly unsuitable, temporary accommodation.

It’s one thing to imagine yourself in this situation alone, or with a partner or a friend, but ask yourself:

- **What would it be like to be a parent with your children also having lost their home?**

Pray:

Pray for everyone currently receiving help from local authorities and thank God for the systems and workers that are in place. Pray for reform where it is needed and for more clarity. Pray for every person waiting for a decision that affects their housing – ask God for mercy to win in every situation where someone is in need. Pray for children to be safe and receive good help and for parents to be relieved in their anxiety for them. Ask God if he’s stirring you up to find out more about campaigning for change on some of these issues... and if so, consider contacting the national charity, Shelter (www.shelter.org.uk) to find out how you could get involved.

7. Find a charity shop and stand outside it...

The role of charities – nationally and locally – in helping those without homes, or assisting people to address life-controlling issues that are getting in the way of them sustaining a tenancy, is vital. Often it’s charities’ expert case-workers help people navigate the complicated situations and systems they face, provide extra accommodation to those the councils can’t help or are still waiting for help... and act as a consistent point of call across lots of separate services that homeless people might need to access such as doctors, drug and alcohol services, job centres etc.

Ask yourself:

- **How would you feel seeking help from a charity? Turning up at a shelter one night perhaps... would that be an easy or hard thing to do?**

Pray:

Pray for everyone seeking or receiving help from homelessness charities today – for their safety, care and progress through the system from here on. Pray for Shelter, Crisis and other national organisations and for all local organisations and services you know about who are standing in the gap with and for those in desperate situations. Charities in this sector are facing more need and less funding – pray for miraculous provision and increased

Creative idea:

Outside prayer stations – walking with the homeless

generosity for them, and for supernatural love, wisdom and patience for their workers who experience a lot of ongoing pressure and some very challenging and distressing situations.

8. Stand on the steps – or in the porch – of one of the town/city centre churches...

Churches and their members play a huge part in resourcing and running charities helping people who are homeless, and many also reach out to individuals themselves. And many homeless people still recognise churches as a good place to come for help – for immediate shelter or relief, or for ongoing support.

Ask yourself:

- **How would you feel coming to church, or asking people from the church for help, if you had lost everything... or you had been out on the streets the night before?**
- **How do you think people would react to this if they knew you... how about if they didn't?**

Pray:

Thank God for every individual and church reaching out in love, especially those who are being generous to the point of it truly costing them. Pray for genuine welcome to be extended to people who have challenging needs and for wisdom in understanding the best way to be part of bringing transformation to their lives. Ask God to start with you – how is he asking you to pray or act? Or perhaps he simply wants to say well done, keep up the good and loving work.

Once you're back from your walk...

Use some or all of the following reflection/discussion questions to process the experience you've just had:

- What did you learn?
- What surprised you?
- What challenged you?
- Has anything changed/will anything change in how you view homeless people as a result of doing this walk?
- Has anything changed/will anything change in how you pray for homeless people?
- Has anything changed/will anything change in how you respond to homeless people or homelessness projects as a result of this?

Finish by spending some time in open prayer however you feel led – asking God to help you let go of things he's not asking you to take responsibility for praying or doing after today, but to also help you to remember, retain and explore more about those he is.