

HOMELESS CHURCH



ANSWERS THE CALL TO MISSIONS



BY DAVE BOHON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE MASON

On the bustling streets of San Francisco you can see them every day. More than 14,000 strong, they push battered shopping carts full of tattered belongings, grope through dumpsters and back alleys for food, or stand idly among the busy throng. Their vacant gazes and world-weary expressions tell stories of untold heartache, wasted lives and lost hope.

They are the city's homeless — part of a burgeoning population wandering the streets of communities across America. But to Pastors Evan and April Prosser, they are people with faces, names and hearts that cry out for help and healing. They also make up the core of the Prossers' vibrant Assemblies of God congregation, appropriately named the Homeless Church.

How God has moved on this nontraditional congregation to partner with a young missionary called to a land thousands of miles away is a story that is challenging to churches of all kinds.

"Homeless people are just like anybody else out there trying to make their way in life," explains Evan, a Harvard graduate and 1960s hippie. "The difference is that these folks have been knocked down one too many times and have stopped getting up to try again."

While defeat and discouragement have chained thousands of homeless to a desperate cycle of misery, God is powerfully using the Homeless Church to heal and transform lives every

continued on page 27

HOMELESS CHURCH



Evan and April Prosser



day. “These precious men and women are like diamonds in the rough, waiting to be polished by the power of the Holy Spirit,” says Evan. “God is going to get value from their lives.”

In 1994 God called Evan and April to leave the pastorate of a conventional church and minister among San Francisco’s homeless. They purchased and moved into an old school bus, which they now call home. “We felt compelled to cast in our lot with the people,” says Evan.

They quickly discovered that the homeless community is composed of people from all walks of life. “One of our first contacts was a woman who had worked for NASA,” recalls Evan. “She got trapped by alcohol, lost her job and was living in a van with her young daughter. I gave her my Bible.”

As the Prossers lived and moved among the homeless, they quickly realized the potential in front of them. “We didn’t have any problem seeing beyond their current trouble and issues,” says April. “Right from the start God gave us the eyes of His Spirit to see clearly what He wanted to do with their lives.”

They quickly discovered that the homeless community is composed of people from all walks of life. “One of our first contacts was a woman who had worked for NASA,” recalls Evan.

Today, as their lives are transformed and empowered through the gospel, these same individuals have begun to reach out to their community — and beyond. That is precisely what happened when missionary LaDawn Rance called Evan and asked to come and share her heart for the people of the Dominican Republic at his church.

As with all AG missionaries, LaDawn raises her support by appealing directly to pastors and churches. But, the people attending the Homeless Church lacked enough even for their own needs, let alone extra to give to missions.

“When LaDawn called me and asked to have a service, I basically told her, ‘I would love to, but our members are homeless and don’t have any money,’” Evan recalls.

Undeterred, LaDawn asked to come anyway, just to share her vision and ask for prayer support. “I wanted to share my heart,” she says. “Even if they couldn’t do anything else, I knew they could help me through prayer.”

The awesome move of God that took place at the simple, outdoor gathering has continued to affect not only the Homeless Church, but also far beyond the city limits of San Francisco. As Evan introduced her that morning, he did so with some trepidation, realizing that the people had little or no money to give.

continued on page 29

HOMELESS CHURCH



“But as I stood there talking with my hands open, a wonderful thing happened,” he recounts. “People came up and began putting money in my hands. The Lord touched their hearts and things just broke wide open.”

That Sunday the Homeless Church received an offering of \$19 and followed up the next Sunday with \$72. “You could just sense that something had begun there in the hearts of the people that God was going to use for His glory,” says Evan.

Many of those attending the Homeless Church earn what little money they have by collecting and selling aluminum cans to local recycling centers. April encouraged them to commit just a few cans each month to LaDawn’s work in the Dominican Republic and trust God to honor their faithfulness.

And He has. Currently the Homeless Church is collecting an average of \$50 per week for LaDawn’s ministry. Evan explains that it is a step of faith that has stretched him and blessed his congregation with the joy of pouring themselves into the work of God’s kingdom.

That Sunday the Homeless Church received an offering of \$19 and followed up the next Sunday with \$72. “You could just sense that something had begun there in the hearts of the people that God was going to use for His glory,” says Evan.

“Every Sunday I remind them of the support they have given to LaDawn’s ministry and how they are lighting a fire in the hearts of others to support God’s work throughout the world,” he says. “Then I hold out my hand, and they come up and start putting in money — a few coins, maybe a dollar, and sometimes \$5 or even \$10. It’s a sacred moment of worship that I know deeply touches the heart of the Father.”

For some, the response is almost beyond comprehension. Here are individuals with no money or means of support, struggling and living by faith each day for every mouthful they eat. Yet they give what they have with joy and a sense of expectancy at what God will do with their gifts.

“They see this as an opportunity to give back to God, who has done so much for them,” explains Evan. “I tried for years to get people to tithe on even the little they have. But since this has happened, I’m surprised, blessed and moved every Sunday.”

What has made the difference? What is it that has caused these men and women of the streets to open their hands and their hearts to LaDawn and the people of the Dominican Republic? The answer goes right to the heart of the gospel and is the reason the Prossers came to San Francisco in the first place.

continued on page 31

HOMELESS CHURCH



“I’ve got Christ in my life, and other people need Christ,” says Cameron, a homeless man. “That’s what our work is for — to bring Christ into other people’s lives. It’s not about what we hoard; it’s about what we have to give. If we don’t give to them, they’re not going to be able to give to others.”

Another man, Lionel, tells of hearing about people in Africa who are so destitute they resort to searching for food on garbage heaps. “We don’t want that to happen in the Dominican Republic,” he says. “Jesus says, ‘If you love me, you should do unto the very least of these, my little ones.’ And if you do this, you did it to Him. We give because we are commanded by Jesus to give to the poor.”

For LaDawn, receiving monthly support from a congregation of homeless people is a humbling, moving experience. “I feel challenged and honored to be somebody they believe in,” she says.

“We give to missions because God says we are to support those who do the work of the Lord,” says Marvin, another homeless man. “We want to support missions.” He adds that while the amount each person gives is never very much, “God says if we give, He will bless it — He will double it — some sixtyfold, some a hundred, you know.”

For LaDawn, receiving monthly support from a congregation of homeless people is a humbling, moving experience.

“I feel challenged and honored to be somebody they believe in — somebody they want to partner with to be Kingdom builders,” she says. “It has made me know that God is in charge, and even in the midst of impossible circumstances, He can touch people’s hearts.”

To Evan, the steps of faith his congregation has taken to be a part of missions present a huge challenge to conventional churches everywhere. “God’s heart is missions,” he says. “As a pastor, one of the greatest things I can do is give people a chance to have a part in the work of the Kingdom.”

The response of the Homeless Church to God’s heart for missions has raised Evan’s level of expectation. “I was asking for cans to crush, and they came up and put \$5 or \$10 in my hand,” he says.

“The missions call has a hold on their hearts and has made me realize that people want an opportunity to give to God. I am absolutely convinced that if churches everywhere would commit to giving to missions, God would bless mightily in ways they can’t even imagine.” **tpe**

DAVE BOHON and his family attend the Grove Christian Center, an Assemblies of God congregation in Maple Grove, Minnesota.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.