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The Union County Homeless Persons Vigil 2023

Rev. Carmine Pernini, Zion Lutheran Church, Rahway & Coordinator for UCICC

December is quickly coming to a close as the nights get longer and the days grow shorter. Christmas is approaching and Hanukkah just ended. Around this time every year, the Union County Interfaith Coordinating Council, Community Access Unlimited, and the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless host a memorial service for homeless people who have recently died. It was held on the longest night of the year, the Winter Solstice, on Dec. 21st at Fountain Baptist Church in Summit.



So far, there have been 55 names gathered of people who were without homes who died while being homeless. Whether that seems like a lot or a few, you can be relatively certain that the Union County Homeless Person's Vigil is the only place that these lost souls will be named. The vigil is a place where we, a small community, remember the names of people whom society has long forgotten, before they died and maybe even before they became homeless.

Zion Lutheran Church, Rahway is the congregation that I, Rev. Carmine Pernini am the pastor of and have run a homeless ministry at for a decade. Every year, I worry if a name will be read at the Homeless Vigil of a person who I helped keep off the streets. I always approach this event with great anxiety of hearing a name of someone I knew. At the same time, there is another kind of grief which permeates the room when people realize that they don't know the people who died. I didn't know them, and nearly no one else did either.

Homelessness, in my experience, is a preventable tragedy. According to the **New York Times**, the US saw the largest one-year increase in homelessness this year since the federal government began an annual count in 2007. The Times reported that the single biggest issue causing homelessness today is not drug abuse, alcoholism, or mental illness, it is a lack of affordable housing. According to the Times, "The most significant causes are the shortage of affordable homes and the high cost of housing," said Jeff Olivet, head of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.

We have, by and large, grown too comfortable as a society with economic systems and practices that deem it acceptable to freeze to death on the street. Homelessness is a persistent condition that reflects our priorities. Homelessness is a byproduct of how we do things, and many have come to accept it as a fact of life, either through apathy or by telling themselves that homeless people deserve to be homeless.

Typically the phrase NIMBY, which stands for “not in my backyard”, is employed when describing the prevailing attitudes of community members in their disdain for having “people like that,” meaning homeless people, move into their neighborhoods. This NIMBY attitude applies as much to residents as it does to municipalities. A municipality is simply a group of residents, voters whose power extends to whether or not an elected official will get elected or win a second term. Municipalities, then, are, at their best and most idealized, servants of the people. So, finger pointing regarding NIMBY attitudes really should lead back to us, the voters because municipalities theoretically serve us. Municipalities typically do not want to offend voters by promoting the construction of “affordable housing.”

As December draws to a close and January begins to inch closer, we look forward to January’s Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations, where many a speaker will bellow, “A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” This quote conveys that the standard of justice must be equitably applied to everyone or it isn’t justice at all- then there is no standard of justice, just preferential enforcement. When we consider the long hard fights for equality for African Americans, women, LGBTQIA+, and many others, we feel, on our best days, that we are making progress.

But, MLK’s quote above also applies to human dignity, “A threat to human dignity anywhere is a threat to human dignity everywhere.” Where one person is denigrated and allowed to slip through society’s cracks, anyone can. If we do not have societal mechanisms in place to support people at their lowest moments in their lives, then none of us truly are safe. Sadly, when it comes to homelessness, we still allow discrimination based on class, welcome people to our “backyards” only if they have enough money in their bank account. In my decade of ministering to homeless people, the most common refrain that I heard from the hundreds of volunteers who worked in the homeless ministry was, “That could just have easily been me (who is homeless).”

The nearer you get to people who are homeless, the more quickly the lies we tell ourselves about why there are homeless people vanish. We like to tell ourselves that there is a social safety net that will protect us/them from the streets, but there really isn’t. There is an army of wonderful people out there whose life’s work is to help you, should you reach bottom, but there simply aren’t enough resources available to get the job done. There aren’t enough affordable places to live. There aren’t enough shelter beds in Union County. There isn’t enough money to get you a hotel. There aren’t enough resources and there is even less collective will to procure them.

On top of resources being slim, many will state that homeless people deserve to be homeless. I believe this is a way people try to protect themselves from the harsher realities learned about life when actually learning about the issues people face. We say that someone is homeless because they are lazy. They need to try harder. They need to get a job. They need to clean up their act. I have heard all of this many many times from normal folks as well as elected officials who have spoken out against taking homeless people off the streets in my church. It is true that there are some people who genuinely struggle with substance abuse, but the reality is that so do people who have homes and families. We do not say that because someone is struggling with substance abuse or mental illness that they should lose their home. That would be absurd. But, as absurd as that is, we do say it about homeless people.

The lack of resources available to help house people and the poor attitude about why people are homeless work together to cover up a much larger problem: homeless people are just people whose luck ran out. What this says about you or I is that we are simply fortunate enough to not have lost a job and have relatives in the area to take us in. Or that we just happened to have enough money to cover the hospital visit, rather than draining our savings and being forced out onto the street.

