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## Book Reviews

*Why the Homeless Don't Have Homes and What to Do About It*

by *Michael Elliott*

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241

BOOK REVIEWS

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Michael Elliott, *Why the Homeless Don't Have Homes and What to Do About It*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1993. 120 pages. \$9.95.

One of the deepest potholes in the pathway to the societal bliss promised by democratic capitalism is the increasing problem of poverty and homelessness in the United States. Despite the collapse of communist dictatorships during the late 1980s, only extreme conservatives will claim that the United States offers a model society for the rest of the world to follow. In a land where private property is a supreme value, one-half to 3 million people are without domicile, and over 35 million live in poverty. While Wall Street stock prices soared to new heights during the 1980s and 1990s so did the number of homeless people. Why do these people not have homes? What can be done about it?

These two questions are the basis of Michael Elliott's fascinating new book *Why the Homeless Don't Have Homes and What to Do About It* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1993). Elliott is a Southern Baptist minister who has been working directly with the homeless since 1979. He began his homeless ministry with a small inner-city church in Louisville, Kentucky, became executive director of the Louisville Coalition for the Homeless, and then executive director of Union Mission, Inc., which includes four homeless shelter programs in his hometown of Savannah, Georgia. The innovative Grace House program consists of bringing together a diverse group of volunteers to help the homeless help themselves in a manner that benefits both groups.

*Why the Homeless Don't Have Homes*

Why are people homeless? On the basis of his personal experiences, Elliott appropriately integrates both liberal and conservative explanations. Liberals are correct in attributing homelessness to a loss of affordable housing, deinstitutionalization, changes in family structure, cutbacks in federal housing and support programs, and growing poverty. Conservatives are also correct in attributing homelessness to bad personal decisions, an inability to manage money, alcoholism, drug addiction, laziness, bad choice in friends, and teenage pregnancy. According to Elliott,

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"homelessness in America is the result of both personal choice and a complex set of social factors" (p. 8).

Who are the homeless? During the 1980s, the alcoholic male hobo was joined by children, women, and working men. Psychiatrists estimate that 25% of all adult homeless are mentally ill. By far the most drastic and tragic change in the nature of the homeless is the appearance of homeless children. A staggering 25% to 33% of the homeless are children. Born to teenage parents, they follow their mothers to homeless shelters after their grandparents can no longer financially care for them. Homeless children suffer from inappropriate psychological and social development and enter into a vicious cycle of inadequate education, delinquency, crime, and a repetition of the course of their parents—a high school dropout and another teenage pregnancy.

Another 25% to 33% of the homeless population are women, many of whom are suffering from drug addiction or mental illness. Homeless women are forced to have sex on demand to feed their drug addictions or for protection on the streets. According to Elliott, it is not clear from his experiences whether these women become homeless and, in response to these harsh living conditions, then become drug addicts, prostitutes, and mentally ill, or vice versa. In either case, few of them climb out of homelessness, and their children add to the homeless population.

The largest group, accounting for 33% to 50% of the homeless, are men. Many are poorly educated. Some had lost jobs and dealt with their failures by becoming alcoholics and drug addicts. Others were first addicted to alcohol and drugs and then became jobless. Some are mentally ill. Embarrassed by their economic and social failures, these men have cut off relationships with their more stable parents, brothers, sisters, and friends, and anonymously seek refuge in the service delivery system of the nearest city.

Who is to be blamed for this societal scar? In a broad-based attack on homeless individuals and societal institutions, Elliott argues that

it is not only the homeless who must learn to name their demons, but governments must recognize that throwing money at a problem is no answer and that many of the old funding mechanisms do not work in today's world. Religious organizations must regain their mission to be communities to all of society's members, especially the poor. The current social service system has to understand that it is fighting a losing war if it wins only funding battles. Yesterday's shelters have to know that they are making little difference meeting the true needs of the homeless. If new territory is not surveyed, the homeless problem will continue to worsen, and all parties will grow increasingly frustrated at their inability to make a significant

difference. This new territory will be explored when all involved name their own demons and learn that recognition of a problem is half the solution. (p. 18)

Government has failed because desperately needed money was thrown in the wrong directions. Contrary to public perceptions, there has been a steady increase in government involvement with the homeless during the 1980s. Major pieces of federal legislation include the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 and the Family Support Act of 1988. Many of these legislative efforts have failed because of their lack of a long-term vision and of coordination. Too often, political turf battles have superseded problem solving.

Religious institutions have failed because they offer charity, but not community. Most churches, which prefer homogeneous fellowship over diversity, treat the homeless as people in need of a social ministry rather than potential members of the congregation. Traditional congregations shy away from social activism on behalf of the homeless in a misguided respect for the separation of church and state, opting instead for charitable donations that are a tiny fraction of their total budgets.

