

2010

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## Recommended Citation

Maas, Matthew, "Youth Homelessness: A Cry for Right Memory and Embrace" (2010). *Children, Youth, and Family (CYF) Papers*. Paper 10.

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Youth Homelessness: A Cry for Right Memory and Embrace

By Matthew Maas

A Term Paper  
Presented to Dr. Andrew Root  
Luther Seminary

As a Requirement in  
CY 4520: Youth Ministry in and for the Sake of the World

St. Paul, Minnesota  
April 20, 2010

**Introduction: Going to the Other Side**

“Let us go over to the other side,” Jesus says. They leave the crowd to cross to the otherside of the lake and enter a storm (Mark 4:35). The story continues as Jesus calms the storm and his rag-tag band of followers --wrought with fear-- ask, “Who then is this?” (4:40). Reaching the other side, a demon possessed man--shackled in a 1st century asylum--answers their question shouting, “the son of the most high God.” Jesus breaks through theses societal/cultural barriers, going to the other side, where the crowds dare not go because the unclean--those excluded from community--live. The gospel writer says, “When Jesus crossed *again* in the boat to the other side,” a woman touches the hem of his garment and is healed (5:21-27). The boat has been an image of the church community for centuries and the direction Jesus points is “to the other side.”

Just as in 1st century Palestine, today the most vulnerable and least visible in society are found “on the other side.” This paper aims to take “to the other side” in addressing the cultural phenomena of youth homelessness. Jesus brings the disciples to this side, not for a week-long servant event, but to show them the activity of God is amongst those who are the least visible and most vulnerable. God’s presence amidst the lives of youth who experience homelessness takes the church through exclusive boundaries and leads them to a more holistic vision of their identity as the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Body of Christ. I hope this paper is more than words on paper but a vessel which carries the reader “to the other side” where God hears their cry for remembrance and embrace.

## **I. Descriptive: Context and Cultural Phenomenon**

I desired for the youth in our community of faith to be aware of the issues in their urban context, around their state and in the world. In order to address this cultural reality for people in their own community, I thought it would be most effective to do an educational series on youth homelessness. At the first session, we watched *Homeless Youth: Finding Home*. This documentary provided stats and brief stories as a foundation for the discussion. At the second session I brought in a speaker, Jen Fairbourne, who not only works with homeless youth but experienced homelessness too. Finally, I left the series open to see where we could serve as a community of faith. I wanted to do this “leave space” so that the Spirit and experience could guide where to go next. It was at the end of Jen Fairbourne’s talk with the church group that the youth collectively decided they want to “do more” to end youth homelessness in their city.

Leading up to this moment of a call to “do more,” it’s important to describe what the process was up to that point. What we heard from *Homeless Youth: Finding Home* detailed the reality of despair and tragedy for these youth. Our group heard that the person experiencing homelessness is one in a state of feeling lost and struggling for survival. Every night in Minnesota it is estimated over 700 youth are in this place. The youth experiencing homelessness are from reservations, small towns, suburbs and urban areas of Minnesota. As sixty-five percent of the 700 are people of color, the issue quickly reaches racial and economic injustices. Youth homelessness is even an issue in rural areas, which many of us perceive as picturesque Lake Wobegon Country, and those who are the most vulnerable migrate to urban areas such as the Twin Cities and Duluth. Some seek these places because positive memories as children and the memory of hope in these locations is all they have when the future appears to be nothing but a perpetuated state of survival. The documentary paints a dark picture with detailed brush strokes of four individual’s lives. On the screen a female tells of her first night being homeless: “When