Lack of affordable housing is a problem which can be solved, but it cannot be solved until voters tell municipalities that it is a priority. And, voters will not tell municipalities that it is a problem until we stop lying to ourselves about why there are homeless people. So, as long as we keep fooling ourselves with stereotypes which cover up the larger issue we will never get anywhere with the issue of homelessness and housing. And, sadly, in my decade of experience of working with homeless people, by the time most of us figure out that there is no social safety net to keep us off the street, it is too late.



UNION COUNTY INTERFAITH COORDINATING COUNCIL

Homeless Persons Vigil

Participant Reflections from the Union County Day of Prayer from Nov. 9th, 2023

The Union County Day of Prayer, held on November 9th, 2023 at Santa Isabel Lutheran Church, Elizabeth, was a beautiful demonstration of interfaith solidarity amidst a time in which there has been increased antisemitism and Islamophobia on campuses and on the streets as a result of the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Each year interfaith representatives gather to address the various issues in their communities through prayer, scripture-based reflections, and song.

What follows are reflections from some of this year's participants from the Union County Day of Prayer. Dina Dandhu Has from ISKCON of Central Jersey Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple remarked on his second participation in the Union County Day of Prayer:

“It was a great blessing to gather with friends of many faiths and backgrounds in the spirit of sharing openly and honestly from the core of our hearts. In glorifying and calling upon the Supreme Person together, we nourish and honor each other's faith, and establish our shared and urgent yearning for genuine connection, prevailing compassion, and remembrance of who we are at the deepest level.”

Dina Dandhu Has observed that despite the tension in the room which was the result of many lives lost in Palestine and Israel, faith leaders from Jewish and Muslim faiths felt open enough to address what weighed on their hearts and were able to pray for one

another.

William Webb, Special Project Manager at Community Access Unlimited who has attended many Union County Day of Prayer services, said, "I could feel the pain and anguish voiced by faith leaders over the conflict in Gaza and the loss of innocent lives. Just as powerful was the message of hope for humanity that is present when we see and hear each other as human beings, whatever our faith orientation may be. It was a challenging and important time to hold this event, and it was a much needed expression of healing for our wounded world." Again, Mr. Webb experienced the complexity of faith traditions which both call for care for others while at the same time find themselves locked in conflict where civilian death tolls grow each day.

Dr. Wail Rasheed, of the Islamic Center of Union County, spoke at the Union County Day of Prayer. He and his congregation, primarily Palestinian, have suffered heavy losses during Israel's response to Hamas' incursion. He said, "As we gather annually in the spirit of interfaith prayer and harmony, let us embrace the beauty of our differences and unite in prayer for **peace, understanding, and love**. May our diverse faith traditions inspire us to build bridges of compassion, strengthen our communities, and work hand in hand for a more inclusive and harmonious world. May our trust in each other open our eyes and our hearts, and give us the courage to say: '**Never again war! With war everything is lost**.'" Dr. Rasheed spoke passionately about the losses he and his community had suffered but still was able to call for a more inclusive and harmonious world.

Finally, Rev. Dr. Robin Tanner, a Member of the Lead Ministry Team at Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Summit, felt moved to write a poem about the event titled, "The Safest Place," which is presented in its entirety below:

Running late,
I slide in toward the back.
It is an interfaith service.
I want to run out.
But this is the call.
Stay.
Thirty-four days since the attack.
Since bombs began.

Here a man rises to tell us –
This is the safest place you could be.
An interfaith service.

Swirls of social media and hate speech.
And my child bullied at school.
Rush to the mind.
I slide the phone into my purse.
Not now.
Stay.

Another man rises to the pulpit.
He tells of speaking to his mother in Gaza.
Telling her goodnight over tea and across an ocean.
Just hours later receiving the call
Her home bombed

No, no, she was going to bed.

This is the safest place you could be.

After the service
A rabbi, a teacher, tenderly says to the man
I am so sorry about your mother.
We are so very human and learning impossible lessons now.

"All our mothers, so many mothers," the man says and takes the rabbi's extended hand.

And children
All our children
So many children
Under the rubble
Held hostage in tunnels.
Murdered before the first year of life.
Teenagers just at the edge of their futures.
Parents crafting homes from traditions.
Grandparents just tucking in for the night.
All someone's child.

Barely a whisper, a young woman asks me,
Will you call for ceasefire?
And I almost weep.

I see the poster of the woman who grew up in this town:
Smiling with long black hair and a beaming smile:
Is she alive?
I think of the young highschooler harassed.
And the man's mother in her pajamas, having just gone to bed.
The baby who now spent a month in captivity.

Call for so much more.
Call for our humanity
Call for the end of death
Call more for life
Call for release
And liberation
Call for a truer peace,
Birthed from justice.

Call for everywhere on this sweet earth to be
At last
The safest place
You
Could
Be.

Finally, the Union County Interfaith Coordinating Council, in partnership with Community Access Unlimited, was inspired to continue to hold this event despite the conflict's impact domestically on our faith communities. The religious leaders from UCICC demonstrated the necessary and blessed importance of being in community together while witnessing the atrocities of war. The Union County Interfaith Coordinating Council's religious leaders demonstrated to our communities how to weep while actively loving one another.

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We wish you Happy Holidays and a blessed New Year

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