

Christian Mercy and Justice Network

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But let justice flow like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream. Amos 5:24

Family Resource Day Through the Years

By Vern Fein

CMJN meetings:

Join us at our monthly meetings every 3rd Thursday at 7:00!

Meetings are held at New Covenant Fellowship (the corner of White and Randolph).

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On August 11, Christians from nineteen area churches gathered at Salt and Light to hold the Family Resource Day.

Over 60 volunteers from these churches distributed over

700 fully-loaded backpacks to school kids, over 6,000 pounds of food, over 1500 items of clothing, conducted 40 school physicals and offered prayer to everyone who came. Hundreds of families waited patiently in line while their children enjoyed wonderful activities. Family Resource Day has become the largest of its kind, and a much valued community event.

But it was not always that way. The Family Resource Day started as part of a Jesus' Days' celebration that distributed food, clothing, and love to those who came.

Then, some of the organizers decided to bring in school supplies and make it a bigger event. The Christian Mercy and Justice Network saw the potential of this event, re-named it the Family Resource Day, solidified the August date, and begin to plan. The first few were held at the Vineyard Church, but various churches were involved from the beginning. Soon after the first event, the Christian Mercy and Justice Network officially adopted the event.

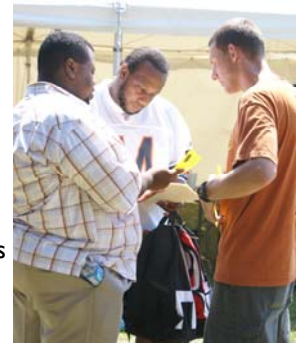
The Family Resource Day has always offered food through the Eastern Illinois Food Bank. Early on, its second emphasis was children's and maternity clothing because of

the high demand for those items. School supplies were added in the third year. That year, we had 50 backpacks and assorted supplies in a box. They were gone in 20 minutes! In addition, the group added the Mobile Health Unit from the Champaign County Christian Health Center who offered school physicals.

The following year, Vineyard began to construct a new facility prohibiting the use of that space for the event. A search began, and Salt and Light stepped forward and agreed to host. It was a wonderful match. Not only did we have a stable facility and staff in place to organize and help, but Salt and Light already did clothing distributions so we were able drop requests for that very difficult item and focus on the school supplies. The first year at Salt and Light (2005) we distributed over 300 backpacks. Last year that number jumped to 550, and this year over 700 went out the door.

The motivation for this event is not just to give items away, however. In John 17, Jesus prayed that his followers would display a unity that would convince the world of His love for them. And, Jesus always held up serving those in need as a major commandment. As organizers of the Family Resource Day, we believe this event combines those two elements in an effective way – churches working together and Christians assisting those in need.

Looking into the eyes any school child when they have just gotten a brand new backpack stuffed with all kinds of supplies helps us realize



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that the Family Resource Day is a great blessing to all involved.

We have an even greater vision for the future. We would love to have the great majority of Champaign-Urbana churches come on board. We would love to supply backpacks to every family who needs one as well as add other services. We would love for this event to become so big that it becomes a witness to Jesus' love and the community says, "Look at what those Christians do when they band together, help each other, and care about those in need."

If you would like to volunteer or have your church to join with us in next year's event, please contact Vern Fein at vfein4@yahoo.com or 367-8082. For more information, check out the Christian Mercy and Justice Network's website: www.cmjnetwork.org.



Ministry Spotlight — Keepin' It Real with Real Life Teen Parent Outreach

By Stephanie Davenport

Recently I was enjoying a cup of coffee at *The Vineyard Church's Doppio Café*, when my attention was lured away from my laptop by the boisterous laughter coming from the other side of the café. Much to my surprise, I found a group of teen moms gathered around one young lady in particular, who was proudly showing off her week old newborn. They all shared soda and snacks while the veteran teen moms gave lots of friendly advice and encouragement to the new mom. Shortly there after I watched them all adjourn to another *Vineyard* classroom where they were able to enjoy some relaxation time with a yoga instructor who had donated her time that evening to the teen moms.

I later discovered that this lively gathering is called *Real Life Teen Parent Outreach*.

They meet every Monday night and they are an arm of *Youth for Christ*. *Real Life Teen Parent Outreach* is in its second year of ministry and appears to be off to a phenomenal start. They currently have about twelve teen moms that attend and that number will continue to rise as the school year progresses and word gets out about the program, says *Real Life Director, Laura Olthoff*. Laura is experienced in social work and outreaches directly to east central Illinois schools.

Throughout the year, *Real Life* plans to cover various parenting topics as well as subjects that will assist the teen moms in making healthy life choices. Later this fall they plan to teach classes on self defense, child safety, nutrition and budgeting. *Real Life* also realizes that teen moms face a great deal of stress parenting

alone and so they also try to incorporate occasional events that provide relaxation and a little pampering for the young ladies. Every winter they host a spa night where the young women are treated to pedicures, manicures, haircuts and more. Most importantly, the program offers all of these opportunities in a non-judgmental, caring environment.

Real Life grows throughout the school year which also creates a demand for volunteers. If you have a heart for teen moms or caring for their children, *Real Life* might be the place for you. There are also lots of special monthly and quarterly events that make great serving opportunities for small groups and bible study groups. If this sounds like an area of ministry you'd like to get involved with, contact *Real Life Director, Laura Olthoff* at 898-5685 or laura@yfceci.org

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Connecting Church and Community — “Partnering Against Homelessness”

By Amanda Kreeb

“Love your neighbor”.