I was dropped off in downtown, I slept in a port-a-potty in Loring Park.” One youth in the room shouted, “Nasty!” upon hearing this. Our understanding of what homelessness and what home means becomes challenged. Kimberly Dovey in *Home and Homelessness* says, “Home is a relationship that is created and evolved over time; it is not consumed like a product of an economic process. The house is a tool for the achievement of the experience of home” (Bouma-Prediger 58). Much of what we hear going on with these youth has more to do with broken relationships than the economics of housing structures. Another youth on the documentary reported they felt like they were viewed as a statistic and not a person and that “I didn’t choose to be homeless because it is part of the urban genocide that’s happening in America.” Hearing terms such as urban genocide, referring to the deadly results of systemic poverty, unlocks the stereotype that youth have chosen this as a way of life. The resiliency of those experiencing homelessness is quite high, and they often say they had to grow up quickly. In this growing-up quickly, a social worker expanded, “they quickly gain protective skills in a survival mentality within a very hostile environment.” The survival mentality can initiate mental instability for many homeless youth and methods to self-medicate through drug and alcohol abuse. There is a thread of instability in their childhood. The Wilder social worker discusses attachment disorders, personal shame, and chemical addiction as therapy topics needing to be addressed for those who enter youth homeless shelters. Homelessness soon takes on a chaotic state for those who truly are the most vulnerable in our society.

After this initial exposure, I began to see that this was an issue that we really had not known much about. While I was glad to journey with them towards putting a face on the most vulnerable in our community, it was also gut-wrenching to realize that the places in the city which I consider peaceful, such as the river and parks, were places of great pain and

hopelessness for these youth. Our preconceived notions are blown apart, especially when we hear Jen's story, of what it means to be homeless.

Jen Fairbourne experienced youth homelessness and has been working with homeless youth for the last 17 years. Her story is a narrative that describes a face of evil and a journey to forgiveness. She grew up in an affluent family, unlike some of the people we met in the documentary. Jen, the second oldest of seven kids, grew up in a devoutly religious family and felt her parents loved her very much. In fact, her childhood in many ways is not much different from those in the youth group. Thus, it's not a background that one envisions would turn quickly into a life of hopelessness. The moment where the documentary becomes three dimensional before their eyes is when Jen told the group, "When I was sixteen, I got a ride from a church activity from a man from church who didn't take me home but took me to an abandoned junk yard and molested me." Students in the room gasp and momentarily couldn't look her in the eyes, finding it easier to stare at the elegantly, flowing tattoos on her arms. She continued, "It absolutely destroyed me. It was the first time I was touched by anyone and it sent me on a big downward spiral." Her story is all too common amongst homeless youth, as many are sexually and/or physically abused before they end up homeless. According to Youth Moving Forward, 51% have been abused ([www.youthmovingforward.org](http://www.youthmovingforward.org)). Here a youth's life changed dramatically, not because she could play her violin better than anyone or by an unwise choice, but by an event she never imagined would occur. Jen's parent's were not equipped to handle the situation.

"I became extremely depressed and I would wake up Sunday mornings and be sick to my stomach. I couldn't talk to them about it. I felt guilty and I felt it was my fault. I don't know what I thought they would do but I stopped going to church. And because of that, I lost a lot of the friends I had in the church community and felt very alone and very isolated."

Jen's an effective speaker with young groups and it's clear they're quite comfortable hearing someone not gloss over the difficulty between parental and church relationships. The suffering Jen experienced is a place where the youth may not know, but they can imagine what it feels like to be isolated, lonely, depressed and misunderstood. She says of her suffering at this time, "I ended up connecting with a group of friends at school who I thought I identified with because they also were going through a lot of pain, a lot of suffering; they were kids who smoked and drank. I found that alcohol worked really well at numbing and medicating some of the stuff I was going through." Things at home grew much worse for the relationship between Jen and her parents. Subsequently, she became more depressed and was locked in a mental ward for six and a half weeks. Her parents were overwhelmed. It was at this moment she shared, "When I got out there was no returning home. There were unreconcilable differences and I was super angry that they had locked me up, so I stayed with a few friends." She did graduate high school after "couch surfing" until she was eighteen. We were all impressed with her resiliency amidst experiencing homelessness, but with nowhere to go, the loss of tradition and identity within her family, she continued to experience homelessness the next seven years.

