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The Spirit of Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger

Shortly after my partner and I moved to Belfast, a faint knock on the front window (our makeshift doorbell), summoned us outside. There we were greeted by two complete strangers inviting us to dinner at their home. We remain grateful for their friendship and their welcome at a time when we barely knew anyone here. I've since learned that Belfast has a tradition of welcoming visitors and strangers, like the back-to-the-landers, artists, and those seeking a better quality of life here from the 1960s down to the present.

In spite of this spirit of hospitality, the scarcity of affordable housing, soaring real estate prices and the short-term rental market have made it near impossible for many to find a decent place to live in the area. The number of people living with housing insecurity or in homelessness continues to climb.

In the November 25 *Republican Journal*, Jodie Stout in the Belfast General Assistance Office spoke eloquently about the challenge of finding affordable housing for families and individuals seeking housing assistance. A few have been housed in local hotels, but many others, in spite of housing vouchers, have not been able to find housing. Two years ago the Waldo County Homeless Coalition identified 63 men, women and children who, by self-report, were dealing with housing insecurity or homelessness. Per Stout's assessment, the numbers have climbed since then.

Homeless issues are complex, multi-faceted and don't lend themselves to easy answers. But the solution is housing--affordable, appropriate housing. Our non-profit neighbors have stepped up to help address the housing and homelessness crisis here in the mid-coast, including Volunteers of America, WaldoCAP, New Hope Midcoast (formerly New Hope for Women), Habitat for Humanity, the Knox County Homeless Coalition, From Above, the Reentry Center, as well as all the agencies that help keep people housed and fed, like the Belfast Soup Kitchen, Waldo Bounty, and the many food pantries throughout Waldo County. A brand new non-profit, *And Yet I Still Am One* is working to address homelessness in those 16-21 years old. But the need is still great.

GBAM, the Greater Bay Area Ministerium, a working group of local ministers, is exploring how area churches can be part of the solution. Last winter the Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast, with the support and assistance of volunteers from other churches and the wider community, opened a temporary daytime warming center, a safe place where those seeking respite from the cold could come for meals, showers, clothing and fellowship. Volunteers were often able to help homeless guests connect with other service providers for assistance. The warming center is unable to open this year for multiple reasons, but the folks behind it are already asking how they might continue to help this vulnerable population.

Currently GBAM is discussing how local churches might provide shelter to homeless families, using what is known as the “Family Promise” model. Nationwide, over 6000 churches, synagogues and community organizations have joined together in clusters to provide support, hospitality and shelter to homeless families on a rotating basis. The programs are small, usually serving four families at a time. Each day families come to an intake location, are screened and then transported to a host church where they are welcomed with a hot meal and a safe place to spend the night. After breakfast, they are sent out with brown bag lunches to see them through the day. After spending a week or two at a given church, the families are then transported to a new church host for the following week. These programs, designed as a temporary bridge to a more permanent solution, enlist housing advocates to help families secure housing and offer on-going support once they are housed. Of families served nationally by Family Promise, 81% have found housing, on average after 66 days in shelter.

Churches, with their spaces often underutilized at night, are an untapped resource for addressing homelessness. And hospitality, the tradition of welcoming the stranger, is central to most faith traditions.

The pandemic has taught us that Belfast and the surrounding counties have a huge heart for helping others. Now is the time to call on that same spirit to help us find housing solutions for our neighbors and those among us who live with housing insecurity or homelessness. When we do so, we may just be surprised how our lives are blessed. As it has been said, “Don’t neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

The Rev. Bob Johansen is a retired parish minister and spiritual director. He is ordained in the United Church of Christ and has served churches in the UCC and the UUA.

As an interfaith group, the **Greater Bay Area Ministerium** envisions a world in which faith unites, rather than divides people. We invite community religious leaders to gather together for fellowship and collegial support; to bring worship and spiritual opportunities to our community; to develop, honor, and preserve varied faith traditions; and to strengthen and support our community in calling the world to accountability, generosity and peace.