

Critical time to help homeless, mentally ill in Georgia

By PAUL BOLSTER

In Mark, chapter 5, Jesus meets a naked man with an “evil spirit” who lives alone in mountain caves that serve as tombs. Jesus tells the evil spirits to come out of the man and go into a nearby herd of pigs. The man is healed of his mental illness, puts on clothing, and sits with the disciples as Jesus teaches them God’s word.

The man wanted to go with Jesus, but Jesus told him to go back to live in his community.

“So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.” (Mark 5:20). The man apparently found a place in the community where he connected to his neighbor through the windows and doors of his own home.

What’s the meaning of Jesus’ story for Georgians today? Many thousands of Georgians live every day with mental illness. Think about your friends and relatives. Do you know someone who has committed suicide? Many of these persons are separated from community life because they reside in modern-day caves, which are

local jails, state prisons, mental health hospitals, nursing homes, and homeless encampments.

Some 20 percent of new state prisoners are being treated for mental illness at the time of their incarceration. One state analysis reports that there are 18,000 low-income households in the state that could benefit from affordable housing connected to community based mental health services.

While Georgia ranks near the bottom of all 50 states in terms of dollars spent on mental health per capita, the solution isn’t simply to spend more money. While it is part of the answer, the system of providing care also must change.

This may be the most critical time in reform efforts over recent decades. What we do this year will establish the system for the next 10 years. Gov. Sonny Perdue has been active in making plans for systemic change. Will a new governor and a new legislature follow through with these plans?

Now is the time for Georgians to elect officials who seek to make changes that will shift resources from institutions to community based services.

Many people believe there is evidence that the state has vio-



lated the civil rights of individuals committed to its mental health hospitals. We await a settlement of the legal issues or a ruling from the federal judge that will mandate change. But that will not be enough if Georgians don’t speak out and support elected officials who seek to make the changes. There needs to be an aggressive legislative effort this year.

In a broad outline, the changes need to include:

1. Expanded community level primary mental health treatment that includes crisis stabilization, mobile crisis teams, assertive community recovery teams, and contracts for community hos-

pitals. We must develop robust community based services that provide treatment and prevention.

2. Supportive Housing. This means rents that fit low incomes and mental health services that help people stay housed and stay in recovery.

3. Supportive Employment. People with mental illness can work and want to work. Work is part of recovery. Legislators need to believe that employment can help people lead independent and productive lives.

4. Intensive Case Management. Case management connects individuals to the services that are available in

their community. Most of us have this support from family and friends. The case worker helps the consumer avoid an emergency by systematically addressing needs before a police officer or judge gets involved.

In the broadest sense, the state must shift its mental health resources away from emergency systems and institutions and put money into modern, community based mental health services. The change will not be completed overnight but the time to start is now.

One study by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs predicts we would save \$13,000 for every mentally ill person we help to succeed in his/her own housing. Methodists should speak up and call for the systemic change in our mental health delivery system. The current system has many wasteful revolving doors. We think Jesus would want us to fix it so more people are healed and can hear God’s word.

Paul Bolster is a member of Trinity UMC and has been the Director of Supportive Housing for United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta and the Regional Commission on Homelessness for the past four

Campolo, Acevedo to speak at event

Organizers of Beyond These Walls 2010 Mission Conference, planned for Oct. 7-9 at McEachern Memorial UMC in Powder Springs, want to help you transform your congregation and equip members for life-transforming ministry.

Keynote speakers will be Dr. Tony Campolo, teacher and author, and Jorge Acevedo, pastor of Grace Church UMC that operates one of the largest and most effective recovery ministries in America.

Many other authors, teachers, and mission leaders will bring the “best of the best” in mission teaching and equipping. Checkout www.missionconference.org to see the complete offerings. Presenters include:

Dr. Brice Norton of Mount Pisgah UMC has a passion for the spiritual formation of short-term mission teams. He will be presenting two different workshops with best practices for helping your team members grow in the image of Christ as they prepare and serve in the mission field.

Dr. Daniel Rickett is the Executive Vice President of Sisters in Service, an organization working to restore the lives of



abused and exploited women and girls in high-risk places, equipping them to live in freedom and faith for a strong future. His life-long passion has been authentic mission partnerships. Daniel will present two different workshops dealing with the keys to establishing effective, productive partnerships and how to establish healthy relationships across the “wealth divide.”

Can you imagine the community being genuinely thankful for your church? Can you imagine city leaders valuing your church’s participation in the community- even asking for it? Can a declining church find new life by simply blessing its community? Come and hear the struggles and triumphs of Austell First United Methodist, a church that in less than three years went from little outward mission to being named its town’s “Business of the Year” for its community involvement.

Turning churches outward is hard work, but Rev Brett DeHart’s workshop will help prepare you for that challenge.

There are many more quality workshops - you can check them all out at, www.missionconference.org.

Who should attend?

- Pastors looking to lead their congregations to a new level of purpose and reason for being.
- Churches looking for a means to revitalize their congregations.
- Churches already interested in missions and seeking new tools.
- Effective mission-focused churches that can share their wisdom and best practices in mentoring other churches.
- Lay leaders, mission committee members, teachers, evangelists, servants and anyone with a passion for the Gospel.

For more information and to register visit www.missionconference.org.

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