She stepped away from her story to give us some facts on the cultural phenomena of homelessness. We found out many youth leaving foster care after high school, in fact, become homeless within this transition. There is a deficit of transitional housing for youth leaving foster care in the state of Minnesota. Since youth experiencing homelessness did not elect to live this way, they exclude themselves from asking for help; only 15% of the estimated nearly 23,000 homeless youth in Minnesota benefited from housing services or emergency shelters (2008 statistics). The issue becomes more complex when considering the racial complexities. Faribourne mentioned, that African Americans are more likely to be homeless because mental

illness in these communities is an unwanted stigma and lack of healthcare for African Americans contributes to their vulnerability to homelessness.

Jen continues, “I hopped on a freight train and left the state. During that time I lived in abandoned buildings and ate out of dumpsters.” We all felt pity towards her as she described the reality of experiencing homelessness; however, both the Wilder documentary and Jen say that “if given another life I wouldn’t change or trade it.” I ask myself, I wonder if *this* place, one of pity, is where we often start for desiring to “help?” If so, we are not listening beyond the experience and our own feelings to truly listen and respond what homeless youth desire.

Remarking on life as a homeless youth she said, “I travelled by hitchhiking and freight trains and really when I left, I was angry at my family, I was very angry at God, I was really overwhelmed.” When guiding others to tell their stories she never shared all the details, but she made herself quite vulnerable, not only in the physical survival aspects of her story, but the psychological and spiritual stresses as well. “The three years I spent living on the streets were the ones where....I learned how to find my spirituality.” Unquestionably, Jen hooked us as she described such a low point and it was due to experience, not doctrine, that an existential crisis of deep questions carried her to a place of prayer. She asserted, “I had so many absolutely miraculous things happen throughout that time that that was what helped me gain my spirituality back.” The experience of homelessness becomes one of the lack and the void of resources due to being cut-off from community. And the homeless live much closer to the created world’s ability to bring about death whereas those with sufficient health care and housing living more naively in world of manufactured risk.

## **II. Interpretive**

There are many organizations that are aware of the phenomenon of youth homelessness. When Jen returned to Minneapolis she connected with two drop-in centers, Project Off Streets and Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota's Rezek house. She learned about these organizations from the people who, "saw we were good kids that had been given bad scenarios to deal with and they helped us believe that too because we were feeling bad about ourselves." The understanding of sin and their relationship with God plays a large role in how stories are structured. For Jen, growing up in a rigid religious environment, understood the sin of the perpetrator as something she was at fault for. Parallel to this understanding of sin, sexuality and the understanding that humans are created as sexual beings, was not part of her resource for managing the tragedy. GLBT youth compose a significant percentage of adolescents living on the streets, rejected by their families, ostracized by faith communities, and turning to chemical abuse in order to numb the pain. The more one listens and sits with the pain, the more one sees the tangled, jagged chaos of the issue. Jen's story does offer hope; the experience of being homeless isn't and doesn't have to be the ultimate reality.

The most significant turn for her was meeting one individual,

"who said we had a lot to offer because of our experience with drugs and alcohol and believed we were great essentially great drug counselors because we had a vast amount of knowledge about the drugs we were using and asked us to go into other drop in centers and shelters and talk to other kids very frankly and openly about drug use... and it worked."

This is a "success story" for the methods used to restore a youth to themselves and their community. The vocation as a drug counselor gave her purpose and yet didn't ignore her pain. She said of this turn, "It was twofold: one, it gave the young people who were in these programs

real life people who they could look at then say ‘we know we don’t want to end up like you so we’re not going to do drugs.’ It let us feel like we were valued and like we were contributors in the community and it took us out of the role of being homeless drug addicts to being educators and community activists.”

We all assumed that she had gone through therapy in order to do the drug counseling but she shattered this assumption. “That was the beginning to a very huge change that happened in me where I started believing in myself and getting the help I needed to heal and to treat my mental health problems and that was when I, at the age of 21, knew that I was supposed to be working with homeless kids.” Her calling is very timely as John Berger calls the twentieth century “the century of banishment” in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* says, “never before our time have so many people been uprooted. Emigration, forced or chosen, across national frontiers or from village to metropolis, is the quintessential experience of our time (Bouma Prediger 82).

