

Ines W. Jindra, Michael Jindra, and Sarah DeGenero  
(2022)

***Contrasts in Religion, Community, and Structure  
at Three Homeless Shelters***

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In both Europe and North America, faith-based organizations have historically been a bedrock of service provision to people who are experiencing homelessness. As early as 1826 in Scotland, the Glasgow City Mission offered homeless individuals a meal, a church service, and a bed for the night. Nearly 200 years later, faith-based organizations play a significant role in the provision of homeless services across both North America and Europe. Inez W. Jindra, Michael Jindra, and Sarah DeGenero, in their book *Contrasts in Religion, Community, and Structure at Three Homeless Shelters*, examine different ways in which these institutional spaces integrate corporeal assistance with religiosity through a comparative case study of three US shelters. In doing so, they are interested in the different roles that religion can play in homeless shelters to “help people get their lives back on track” (p.18).

The three shelters they study take three different approaches to how they manifest religion in their respective ministries, in what the authors term *faith-permeated*; *faith-affiliated*; and *faith-background* orientations. Jindra et al. (2022) adapt these types from Sider and Unruh’s (2004, pp.119-120) broader typology, and Jindra et al.’s descriptions are brief and vague. Faith-permeated shelters, for example, “take religion very seriously and integrate it fully into the daily life of the organization” (p.15). Beyond this, it is consistent with their description to cast faith-permeated shelters as the most pedigreed of the three types, with a focus on spiritual conversion and psychological rehabilitation that traces back to the original Glasgow mission. Gospel missions such as the pseudonymous “Grace Ministries” that Jindra et al. profile performed domestic missionary work in the Hobohemias and Skid Rows of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and remain fixtures in homeless landscapes as they provide meals and shelter in tandem with the pursuit of conversion and rehabilitation of those to whom they minister. Jindra et al. go into no further detail on specifics of the theology underpinning either Grace Ministries or faith-permeated shelters more generally, but it is again safe to apply elements from elsewhere, this time from Rooney’s (1980) ethnographic study of missions on skid row, where a key tenet of gospel mission theology is how “the sphere of individual responsibility is stressed

to the point of eliminating social reality” (p.908) and where “an individual’s sinful life can be altered only through a transformation of grace by accepting Christ as one’s own personal Savior” (p.909; see also Stivers, 2011; Fagan, 1987).

Even in faith-permeated shelters, the bundling of evangelism with material assistance manifests itself in different ways. Here Rooney (1980) gives us one extreme, in which missions provide needed sustenance at the cost of subjecting supplicants to a faith-imbued judgment that frames homelessness as a state of sin and casts blame upon the individual for their predicament. In a decidedly more positive contrast, Jindra et al. (2022) frame Grace Ministries’ mission as a “therapeutic community” where residents are “enveloped in a strongly religious setting” (p.43). This provides a structure and a community in which residents can “[connect] life path events to the descent into homelessness” in working toward attaining “personal transformation” (p.62). By all indications, both extremes (and many more cases in between) exist in the still-flourishing contemporary gospel mission movement (Fagan, 1998), but Jindra et al. make no mention of how representative their depiction of Grace Ministries is to a more general type.

The individualised orientation of faith-permeated shelters also colours much of Jindra et al.’s (2022) analytic approach. In Chapter 3, Grace Ministries’ service philosophy and the authors’ means of analysis both hold that exiting homelessness is a function of a largely introspective process. Much of the Grace Ministry case study consists of interview summaries that highlight the misfortunes and traumas that the informants experienced on their paths to homelessness. These interviews also become the basis for the authors’ evaluations of the extent to which the informants “made sense of their life histories” (p.78), took up the “religious toolkit” made available at Grace Ministries, and then “could start changing how they talked about their lives” (p.78). Following this 3-step trajectory became the benchmark by which the authors judged their informants’ success in successfully engaging with the Grace Ministry programme.

The authors proceed to lay out their analysis in almost psychoanalytic terms, operationalising successful programme participation as recognising past missteps and rebuilding both self-identity and community. Jindra et al.’s (2022) outcome of interest, the degree to which people grasp and alter their trajectory, gain insight, and take steps to improve their situation (e.g., pp.77-79), reflects a measure that is both vague and intermediate, with an uncertain relationship to successfully exiting homelessness. How valid the outcome measures presented in this chapter are for exiting homelessness to a stable, affordable, and permanent living situation is not explored, and the informants are presumably still temporarily housed in the facility

when the chapter ends. Instead, the authors, like Grace Ministry, seem to assume that internalising psychological healing measures in a community built upon faith will resolve homelessness.