This seemingly simple commandment isn't so simple when we begin to investigate what a 'neighbor' truly is. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, a neighbor is “one who lives near or next to another”. Despite this interpretation reflective of our current culture, Jesus provides a much different look at what a neighbor might be. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37), Jesus notes that a neighbor might be the person that we would least likely to live by: naked, neglected, wounded, and abandoned—left for dead next to the road. As much as we would like to believe that these 'neighbors' do not exist, they do; we not only see them, but like the Pharisee in the parable... we often pass them by.

According to a 2003 survey, there are 315 homeless persons in Champaign County. Several agencies including the Mental Health Center of Champaign County may provide shelters and assistance for these homeless individuals, but their battle can't be fought alone. The Times Center for example, a transitional living program for the homeless, is able to house and provide support for 50-70 men. In the winter months however, their facilities overflow; homeless men are turned away at a

time when even the streets are inhospitable.

Several years ago—realizing Jesus' command and prompted by his love, several local area churches (Savoy United Methodist Church, Restoration Urban Ministries, and First Presbyterian Church) stepped forward to create a ministry specifically addressing these 'neighbors' in need. The ministry, “Partnering Against Homelessness” not only provides overflow shelter to homeless men—it provides loving outreach in Jesus' name.

Every week, from January to April, the churches involved in “Partnering Against Homelessness” take turns hosting an overflow shelter (Savoy United Methodist Church and first Presbyterian Church each host one week each month, Restoration Urban Ministries hosts two). During this time, homeless men from the Times Center are transported to the allocated church shelter each night where they are provided clean bedding, snacks, and an opportunity to know God more—through his word or simply through the actions of the volunteers on site.

Barb Davies, member and one of the coordinators of the “Partnering Against Homelessness” program at Savoy United Methodist Church, explained in a recent interview that part of

the difficulty in dealing with homelessness is that we often assume that someone else is taking care of the problem. Ervin T. Williams, Senior Pastor and Executive Director of Restoration Urban Ministries, summed it up by stating that “homelessness is here to stay; the answer to the question ‘what can be done about it?’ is not found in ‘you’ or ‘I’—the answer can only be found in ‘we’”. WE is exactly what “Partnering Against Homelessness” is hoping to achieve. Their ministry is much bigger than providing a place to sleep—its about activating and inviting others into partnership against a problem that needs ownership... especially in the Christian community.

If you or your church is interested in being part of the homeless solution by working with “Partnering Against Homelessness”, please contact **Barb Davies at 417-7601 or bjd830@sbcglobal.net** (Savoy United Methodist Church) or **Ritchell Yau at 649-8525** (First Presbyterian Church). *Volunteers are welcome and needed!* Being a part of “Partnering Against Homelessness” allows us to truly love our 'neighbors' by putting God's love and compassion into action.

“Homelessness is here to stay; the answer to the question ‘what can be done about it?’ is not found in ‘you’ or ‘I’ - the answer can only be found in ‘we’”.

- Ervin Williams

Director of

Restoration Urban

Ministries

For information on other agencies who serve people who are homeless, check out <http://helpbook.prairienet.org>

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The Unmerciful Servant: Reconsidering Our Approach to Mercy & Justice

By Jeff Trask

“The Bible says that every man should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps”. Sound familiar? This was (and still is) a phrase often mentioned in conversations concerning the poor. There happens to be one critical problem with this statement – the Bible never says such a thing. Despite that fact, however, the Christian community in the United States has allowed mercy and justice to be framed by the dominant secular culture which is more apt to blame the poor for being poor than be merciful. This adopted framework even seeps into the hearts of those willing to sacrifice their time and money for the poor. What often begins as a completely altruistic response to help hurting people, quickly converts into a myriad of rules and regulations to justify helping “only those that *really* need help”.

Our attitude is similar to the unmerciful servant whose extremely large debt was cancelled by a merciful king and then has the nerve to assault someone that owes him a small debt moments later. Seems absurd on the part of the servant whose debt was mercifully forgiven, right? Unfortunately, we tend to resemble the servant’s behavior. When we witness

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’”

Matthew 18: 32-33

some of the mistakes people have made in their lives (the debt) that caused them to be in their situations or the behavior of those in survival mode, the judgment antennas rise and begin to dilute our altruism. We often revert to “let’s fix them up” mode, thinking the point is to get people to where we are. We begin seeing the poor as projects instead of people and want to make sure our investment of time and energy is going to be used efficiently and effectively.

Of course, we need to establish boundaries, be clear with our limitations, etc, so we can have order. But, our pure intentions begin to erode into seats of judgment,

adopting a viewpoint the dominant culture still embraces – survival of the fittest. And of course, the fittest in this country are those with the most resources. For example, our country predominantly believes that those who cannot afford health insurance are the cause of America’s health care crisis instead of critically analyzing a health care system that leaves 46.1 million people without a place to receive basic medical care.

Even those who help the poor have very different standards for themselves compared to the people they serve. For instance, the poor often must wait in extremely long lines and endure tedious processes to get the most basic things accomplished. Do we empathize with these frustrations, or do we believe that’s just the cost of being poor? My point is not that everyone should get everything they want in life. The point is what Jesus was trying to communicate through this parable – treat others as your heavenly Father has treated you. When we begin to grasp that God’s desire for us to love each other is so much more important than efficiency and effectiveness, we begin to experience a taste of God’s kingdom. I’m hungry for that love, and a taste simply will not do for me, will it for you?