Local coalitions have failed because of the fragmented efforts of well-intentioned people who do not necessarily trust one another. Many community leaders "did not believe that the community should expand or upgrade services to the homeless, fearing that such actions would attract more homeless people to the area" (p. 80). For instance, there is truth to taxpayer complaints that Madison's fine social services attract Chicago residents who bring with them destructive habits and friends. Chronically underfunded homeless shelters, unable to coordinate their efforts, have limited their vision to providing the basic necessities of food and shelter.

### *What to Do About It*

#### *According to Elliott,*

It is ironic that most segments of every community desire the same thing. Chambers of commerce do not want the homeless problem to tarnish the city's image. Religious institutions want to be inclusive. Local governments desire their citizens to live safe and fulfilled lives. Funding sources contribute money to solve the homeless problem. Citizens do not wish to see people suffering in their town. Service providers are committed to helping people. The vast majority of the homeless themselves do not want to remain on the streets. Without a catalyst to focus these energies toward the same goal, however, community resources remain underutilized as the problem worsens.

Who should be this catalyst? Elliott calls for a coordinated joint effort between government and religious institutions. Government should attack the structural causes, and the religious community should attack the personal causes. Elliott offers common advice for both institutions—establish a diverse network of morally uplifting friends for the homeless. Homeless children need education *and* diverse morally uplifting friendships. Homeless adults need social services *and* diverse morally uplifting friendships. The homeless need to engage in contracts with providers that make them publicly accountable for their decisions *and* diverse morally uplifting friendships.

Elliott's model is his own Grace House program where the Junior League, gay community, religious community, state government, and local Alcoholic Anonymous groups all have direct and constant contact with the homeless, forming a diverse network of friends as a safety net for when things go wrong. On the basis of the Alcoholics Anonymous model, the homeless must publicly admit that they are at the bottom of society and their lifestyle is unacceptable. It is only after a homeless individual "admits that he or she is homeless and then decides not to choose such a life, the possibility of genuine assistance is possible" (p. 100). The social services and friendships that follow focus on fulfilling basic needs and on instilling a sense of self-worth and dignity. At this point, the homeless enter into partnerships with volunteers based on strengths rather than weaknesses; thus both partners learn from each other.

A sense of community and responsibility is learned at the shelter because the homeless must staff operations in exchange for food and a place to sleep. Work skills learned at the shelter are linked to potential job placements. Life skills are applied immediately, and the network of friends hold the homeless accountable for their behaviors in a supportive manner.

Unfortunately, Elliott assigns businesses the very minor role of providing charity, volunteers, resources, and a small administrative fee when businesses employ newly trained homeless workers. Providing jobs is only briefly mentioned because many of the homeless lack marketable skills and a strong work ethic. Many of the jobs that homeless people are qualified to pursue pay minimum wage, which at a monthly gross income rate of about \$730, is not enough to pay for rent, food, clothing, day care, transportation, and other basic necessities of life.

What can businesses do to reduce homelessness? For several years, I have been challenging students enrolled in my required master of business (MBA) business ethics course to answer this question. Student perception of homelessness is greatly influenced by television shows,

news programs, movies, and the biased sample of panhandlers they meet downtown. As suggested by Elliott, I require that my students personally interact with the economically worst-off by volunteering 3 to 6 hours at a local homeless shelter, meeting residents of low-income housing projects, and attacking the problem of poverty with group projects that can be implemented in conjunction with the homeless, low-income residents and community leaders.

Meeting the homeless often results in students destroying old stereotypes. Students who lean right on the political spectrum struggle with homeless people showing up at the shelter in work uniforms. Those who lean left struggle with homeless people who have drug and alcohol addictions or those who have mastered the manipulation of public services. Both groups of students tend to reach one of Elliott's primary conclusions—many well-intentioned government programs, social service agencies, religious institutions, and local coalitions are fragmented and fall far short of the goal. Coordination of services is essential *and* the homeless must be held accountable for the choices they make. Society falls short in the former and seldom attempts the latter. Much of the current backlash in public opinion about the homeless is a consequence of social services not paying sufficient attention to the accountability issue.

My students' choice as a catalyst is an institution whose role is marginalized in this book—business. Developing exchange relationships is what management is all about. Businesses may succeed where other institutions have failed, by developing exchange relationships among the homeless, government services, church groups, local coalitions, educational institutions, and other businesses. In this sense, businesses could consciously choose to do that which the invisible hand has been unsuccessful at, reducing homelessness.

What do the students have in mind? As the instructor, I push them to follow through on their deeply held belief that businesses can do a better job than government at solving social problems. In the tradition of Milton Friedman and neoclassical economic theory, they easily embrace the radical idea that homelessness should be perceived by business leaders as an economic opportunity rather than a public goods problem left to government and nonbusiness interest groups.

Their basic conclusion is that homeless shelters should be operated like businesses. Low-interest government loans could be obtained to provide a dorm-style living environment and job training programs. Shelter managers could then do what business people do on a daily basis, broker multiple relationships for the good of the organization. Contractual

arrangements could be made with (a) clients to staff the business, (b) educational institutions to provide valuable training, (c) social service agencies to provide valuable services, (d) church groups to provide moral guidance, and (e) other local businesses to provide internships.