The second case study, presented in chapter 4, is of a facility referred to as House of Hope, where the authors apply their biographical analysis to what they term a “faith-affiliated” setting. Faith-affiliated homeless programming proliferated after the rise of contemporary homelessness in the 1980s as a means for churches and other faith-based organisations to address homelessness in a manner that both speaks to the faith-based imperative of ministering to the poor and enables collaboration with more secular aspects of local homeless services systems. Such programming is typically ecumenical or interfaith, and structured so that volunteer groups from participating religious entities could perform essential service tasks in which they interact with the service recipients. Faith-affiliated organisations focus on more material goals such as obtaining housing and employment, with faith manifesting itself not in an evangelical context but in the community support that is extended to the service recipients. “Rather than the religious content, the explicit culture at House of Hope homed in on self-sufficiency” (Jindra et al., 2022, p.117), and the authors identified individual traits such as “a sense of independence, agency, and having an idea of where one wants to be in the future” (p.116) as key indicators of what they considered successful programme completion. It is unclear whether such traits predispose residents to programme completion, or if program participation builds a resident’s capacity for self-sufficiency.

Chapter 5 contains the final case study, a portrayal of a shelter Jindra et al. (2022) generically calls Respite Center. This is a “faith-background” shelter in that, while owned and managed by a faith-based organisation, demonstrates “little active religiosity” and is otherwise indistinguishable from a secular shelter. The median stay is one month, and after 45 days most residents must pay for further lodging. Of the three types of faith-based shelters, this one is most apt to meet its residents where they are at. In contrast to Grace Ministries and House of Hope, Respite House’s intake screening is more inclusive, and residents have the option of whether to engage with the shelter’s programmatic elements and case management services. This means that residents can use Respite Center for a variety of ends including short-term respite; waiting while applying for disability assistance or subsidised housing; or pondering their next move in an episodic odyssey of short-term living arrangements. Residents were most appreciative of the “practical help” (p.141) they received at Respite Center, but the authors fail to consider this and instead scour the interviews they collect for signs of insights gained into past experiences and concrete steps taken to improve current situations (p.126). As a

result, the authors bemoan the missed opportunities for deeper understandings of biographical trajectories that might have been gained had various residents stayed at a more explicitly religious shelter such as Grace Ministries.

Ostensibly, the authors lay out this book as a comparative study of different approaches taken by faith-based organisations toward providing shelter. However, this structure is incongruous with the authors' inordinate focus upon the biographical elements of homelessness as experienced and recounted by the interviewees at all three shelters. The interviews provide much material for making connections between current homelessness and life events going all the way back to childhood. The researchers further comb these interviews for narrative indications that the interviewees are engaging with this material, and that they are using shelter programming, in whatever fashion it is presented, as a tool for initiating change. In this fashion, the authors align themselves with the faith-permeated approach taken by Grace Ministries.

This near-exclusive individual focus overshadows any institutional insights the book provides. Their claim of acknowledging "the immense role of structural conditions contributing to homelessness" (p.161) notwithstanding, many readers will decry the absence of any consideration for the role that structural elements play in facilitating homelessness or the role that housing plays in resolving homelessness. It also begs questions pertaining to whether shelters are better suited to be reclamation projects or conduits for expediently regaining permanent housing. A two-year stay in a religiously oriented community setting, as is the norm at Grace Ministries, comes at a high cost and no assurance that Grace will be any more effective than Respite Center, where roughly half the residents exit within about a month, in facilitating even initial steps out of homelessness (see p.18). This does not keep the authors from concluding, without any apparent support from their data, that Grace's approach of compulsory programming and accountability is superior to the more flexible arrangements of the Respite Center. Continuing in this vein, they assume an academic bully pulpit to assert that shelters should be places of "human flourishing" as they summarily dismiss, in one sentence, the effectiveness of a Housing First approach (see p.160) despite a vast literature attaining to the ability of this approach to facilitate successful housing outcomes (Woodhall-Melnik and Dunn, 2016).

Ultimately, this book is more about religion and spiritual transformation than about homelessness. This becomes apparent in the final part of the book's concluding chapter, which features two key assertions. First, Jindra et al. (2022) contends that "religion is often a positive force" (p.162) in a homeless context. The book indeed shows how shelter, as modelled by Grace Ministries, can act as a spiritual and therapeutic community and thereby help people experience substantial personal transformations. They also contend that faith-based organisations can "[help]

people take steps to overcome episodes of homelessness” (p.163). However, there is simply no evidence presented in these case studies that shows how any inherent feature of religion facilitates people’s literal exit out of the shelter. Taken together, they show how homelessness becomes a way to religion but fail to show how religion offers a way out of homelessness.

## Postscript

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A unique opportunity to explore some of the questions left unanswered in the book presented itself when one of the reviewers (Metraux) assigned the first chapter of Jindra et al.’s book in the undergraduate course, “Nonprofits in Civil Society,” that he was teaching in Spring 2024, and had the directors of two Delaware faith-based shelters present to the class. This mini-panel, recorded with the participants’ permission, kicked off with a summary of Jindra et al.’s three institutional profiles, after which, in an informal validation of sorts, the panellists were asked whether any of these profiles fit the organisation they run. Rev. Tom Laymon, Director of Sunday Breakfast Mission, a gospel mission affiliate, acknowledged, “yeah, we’re very faith-permeated” and explained, “we offer a relationship with Christ but no one can be forced to become a Christian.” Tyler Shade, who directs Family Promise of Northern New Castle County, held the faith-affiliated description as a “generally fair” portrayal of Family Promise insofar as “religion only permeates our organization so much as our families would like it to. It doesn’t permeate the programming in any way.”

