

## Caring for the Homeless

### Title:

No Home and No Hope: The Connection Between Abuse and Homelessness

### Author:

Deaconess Kim Schave, PhD, CPA

### Thesis:

Homelessness can be caused by a number of issues, but abuse and Intimate Partner Violence are frequently the culprits.

### Problem Statement:

The problem of homelessness is often a result of an individual experiencing trauma from abuse or Intimate Partner Violence. Special care is needed to identify and provide practical and spiritual support for someone in this situation.

### Case Study:

We accepted J and her children into our program for homeless families in an effort to help her stabilize after leaving a tumultuous relationship that left her homeless. She was eager to accept the responsibilities required of our programming and worked diligently to adhere to them during her first month with us. At about the one-month mark, as I came on board as the Executive Director of the agency, I had an opportunity to meet with J. I wanted to better understand the plight of our clients to be able to share them with our constituents.

Being forewarned that J would be extremely nervous during the meeting due to her high level of anxiety, I took care to make her comfortable by being open about my work and what led me to it. She seemed to relax after a while and spoke very matter-of-fact about her past and what led to her current condition of homelessness. As she became more at ease, she began to open up about her past experience with abuse, both physical and sexual, and how that led to substance abuse in order to dull the pain. J became quite upset and broke down into tears as she relayed her past, emphasizing that she had never told anyone about the abuse before. Through the offering of helpful Scripture verses and prayer, J was able to experience relief that the secret she had kept hidden for so long, festering and leading to more destructive habits, had finally been shared. She could now move forward with an appropriate treatment plan that would address some of the underlying trauma that would not have surfaced in a typical intake appointment.

J's story is similar to others who find themselves homeless with nowhere to turn. The majority of my organization's clients have a history of abuse, typically in the form of Intimate Partner Violence. This is not uncommon among the homeless population in general. Of the 554,000 homeless people counted nationally in 2017, about 87,000 said they had been a victim of domestic violence at some point in their lives (HUD Annual Point In Time Count, 2018). Approximately 50% of all women who are homeless report that domestic violence was the immediate cause of their homelessness (Pressing Issues Facing Families Who Are Homeless, *The*

*National Center on Family Homelessness*, 2013). There are many more considered “hidden homeless” who either were not interviewed on the one-night Point in Time count or who haven’t reached out to agencies for assistance.

Considering sin lies at the root of abuse, Lutheran theology can inform the response to homelessness in these instances. As noted in the document *When Homes are Heartless—An LCMS Perspective on Domestic Violence*:

Where sin enters, every human relationship suffers. Conflict within the home is predicted when the Lord declares that childbirth will be marred with pain, that the relationship of husband and wife will potentially involve struggles over “rule,” and that providing daily bread will be an arduous task against a rebellious creation (Gen. 3:16-17). Cain’s murder of Abel is the first example of “domestic abuse” in Scripture as the first family experiences the murder of one brother by another (Gen. 4). (p. 1)

From this understanding of sin within Biblical relationships, we can understand modern relationships. Sin continues to permeate the family, and for those who are crumbling under the weight of this sin, the Scriptures are replete with examples of Christ bringing hope and healing. For example:

This Lord Christ turned to, not away from, those who were broken by the weight of sin — both their own and others. He comforted and healed the ostracized, the scorned, the sick, the dying and the forgotten. He healed ostracized lepers (Matt. 8:1-4; Luke 17:12-19). He heard the pleas of the demon-possessed (Matt. 8:28-34; Luke 4:33-36). He called despised people to discipleship (Matt. 9:9-13; Luke 19:1-10). He brought peace and forgiveness to a scorned woman from scorned Samaria who let herself be handed from man to man (John 4).