Often the perception for youth groups is that the only thing they can provide is clothing and food at a homeless shelter, but the homeless have needs for spaces and materials, which provide “an outlet for the anger and frustration and the craziness that you are experiencing on a daily basis.” So, Fairbourne started an arts organization, called Frameworks. With her leadership, she created a space for youth experiencing homelessness to create via photography and pottery. However, she discovered, “arts are expensive and prohibitive for those who are experiencing homelessness to gain access to.” Then, at 25, Jen worked doing street outreach, meeting with youth who were sleeping at the river and the railroad tracks in order to connect with them and build trust amidst their own stories of abandonment, abuse and anger. Playing a significant role in her community she said, “I felt that I had a real gift, a real knack for doing that

and I felt I was called to do this work.” Standing in a place of belonging allowed for healing and forgiveness for her past. She says she began to realize, “the experiences I went through were absolutely for a reason.” Due to workers who reached out and her own efforts, Fairbourne has been restored to the wider community.

Homelessness is not declining, it is on the increase. Faith communities who want to do something about the systemic issues, will not surprisingly go straight to the center of Jen’s experience: family breakdown and untreated mental health issues. When she talked with us she opens up another dimension, the fact that many homeless youth bring children into the picture. Lifehaven is a place for homeless single mothers. Fairbourne says, “The young ladies are recreating their family because they’ve lost theirs, and so that’s what they’re doing in having kids.” There is a window of opportunity to work with homeless youth as they seek belonging and meaning--motivators for learning and change. Fairborne remarked “this is a critical age when people need to be paying attention and helping them navigate through difficult decisions. They don’t have fully developed frontal lobes and those neural pathways are not fully mapped out. That’s your decision making skills for the rest of your life.” The work that Jen and others are doing is critical for the lives of the youth they work with. The weight of the issue was one that couldn’t be lifted from the room. She ended her conversation by thanking us for listening and then one youth raised their hand, not to ask a question but to speak out, “I think I knew a kid who was homeless in our school last year. I didn’t do anything. What can I and, well, all of us do to help these other youth?” The youth raised bold statements because their lives are full of risk and change; envisioning response to cultural issues is in many ways their gift within the faith community. Both the documentary and Jen Fairborne explained what phenomenologically is

occurring and the reasoning. So often we as leaders, and I am quite guilty of this, lean towards “What should I fix” and do not ask “What should be happening?”

### **III. Normative**

What should be happening for faith communities that would like to partner with homeless youth agencies? As Jen described, her story opened a wound that bleeds each time it is re-told. The church has desired to help, placing a bandage on the situation. The band-aids come in the form of piles of unwanted clothing and shoes left on the footsteps of homeless shelters everyday. Yet, such actions are interpreted by social workers and the homeless as religious obligation and not out of a confession of God’s activity. Could this youth group, as the center of a vision, partner in a different way that witnesses to who God is and what God calls disciples to in an authentic way? In this section, I aim to dialogue with Miroslav Volf’s writings, *The End of Memory* and *Exclusion and Embrace*, in order to create a theological framework for normative practices given the previous Descriptive and Interpretive sections. Through entering into a relationship with youth experiencing homelessness, the church is called to “cross over to the other side” to practice forgiveness in response to God’s activity of memory and embrace.

What we remember, and maybe more importantly what we do with this memory, is vital for shaping one’s identity. In the hearing of the experience of one who is homeless, one is reminded of their own wounds and scars. Many homeless youth have fragmented memories--pieces strung together by embellishments and deletions. It’s possible all the jagged edges of incoherence become the catalyst for opening up our wounds. Jen’s story up to that point drew us into the center of a cultural phenomenon. She told the truth of youth homelessness first by telling the truth of herself. In turn, we need to tell the truth of ourselves about our relationship to God and to our environment in order to ‘call a thing what it is.’ When acknowledgement doesn’t