Despite both organisations being oriented toward the Christian faith, the two organisations have very different understandings of homelessness in a way that Jindra et al. did not explore. This difference comes out in the respective views Shade and Laymon have on Housing First, the predominant approach to addressing homelessness in North America and Europe. Essentially, Housing First prioritises the provision of housing before any requirements or stipulations for other services (Padgett et al., 2015). Shade embraces this approach: “Our agency, we’re what’s known as a Housing First agency... The main reason we focus on housing first is the belief that when you’re experiencing homelessness, you have a lot going on. Maybe you don’t have employment. Maybe you have a substance abuse issue, but your number one concern for most people coming through our doors is housing.” Laymon offers a counter perspective: “It’s not only my experience but the experience of 300-400 rescue missions across the United States that we actually talked more about Housing Next than Housing First because... our understanding of the homeless [is that] 95% have gone through substance abuse and mental illness and have broken all their relationships... they’re not there because the resource isn’t available... As substance abuse grows in our society, the number of homeless are

growing.” Jindra et al., as mentioned earlier, are dismissive toward Housing First and thereby miss an opening to explore how the different types of faith-based shelters rest their programming on different conceptions of homelessness.

Laymon and Shade also talked at length about community, a topic covered by Jindra et al. albeit in a limited way. Community is an essential facet of both organisations’ missions, but the way each pursues community is another key difference between the organisations. Laymon portrays the Sunday Breakfast Mission as a place to rebuild relationships:

You see in the article that I wrote [Laymon, 2023] that our understanding of homelessness is about the cutting of relationships and building community; it is the restoring of those [lost] relationships. Most of the people we deal with are considered by society as outcasts, unwanted folks by the majority of society. What we do is invite them in. And say we want to – as I tell our volunteers at Thanksgiving – we want to love on them. We want to love on these folks. And so, we begin at the very first to bring them in and begin to build one relationship that’s the one with us and all of our staff and volunteers.... Oftentimes, our substance abusers need to establish a new set of friends and build, and then they need to have the right relationship with an employer, a right relationship perhaps with education, and the right relationship with the government.

Laymon’s view of community is consistent with Jindra et al.’s depiction of Grace Ministries, and this rebuilding theme fits well with the therapeutic framework they use to present their case studies.

Jindra et al. try to apply this rebuilding framework more generally to all three cases they present, and in so doing fail to consider alternative conceptualisations of community such as the one that Shade describes in the mini panel. “I think,” Shade stated, “at Family Promise, the community building really is focused and centered on being that social capital and being that family for people that don’t have family that are willing and able to assist them in their time of need.” Instead of rebuilding relationships, Shade speaks more about supplementing relationships and uses the concept of social capital, of connecting people with members of various local congregations who can act as resources and supports, as the basis for community. Alternative conceptualisations of community, whether centred upon social capital or something else, are unavailable in the book, although they would present a better fit for framing community in a facility such as House of Hope, or as a counterpoint for assessing community as they observed being practiced at Grace Ministries.

Finally, Shade and Laymon spoke to what their programme participants took with them after they exited the shelter, a key question for both faith-permeated and faith-affiliated models both in terms of regained housing stability and retained faith

and personal well-being. It was also a question that we noted went unasked in the book. Neither Laymon nor Shade stated they specifically track how faith conversions impact programme participants once they leave, but their answers again highlight the different approaches that Sunday Breakfast Mission and Family Promise take. According to Laymon:

75 to 80 percent of our graduates don't return to a lifestyle, drugs, alcohol, jail, or homelessness. And we do attribute a lot of their success due to a newfound or now-found faith. We do attribute it to that. We do find that those who do go through and complete our program, oftentimes it is because they've identified with the Christian faith that we're teaching, and that's why they're continuing. But not all. I'd say maybe 5%, basically, say 'Very interesting. I'm going to take the principles and use it elsewhere'.

Shade takes a different approach based upon social capital:

We have our standard intake packet, and it's usually questions like, what's your income situation, what led to this problem? Points on basic various info that we track on to help monitor our outcomes in the family themselves. But we don't ever ask somebody, what's your religious affiliation? They come through our doors and likewise, when they leave, that's not something we ask either.

This postscript highlights some key structural aspects of faith-based shelters that, were they included in the book, would have increased the book's appeal to readers interested in what faith-based shelters can offer in addressing homelessness, while still engaging the audience drawn to this book from a religion-oriented perspective. Shade and Laymon, who did not know each other prior to this mini panel, were able to frankly and respectfully lay out their differences, with an implicit acknowledgment by each that there was room for both organisations in addressing homelessness. We are careful to present Laymon's and Shade's perspectives without judging their relative merits, and in a way that leaves the topics in their dialogue that are covered here open for more thorough exploration. Finally, this postscript underscores how a more deliberate focus on the institutions themselves, rather than on the individual faith journeys recounted in the book, could have better elucidated the diverse ways in which institutional religion and homelessness mix.

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