Accountability standards are developed for both the homeless and shelter management. Managers should be rewarded on the basis of achieving clearly stated performance goals, such as getting the homeless off welfare and into well-paying jobs. Careful selection of applicants would be essential in the hopes that once this select crowd succeeds, others can more easily follow. Some of these recommendations will certainly upset social workers and raise memories of inhumane company towns; yet, because the status quo has failed, perhaps such a radical program could work.

I have chosen to apply the students' practical solutions to improve the living conditions of low-income housing communities, rather than to homeless shelters, because this economically close group of citizens has fewer detrimental psychological and physical addictions than the homeless. We have joined forces with the mayor's office, a local business coalition, and several low-income housing communities to develop plans for a job training placement agency that could service several low-income neighborhoods. The agency would include, but not be limited to, a grocery co-op, a day care co-op, a restaurant co-op, a computer services co-op, and a credit union co-op. Each co-op would serve as a job training worksite for low-income residents and would be linked with an already existing business as a joint venture. Residents who demonstrate accountability through the program's layers of contractual relationships would be offered equity ownership, internships with the joint venture firm, and eventual full-time employment.

The job training center would be supported by government grants, social service agencies, educational institutions, and local businesses. In terms of educational institutional support, we are in the process of establishing a network organization on campus that will connect every student organization, administrative office, and academic discipline to serve these communities. We are developing a rotating clinic schedule involving the Law School, Medical School, Nursing School, and Business School, among others. Tutoring could be provided by any discipline, and ad hoc services (such as painting, construction, cleanups) could be offered by sororities and fraternities.

In terms of local businesses, we are developing a network organization in which accountants could volunteer to do bookkeeping, marketing managers could conduct fund-raisers, and bankers could teach residents

how to save money. In addition, one group of students is working on establishing a transportation company that would enable low-income residents to get to work, to do shopping, and to travel to government social services.

The local business coalition engaged in this project consists of representatives from Madison's major companies who are purchasing low-income apartments to get local companies to seriously tackle the problem of poverty before the situation worsens. In addition to actually putting all of these programs into existence, it is our hope to develop models that can be used by other low-income neighborhood communities, universities, and businesses. If the local business coalition or low-income housing communities fail to adopt our plans, then we will seek other business coalitions or low-income housing communities that will. We hope that church groups, such as Grace House, could adopt our model. Churches should link arms with businesses and use the unique talents of their parishioners and employees to serve and develop contracts with those living in poverty.

This book has several shortcomings. First, Elliott does not carry out his solution very far. Granted, he is experimenting and many answers remain unknown. Nonetheless, an in-depth how-to-do-it chapter based on his shelter experience would have been welcomed. Second, his solution of a new network of supportive friends could simply repeat the failure of real families and former friends who were unable to stop a person's initial slide into homelessness. That is, homeless people who fail again in their efforts to obtain steady work or fight their addictions may be too embarrassed to tell their new network of diverse friends and move on to another city in search of services.

Probably the greatest weakness of the book is the lack of well-grounded statistical information about the homeless. Elliott leaves the data for the sociologists, which is unfortunate on two counts. First, data on increases in teenage pregnancies would strengthen his argument. According to the January 1994 edition of *Facts at a Glance* published by Child Trends Inc., between 1980 and 1991, teenage births per 1,000 females increased from 53 to 62, and total teenage births nationwide increased from 271,801 to 368,451. Between 1970 and 1991, unmarried teenage births as a percentage of all teenage births have skyrocketed from 30% to 69%. According to survey data, 85% of the births to mothers 17 years old and younger are unwanted, thus increasing the likelihood of the unwanted child being passed to grandparents and then to a homeless shelter. Once the nation comes to its senses and bans guns, maybe the next agenda item could be

banning teenage births. Second, some of the little data provided by Elliott are contradictory—the first chapter claims that at least 250,000 people are homeless (p. 5), whereas chapter 2 claims it is at least 500,000 (p. 19).

Elliott's book is an honest firsthand account of his experiences operating homeless shelters. The first chapter, "Denying the Demons," is the most informative for students because it provides a concise summary of his argument. Elliott ends the book by challenging everyone with a stake in the latest buzzword of "community" to physically put their hearts and souls where their rhetoric is. But his hope seems limited. He concludes as follows:

Help is often given only to those who are perceived to be worthy of people's time, money, and compassion. Many people simply do not believe that the homeless deserve their efforts. The homeless thus receive some attention, enough to get by, but few of them are able to gather the resources necessary to resume their pursuit of the American Dream. Until enough people believe that homelessness should not exist, the homeless will not have homes. (p. 110)

It is time to encourage our students to tackle these issues by sending them into homeless shelters and low-income neighborhoods. Their input and fresh insights are desperately needed.

#### REFERENCES

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