happen says Volf in *The End of Memory*, “untruthful memories are unjust memories and therefore add to the evil from which they seek to subtract” (30). As the Body of Christ, the youth of this congregation are the mind, nerve endings and vocal chords of God’s Word. Their speaking of the truth is a moral obligation to the memory they now have of this encounter. If the church, as the Body of Christ, is a place where we encounter a God who brings life out of death, then speaking truth of youth homelessness in the community brings a vision and reality for true hope. We do not speak the truth out of obligation, but in response to the Spirit. The power of the Spirit brought life from death in the One who identified with the most vulnerable. “The purpose of truthful memory,” says Volf, “is not simply to name acts of injustice...instead, the highest aim of lovingly truthful memory seeks to bring about the repentance, forgiveness, and transformation of wrongdoers, and reconciliation between wrongdoers and victims” (64-65). Such is the efficacy of faith as a way of life; rooted in the future which belongs to “those who give themselves in love” (83). It is risky to give of oneself in love, yet this is the life we are baptized into: one that recognizes we are already dead so the life we live is one that is a new life, one in Christ.

The risk in partnering with a youth homeless shelter is thinking the partnership is only for the congregation or only for those the shelter is serving. Jen’s story explained how it is really both, and more what should be happening is the congregation listening to the stories of forgiveness and healing that could be life-altering for those who are ‘over housed.’ She was very bitter and angry; in response her healing was moving beyond her identity as a victim. She says, “it becomes who you are, you are a victim and that’s the role that you play and that’s what you project onto the world and that’s what the world gives you back.” As a tortured soldier, Mirsolav Volf could not forget the wrongs done to him in order to forgive. Viewing himself as a

victim did not bring him to a place where he was 'more than a victim' or a place of reconciliation. Volf and Fairborne say strikingly similar things about moving towards a new identity, that is there must be forgiveness. Fairbourne adds,

“Anyone who has gone through a similar experience, which a vast majority has, finds that anger, hurt and resentment doesn't do anything to the person who victimized you. It doesn't right any wrongs and it doesn't punish them in any way and it absolutely destroys you. It punishes you, it holds you down-it holds you back--finding ways to embrace it and finding ways to let that go and to forgive is the only way that the healing begins.”

The move toward right memory involves a change of understanding of sin in order that forgiveness can occur.

Since there is an intensified existential crisis of identity for homeless youth, the experience of exclusion becomes their broken reality. The doctrine of sin includes this broken reality. Volf describes sin in this way, as exclusion--both a transgression against 'binding' and a transgression of 'separating' (67). Jen experienced the reality of sin as exclusion when she shared, “it was a point in time that I was angry at God. 'I've given my whole world to you and I can't go back home!' It really built and by the time I left Minneapolis, I don't even know if I can describe how empty I felt. You know I didn't feel like there was anything; there was just darkness everywhere. I didn't have that connection to my family, and like I said, my church was my life and I didn't feel like it was a safe place to go.” Volf's description of this transgression is precisely the event of her being forced to not live in the abusive situation. Of this he states, “exclusion can entail cutting of the bonds that connect, taking oneself out of the pattern of interdependence and placing oneself in a position of sovereign independence” (67).

The other exclusion dynamic is that of 'separating'. Of this Volf says, “Exclusion takes place when the violence of expulsion, assimilation, or subjugation and the indifference of abandonment replace the dynamics of taking in and keeping out as well as the mutuality of

giving and receiving” (67). Jen’s family and community excluded her for many reasons, but it came down to the fact she wasn’t like them. She said,

“I also felt like I was bad, I wasn’t allowed in those church doors, to take the sacrament. God to me was like a dirty four letter word and I was *that* angry. ‘Why did this happen to me?’ and ‘Why is he (the molester) ‘ok’ to stay in the church and maintain family and friend relationships? The other (family/community around her) is then one to push away.”

She was wrongly judged by the community and wasn’t seen as one they could embrace any longer because of their community-made barriers. Barriers created to ‘keep order’ may wall off those outside who are cast into chaos and darkness. Fortunately, our activity does not always parallel God’s move of inclusivity found in Christ.

