Living Water Soup Kitchen & Northern Gateway Community Chaplaincy

“It doesn’t matter how many times you fall, all that matters is that you pick yourself back up and dust yourself off”

Today I wondered what it would be like to be hungry. Never in my life have I been truly short of food. I may say, “I am starving” but really that is not the case. When I open my cupboards, there is always something to choose from. Our bodies are powered by the quality and variety of foods that we choose. Ninety percent of the time I have high energy. I think this is because of the meals that I prepare and the nourishment that comes from these foods. I started thinking about hunger and what it looks like in our community.

Today, my wish is to get you to reflect on the purpose of the soup kitchen within our community. Recently I asked, “Who runs the Soup Kitchen in The Pas? From that one question, I learned plenty. The soup kitchen is run by the Living Water Apostolic Fellowship. For the past 21 years, the caring congregation of Living Water church, various other church organizations including Gospel Missions church in Winkler and community members together have continued to support the soup kitchen. The soup kitchen is not funded by government. Through compassion and love, they have kept the soup kitchen open daily Monday to Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. They have found ways to continue to offer lunch to the people who rely on the soup kitchen at a time when the doors cannot be open to the public. They distribute bag lunches to those who need this service. Many people give from willing hearts, helping hands and from a place of faith to show love to our community. Not only do they prepare and provide a meal, but also to create hope for those in need. Hope, kindness, caring, and a sense of belonging to church and to community.

In researching this one question, it became clear that another group works very closely with the Living Water Soup Kitchen. The Northern Gateway Community Chaplaincy (NGCC) is a street ministry which provides resources and rehabilitation for the homeless population. I was warned that the lady who runs the NGCC was incredibly inspiring. And that she is. In a telephone conversation with Lorraine Ballantyne Packo, I learned about the people whom she reaches out to each day. I learned about homelessness and much more about giving. The mission of NGCC is to serve the working poor, the homeless, those on social assistance and others that are struggling. Both Living Water Soup Kitchen and Northern Gateway Community Chaplaincy give much and receive much back in return. It all starts with a loving heart and a shift in perception.

A little history about the Northern Gateway Community Chaplaincy (NGCC). It was inspired and came to life by Reverend Grahame Spear on July 1, 1999. The main objective of the NGCC is to offer supports to the people who live on the streets. A street ministry. Lorraine stepped into the position in 2015 with no official training but experience with working with the homeless since 2011. She offers guidance, prayer and lunch to the homeless. But more than that she offers hope. She is one piece of the puzzle and has spent almost a decade in developing strong trusting relationships with the homeless.

She works hand in hand with the Living Water Soup Kitchen. Two days a week she prepares and serves lunch from the Soup Kitchen to those truly in need of food. The other days are supported by the efforts of retired Pastor Betty Olson and her husband Ed. Together with The Pas Friendship Center they offer a lunch service. These people work to create small comforts that we often take for granted. Lorraine strongly believes that we are all human! We all have feelings, including the homeless. They may have addresses, but they do not have homes. Their home is on the street. She is supportive in so many ways. Although neither of these groups are food banks, the NGCC sources out donations to create care packages for men and women. Care packages which can include underwear, socks, bandaids, women’s feminine products, soaps, hats, and even q tips. She created 18 hampers for different community members in dire need to allow for an enjoyable holiday celebration. This may not have happened for these 18 families without her loving care and kind gesture.

She spoke to the issue of “family embarrassment” when a family member succumbs to street living. Disbelief that one of their own family is living on the street. Something to think about. Life presents many unknowns. Some good and some not so good. Curveballs such as loss of jobs, income, finances. Add in addictions, abuse, lack of self-worth and non-acceptance. These are just a few that come to my mind. Lorraine believes that everyone needs another chance. “It doesn’t matter how many times you fall, all that matters is that you pick yourself back up and dust yourself off.”

Lorraine also spoke to me about people accepting help for addictions and mental health. She has been witness to many of her clients seeking help throughout her time working with the homeless. She also says that she cannot force people to do something if they are not ready. The decision and the work has to start with the individual, from within. When it starts within it can work out. We all know how it feels when we are forced to do something. It usually does not work.

There are the homeless that have agreed to accept help and treatment. If someone wants help, Lorraine is there is direct the person to services. Some services are local and some are out of province. She spoke about two great facilities that are open to helping people who need supports. One of these organizations is the Freedom Outreach. It is a Christian Outreach just outside of Denare Beach. This facility is usually open to accept willing clients. Due to the current social distancing guidelines, this support group are not taking any new clients. Understandable but heartbreaking to the one homeless individual recently who was ready to seek help.

In our community, Manitoba Housing have been very supportive in providing housing at Oscar’s Place. There is ongoing dialogue to create a stronger network of supports to continue with a Hand Up not a Hand Out. This will take time and effort and is do able. Possible by sharing resources, opening to meaningful conversation and supporting those who have fallen from grace with acceptance.

Lorraine tells me that she is really an introvert but changes to an extrovert when she is working with her clients. They tell her stories, she makes them feel accepted and human. In her words, “I love my job.” She is one heart in the organization. She feels heartbroken at times when she hears of lost lives in this group. Recently she lost 2 clients and feels this loss personally. She also spoke of the young girl who was found deceased behind UCN last autumn. This young lady was her niece. Who supported her during this difficult time in her life? The people who eased her grief and comforted her in her sorrow are the same people that she works with each day... the street people. “Change the way you look at things and the things around you change.”

We may have an opinion on how to deal with the issue of homelessness. It is complex and will not be an easy resolve. But remember, we are all human, with faults, and with strengths. Let’s draw on our strengths and work towards building a supportive loving community. Lorraine and Betty are doing this work....every day.