His invitation — “Come to me” — is for weak and overburdened humanity. He does not and will not turn from the pleas and cries of the broken. He embodies God’s answer to the cries of the suffering and fulfills Scripture’s promises of relief and righted wrongs (Ps. 55:1, 86:1-2, 146:5-9). (*When Homes are Heartless—An LCMS Perspective on Domestic Violence*, p. 3)

Through the hardships that lead to homelessness, it can seem that there is no way out for those experiencing it. Satan has a seemingly endless supply of pain and suffering that he delights in doling out. But we know he doesn’t have the final word. God does! In God’s Word, we find hope and healing:

Our gracious God created a good and wonderful world that sin has disfigured and despoiled. The number of times that the holy promises of marriage are broken by violence is one of the most tragic proofs of sin’s destructiveness. Nevertheless, in Christ Jesus, God’s final word to us is one of hope, not hopelessness. Every day broken hearts are lifted and broken lives are renewed by the mercies of the blessed Triune God. Wounds are healed. Bruised reeds and smoking flaxes are not cast away (Is. 42:3; Matt. 12:20). By the miracle of Christ, joy comes again (Ps. 30:5) in Christ Jesus. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound

in hope” (Rom. 15:13 ESV). (*When Homes are Heartless—An LCMS Perspective on Domestic Violence*, p. 4)

Homeless individuals suffering from the trauma of abuse can be supported through the rites of the church in an effort to aid in their healing. Confession and Absolution may be in order for the client who is burdened with past unconfessed sins. The *Pastoral Care Companion* (Concordia Publishing House, 2007) includes a section with resources for home and family. Selected Psalms and Scripture verses are indicated that can be shared with an abuse victim. On Abuse, the Pastoral Care Companion notes:

Empathy, compassion, and patience will characterize the pastor’s approach in dealing with the physical, emotional, and spiritual damage that may be present in victims of abuse. Because the effects of abuse often linger, the pastor will recognize the need for ongoing care marked by patient use of the gospel to heal, to release from bondage to anger, shame, and fear, and to restore to a life of faith and love.

The pastor may want to suggest that the emotional scars from abuse may well require the assistance of other professional help as well. (p. 395)

Additionally, the following prayers are offered for those who have experienced abuse:

*For the physically abused*

Father in heaven, look with tenderness on name, who has been physically abused. Extend Your healing hand that he/she may be made whole. Remove the damage he/she has suffered in mind, heart, and spirit. By the guidance of Your Spirit, lead him/her to trust in Your steadfast mercy that he/she may live at peace with everyone; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*For the sexually abused*

Merciful Father, the physical and emotional pain caused by the sin against name’s body is deep and severe. You know what he/she has experienced and what is needed for healing, and You alone can provide it. Through Your promises to name in Holy Baptism, cleanse him/her from his/her shame, and make all things new, that he/she may be strengthened to live a fulfilling life in You; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (p. 398)

Hymn suggestions are provided for victims of abuse, as well. These include:

- Jesus, Grant that Balm and Healing, LSB 421
- Thee We Adore, O Hidden Savior, LSB 640
- All for Christ I Have Forsaken, LSB 753
- Christ, the Life of All the Living, LSB 420:5
- Since Our Great High Priest, Christ Jesus, LSB 529:2 (p.399)

## Conclusion:

Families facing homelessness have often endured past trauma that led to their current condition. It is important to carefully assess the reason for homelessness, allowing the client the time and space needed to determine the amount of detail they wish to provide. Caregivers are most effective when they assume a posture as listener, waiting patiently for facts and stories to emerge as comfort levels and trust increase. Understanding the impact of abuse and its connection to homelessness is essential so that caregivers can accurately assess client situations and formulate helpful practical treatment and spiritual care plans. Spiritual care must be guided by an appropriate Law/Gospel response according to the specific circumstances the client is facing. To assist a homeless individual who presents abuse as a contributing cause to homelessness, a review of resources is in order. Helpful resources on abuse from a confessional Lutheran perspective can be found at: [www.lcms.org/socialissues/domesticviolence](http://www.lcms.org/socialissues/domesticviolence) and [www.lcms.org/socialissues/childabuse](http://www.lcms.org/socialissues/childabuse).