Jesus’ life and ministry was one where he broke such barriers, healing those excluded. “The mission of Jesus consisted not simply in *re-naming* the behavior that was falsely labeled “sinful” but also in *re-making* the people who have actually sinned or have suffered misfortune (Volf 73). Rather than label something or someone as unclean due to their otherness, Jesus sees these differences as the reason for *re-naming* the person or thing (Mark 5:25-34). The *re-naming* is the act of justification upon/for the other and within the activity of God’s own justification; the *re-named* was created by God and then continues to be in the presence of God-the creator. The *re-making* takes the unclean and makes it clean. Volf describes this saying, “People indwelt by unclean spirits--spirits that cut off persons from community, made them deeply at odds with themselves, and drove them to seek the company of the dead--such people were delivered from oppression and reintegrated into community (Mark 5:1-20)” (73). The mission of God then appears to take that which is dead/old and defined as ‘other’ and God makes them alive/new. Such is the event of the cross where the most unclean--a corpse hanging on the cross--is made clean through the power of Spirit in resurrection. We, as the excluded or

excluding, are given a vision of the future we have--God's activity of embracing the Crucified One (Volf 98). On the one side we have looked at exclusion, but the barrier of moving to embrace is our unforgiving.

The relationship which tethered Christ to the Creator is an entry to understanding the doctrine of forgiveness as embrace. Jesus brings about a new order (the eschatological reality), one of embrace rather than an order (reality of sin/death) reliant on exclusion. And the new order is dependent upon the relationality between God and world. It is a promise configured in the activity of embrace. The cross loses what it signifies when it is seen as the final moment of redemption; Volf says it is more than event, "the cross says that despite its manifest enmity toward God humanity belongs to God; God will not be God without humanity" (126). This parallels the arms embracing the other in Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. Volf comments, "Guided by the indestructible love...the father keeps re-configuring the order without destroying it so as to maintain an order of embrace rather than exclusion" (165).

The homeless experience exclusion but do encounter embrace. Fairbourne described her spiritual renewal after praying in a desperate situation, "I didn't feel so alone and so dark, I felt like I was tethered somehow...and that made all the difference in the world. People were in places to offer assistance and I know it wasn't just coincidence. And it was the first time anyone said it wasn't my fault." Jen experienced a mystical embrace through prayer but also the physical embrace into a community through social services. In recognizing our own non-being, the cross then is a pathway to forgiveness and a way of being, as we share what Christ possesses with the Father. The memory of our exclusion and wronged suffering is taken into the right memory of God in order that we take up the cross in our new way of memory and by this we practice forgiveness (134-135). The call from these young adults is more than addressing a

social justice issue, they are aware of the intersection of the excluded and the embracing presence of God (Arzola 27). Their gifts of sensitivity and openness lead to a cry for practicing confession and absolution. Those practicing faith as a way of life, look for ways to actively participate in the embrace of God; the Body of Christ becomes more whole as the excluded are recognized as members of the same living, crucified and resurrected body.

#### **IV. Pragmatic**

If the hope is to ‘live out faith’ in right memory and embrace, pragmatically then, how does a leader minister to/with youth in this context? In Frank Azola’s, Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry, he details a methodology for leaders in an urban context. The methodology’s goal is transformation by coupling action (doing) with reflection (being). Five movements: experience, examination, reflection, action and evaluation are worked through in order to move towards transformation. Since this paper is an exercise in practical theology I’ve chosen to hypothetically work through these five movements.

#### **Experience**

The experience of watching the documentary and hearing Jen Fairbourne’s narrative walked the group through the cultural phenomenon of youth homelessness. Students wrestled with the reality of youth that are homeless in their schools, places of work and neighborhood. This initial stage offered them the opportunity to not just ‘play back’ what was said, but to express their own experiences with this phenomena. Since “the primary objects of reflection are the youth themselves” their questions of experience rest within the group (Azola 55). They ask, ‘what was this issue then, and what is homelessness to me now that I’ve heard these facts and

stories?’ In and through the questions the youth begin to examine the fact that their lives have been altered. They see with a new set of lenses looking at those who are excluded, and live outside the boundaries, and, in turn, we see differently with this vision.

