

Dawn's Experience in the Downtown Eastside (DTES)

Gentrification and Homelessness

Here in this ten by ten block radius, I learned a bit of what it means to experience poverty in a “world class city”. With the 2010 Olympics quickly approaching, developers such as Concord Pacific are buying up the only housing available to many DTES residents: dilapidated SROs (Single Room Occupancy) and hotels. Here, people rent tiny bed-bug infected and windowless rooms, and share a bathroom and kitchen. Social (government subsidized) housing is being eaten up and replaced with towering, high-rent condos. This ruthless displacement of an entire community in the name of economic development is called gentrification.

Many low-income residents are facing eviction and sustain a high risk of homelessness. Some will join the 1,000 plus people who live on the streets of the DTES already. Being poor means a having unstable, substandard housing, or no real housing at all. Being poor means a large profitable corporation can kick you out of your home, legally. If you live near an urban area, it is very likely that communities in your vicinity are facing similar pressure.

Servants Vancouver

The lack of housing in the DTES has directly affected Servants Vancouver; they have been looking for permanent housing in the neighborhood for more than a year. Currently, they live a few blocks from the DTES, next to colorful Chinatown. The members of the community include Craig and Nay with their two kids, and also Jenny and Amy. Their desire is to live as an intentional Christian community among the poor in the DTES. Welcoming people who are marginalized into their lives and home, they hope to create an environment where people can heal and find Christ's hope. Servants Vancouver also participates in creative advocacy and justice efforts in both local and global contexts. They are linked to a network of Christian communities living and ministering in the slums of many Asian mega cities.

Among several other goals, I visited this community in order to explore the possibility of joining them in the future. As I first walked the streets of the DTES, I was impacted not only by the many people without homes, but the flagrant (or should I say fragrant!) drug activity: open selling, buying and using. Approximately 5,000 people who use injection drugs make their home here, necessitating harm reduction measures such as a safe injection site. And the risks are sharp: about 30 percent of the DTES population is HIV positive, and 70 percent have Hepatitis C. Sex work and violence against women are facts of life here.

My being, doing and learning

Compared to the hectic schedule I dragged myself through in April, my time in Vancouver was fairly restful. We had a common prayer time each morning; I ate breakfast with the kids, and then enjoyed a quiet time of reading and reflection. Around ten one of the women's drop-in centers opened, and several times a week I would go to spend time with people. I was not a volunteer, but simply another woman around the table. It is an often noisy place for coffee, a meal, shower, restroom, clothes and occasional piano playing.

Relationship

Countless agencies like the women's center fill the basic physical needs for the precarious existence of many DTES residents. But I found that so many women were hungry for something else: relationship. People desired companionship, someone to listen to their story and eat lunch with. At points, being with these women rather than doing something to help them felt insignificant and tried my patience. Here lies a challenge for us to imitate Jesus who came to be with us in our pain without fixing everything. I am encouraged after this month to hang out in the hangouts of people who are ‘out’—it is easier and harder than I thought.

Growing Hope

On Mondays we had a team meeting, sharing and prayer time. In the afternoon a few of us would head to a green plot on notorious W. Hastings Street. There, I pretended to weed, but was more interested in inviting neighbors into the young garden. This was one of my favorite activities, because somehow, life and hope stir in people when they see growing things! Eyes begin to sparkle as they reminisce about their grandmother's plot, pumpkins and rhubarb. Craig and Nay's kids, five and three, always joined us—spilling their laughter and love on the women in despair who sit outside the garden's back fence, shooting up.

Hospitality

On Monday nights I participated in a local group called Stream of Justice, which combines biblical study and creative activism on local housing issues. Tuesday evenings we hosted a potluck, and held our World Creative Justice group. Throughout the week, I spent time cooking for the community and talking with visitors and community guests over tea. Greg rents a room in the house, and is slowly re-emerging from a life of isolation. Ros and John came to stay with

us for two weeks after their apartment building went up in flames. We hoped to help them through that crisis and encourage them toward recovery from addictions they face.

First Nations People

One of the most significant experiences I was gifted with this month was the opportunity to engage with several First Nations people. Compared to other neighborhoods in Vancouver, native people are overrepresented in the DTES. Cultural destruction and abuse in the recent past have left these groups vulnerable and often struggling with poverty and addiction.

I spent time at a local agency called the Aboriginal Front Door that seeks to provide a hospitable place for people on the street, especially First Nations people. Amy and I took part in a women's drumming circle; we were privileged to observe a slice of First Nation spirituality and culture. I also appreciated listening to the stories of people who survived abusive residential schools. One man named Phil mourned that he was the last one in his family to remember their language and religious rituals. Billy made a twisting gesture in front of his heart to describe the gut-wrenching pain of his addiction to alcohol. My spirit was heavy after talking with Terri, a young First Nations woman. Her head partly bald and movements erratic due to drug use, Terri's eyes betrayed no hope.

Reconciling Work

What breaks my heart is the rift between the contemporary Christian church and First Nations people. Because the Christian church often ran the residential schools, much abuse and purposeful destruction of language, culture, families and communities occurred in the name of Christ. Understandably, many First Nations people still feel great bitterness toward Christians. And from my observation, many Christian communities are unaware of or apathetic toward the devastating effects of the sin of the last generation. Stuck in unconfessed historical sin, bitterness and anger, both sides are held back from a full life in God's reconciling love.

Further, it seems there are few culturally contextual churches among First Nations people. Christians in the past have deemed all their spiritual practices as corrupt and failed to introduce the Gospel in a way that embraces and transforms local culture. For example, drumming is a significant way for many First Nations people to connect with the heartbeat of the universe and pray to God. Instead of being outlawed, drumming could be used to worship the God revealed through Jesus. Following this time in the DTES, I want to continue exploring holistic, contextual church planting among First Nations people. I believe this is an area of local ministry that is ripe in North America.

Simplicity

I think what enabled this month to be for me both restful and stretching was the manner in which this community arranged their lives together. They have committed to Servants Vancouver as their "primary place of belonging". This means that they limit other relationships and commitments to some extent, so that priority is given to nurturing their community. Each member continues to participate in a church family and other outside relationships, but care is taken that these do not overwhelm their time.

The result was beautiful in a society where many people are too busy to spend time with God or their family. We spent many evenings a week relaxing together and talking with our guests. We ate meals together without the rush I am used to. Our schedules were free enough to walk most places and enjoy conversation on the way. Is this just a privileged way of life out of touch for normal people? I would encourage you to consider how your commitments, even to ministry, are affecting your ability to spend time in solitude or with your family. As we see our whole way of life (time alone, with our community and with those we are reaching out to) as worship to God, then the conflict between these different elements can be addressed.

Decision-making

The most difficult aspect of my time in Vancouver was discerning if God was leading me to join this community. My attitude became more open to the possibility as the time passed, and I was genuinely able to envision myself there. One evening during our reflection time, I felt a distinct release from my straining to choose the way that most closely matched my ideals. Externally, Servants Vancouver fits well with the goals I had articulated for my life. But I had the sense that a faithful life is not manipulating my environment (choosing the "correct" community) to allow me to live in holiness. Rather, I must make the choice of obedience to God in small ways every day, no matter what community I am part of. The tension is that faithfulness is not an individual affair; an obedient community allows individuals to enter into God's mission more fully. As God gave me freedom in the tension of these two perspectives, I knew clearly that God had opened the way for me to be at Good Works in Ohio. I also felt that the time was not right for me to join Servants Vancouver, as they are still in formation. I am very thankful for what God taught me and allowed me to experience last month. I hope what I shared will encourage you on the Way.