### **Examination**

The community of youth become the location within the congregation for an examination of the cultural phenomenon. Dialogue with the speaker/ representative from the youth homeless shelter becomes important at this point. Thinking critically, the youth deconstruct and re-construct their encounter with the identity of neighbor, God, and themselves.

### **Reflection**

Through dialogue an exploratory conversation occurs so that a resolution is attained from the examination of the issue. Reflection occurs on an individual level, with God and others. The Biblical narrative offers many powerful encounters between the excluded and embraced. At this transformative step it's helpful to examine what God's up to in certain stories and where we see God's activity with the excluded (57). In Mark 5:24-34, a hemorrhaging woman touched Jesus' cloak, was healed and is told by Christ, "your faith has made you well." God is saying something to those who are excluded--as the woman was considered unclean? It appears she had sought out help but no physician could help her. The greek word for save-is *sozo*--but it also means heal or restore (HPSB NRSV commentary on Mark 5). She is saved and restored in order that she can become embraced by her community and her physical body healed. In the middle of this chaotic scene, he pauses to recognize she has a 'place' in the community and illustrates God's 'right memory'. The youth then realize that the body of Christ is not whole when members are 'excluded' rather than 'embraced.' The efficacy of the dialogue was when the connecting of God's story to Jen's story took hold for the youth. This was triggered when

she said, “young people need to feel that they are connected. That’s one of the biggest disconnects that happens with volunteers is that they want to come in and fix people, the people I work with do not want the experience of feeling like an animal in a zoo, these young people need opportunities where they can feel valued and included in their community so it’s not an ‘us’ and ‘them’.” The three aforementioned movements began to place ‘hands’ on the beliefs and thoughts from the dialogue as an action plan was drawn up (61).

### **Action**

The action of the youth was to do three things: present the issue of youth homelessness to the congregation, partner with the local shelter and develop a year-long campaign for the community to raise awareness of the phenomena. In presenting this social issue to the congregation, the youth led a Lenten worship service based on the aforementioned Mark 5 passage. At the front of the sanctuary visual art, created by homeless youth, is displayed. The youth invite Jen Fairbourne to dialogue with them about the Biblical text and her own story of exclusion and embrace. It’s a powerful and confronting experience. Also in the service a prayer is said for the homeless and after the the words of institution, the minister called for an awareness that in the presence of Christ we are united with all who suffer. Immediately after the service the youth gave each member leaving the sanctuary a brochure detailing their hopes for raising money for the shelter. A month after the service, a meeting was held to address how the faith community can meet the needs of the shelter by making concentrated efforts to ask business owners to hire youth experiencing homelessness. In the employment of these youth a group of business leaders and the leaders of the shelter could develop enterprises for homeless youth. The youth of the congregation and leaders, together, initiate the conversations with the adults as a tangible way to embrace the youth in the community. To raise awareness of motorcycles on the

highways, the department of transportation began an ad campaign called Start Seeing Motorcycles. The bright yellow bumper stickers were a response to the number of fatalities between cars and cycles on the roads. In order to raise community awareness of the homeless youth issue, the youth group began an ad campaign parallel to the Start Seeing Motorcycles for the greater community. They made bumper stickers and t-shirts that said, "Start Seeing Homeless Youth in Minnesota--All 23,000." These four action steps-- experience/examination/reflection/action-- empower the youth to be leaders in the congregation and provide "hands on" avenues to make faith a way of life.

### **Evaluation**

After each action step is taken an evaluation of the movement occurred. Through small group dialogue these questions were asked: What is one thing you have learned about youth homelessness? Where are you now in your faith since being involved in the worship service, partnership and campaign? How successful were we so far? What do our future action steps look like now? We learned that the worship service was very effective in placing the youth at the center of the congregation. Second, the ad campaign seemed to be more 'for the youth group' than 'the homeless'-contributing to an us and them mentality. This was temporarily abandoned. Lastly, the partnership between business owners and the leaders of the shelter was surprisingly the most incredible outcome. Several youth from the shelter began working at local businesses and the owners agreed the relationship was good for both parties. It seemed the congregation was addressing the issue of homelessness after hearing the cry to be remembered rightly by God and be embraced back into the community. Jen said of the move from exclusion to embrace, "its a beautiful cycle--once they find a place for healing and for hope they want to

turn around and inspire others and give that back to others and help others believe that it can be done.”

### **Conclusion: Identity in Crying Out**

The efficacy of addressing youth homelessness brought the youth into a fuller identity as the living, crucified and resurrected Body of Christ. After the worship service and partnership, the entire faith community defined themselves as ‘new’. This ‘new’ way of reflecting and acting in the world is transformative. As Kenda Dean says of such transformation, “Christ makes them new, not by making them complete, autonomous individuals, but by grafting them onto one Person whose Body includes young people but is not defined by them (Creasy-Dean 16). The realization and understanding, which the youth of the congregation perceived, was that the cry of the homeless was not just about housing but about being remembered rightly, their exclusion from communities and need for embrace. In turn, their needs and hopes are ours too, in a world where each of us fears bleeding when we tell our stories. We all want and need to hear the truth in love. Their yearning to be rightly named addresses all of our hopes to be called ‘son’ and ‘daughter.’ Our excluding of the most vulnerable leaves the Body of Christ fragmented. The ultimate reality is not this exclusion but the embrace we already have as God remembered rightly-- suffering with what God loves. The present statistics on youth homelessness mean the church must attend to the cry of these sons and daughters of God. In the end there is hope, for the One cried out due to exclusion; the future embrace of this One is our future and hope as well.

## **Appendix:**

*Where was I?* In comparison to the start of seminary I've changed and grown. I came into seminary with a lot of practice in ministry but not many theoretical frameworks. It took until the second semester before I began to articulate questions of my own ministry practices. Service to the neighbor, outdoor ministry and connecting with the global church were passions of mine. Also, faith was *something* to be passed on. Not only did I not have a framework but truly didn't have a language for what I was leading the church towards and Theologically, I focused on the redemptive work of Christ on the cross with very little connection to the practices of the youth and family ministry of the church.

*Where I am now and what have I learned?* The theoretical frameworks to which I've been exposed have expanded my imagination for what should be done within children, youth and family ministry. Utilizing these frameworks in contexts such as cpe and internship have brought me to a place where I see how working out of one's theological commitments places extremely flexible perimeters on the practice. I believe now that language is very important; the way we speak of and about God in language describes our identity as a faith community. Faith is vital and a way of life. I see my pastoral identity to be about healing--partaking in God's activity in the world to bring others into the fuller community of God and one another. And currently view the cross is an apocalyptic, cosmic event in direct relationship with the incarnation, life and resurrection of Jesus. I've learned the Body of Christ includes me, to keep asking questions and the Body of Christ exists for the world.

*What questions remain?* I'm wondering how I can be a leader in a faith community in a pluralistic world? I hope to be kyrigmatic about Christ but at the same time open to what God is doing in the most unlikely and unexpected places. What does preaching, leadership and pastoral care look like while holding these two in tension?

*Rate and list competencies for self. Scale (low to high competency): 1--10,*

### **I. Core Theological Understandings**

God-8

Jesus-7

Holy Spirit Active in the World-9

Church and its mission-8

Christian Life-8

Leadership-9

### **II. Theoretical Understanding**

Cultural Hermeneutic-9

Relational Ministry-9

Developmental Theory-8

Learning Theory-8

Congregational & Community Care-8

Systems Theory-7

Organizational Theory-8

### **III. Practical Leadership Skills**

Cultural Analysis--9

Theological and Sociological

Interpretation Practices----7

Nurturing Faith and Christian Practices- 8

Missional Ministry-8

Ministry Planning-7

Communication Skills-8

Collaborative Leadership-8

Personal Growth-9

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