

The Panhandler: Welcome the Stranger

We are all learning to welcome the stranger among us. Centenary works hard to be an example of hospitality in Richmond's central city. A casual glance around our sanctuary reveals we truly are a place of prayer for all people. But on some Sundays we are confronted with those who come, not to worship with us, but to ask for a handout. For want of a euphemism, we might call these people "panhandlers," and we might want to think about how we deal with them in a way that is consistent with our Christian beliefs.

The first Christian principle is that we are all children of God, made in God's image. That means that we share God's blessings with those less fortunate than ourselves. And Centenary does that. We feed an average of 200 people a nutritious lunch each Friday. In cooperation with Social Services, we intervene to prevent homelessness with help with utility payments, rent, deposits, work materials and transportation. We share with other congregations the responsibility of sheltering people during the winter months through CARITAS.

To the panhandler on the street as God's child, each of us owes recognition of his or her humanity. That means we look them in the eye, we smile, and we treat them with human kindness. These gestures are important because most of us studiously avoid street people - we deny eye contact, turn away, cross the street. They become "objects," not human. To recognize them as fellow humans is a simple blessing to share. Yours may be the only kindly face they see in a week.

A second theological principle is that God's children are allowed choice. Most of these people have made very bad choices - usually involving drugs or alcohol. To be panhandling is to abandon dignity and self worth and, incidentally, to be looked down on by others in the street community. Their behavior is not to be trusted. They come to the church on Sunday because they know they have a large market of concerned persons who can be made to feel guilty. They also know that on Sundays the pastors who know their legitimate needs and their scams are tied up with other duties. Members of the congregation are then easy targets.

So what is the concerned Christian to do?

Do not give money. Money will rarely be used for an intended purpose. And gifts of money encourage more panhandling. If you are comfortable with the action, buy a meal; take the person to the bus; buy some gloves; or, most important, listen. I knew a guy who carried military MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) for street people. Generally, however, your intervention is not necessary in Richmond on a Sunday. You can refer people to meals offered by churches throughout the city. When you offer a constructive alternative, the panhandler will usually move on.

During the week, agencies work to provide additional clothing, food, and housing. There is a summary of such resources in the church office. The most useful thing you can do is

to put people in touch with these resources by encouraging them to contact one of them as soon as possible.

Know how to say "no." It can be said with care and concern. "I'm sorry, I help through my church." You are free to go your way. If you are harassed or intimidated, get to some place safe and call 911. "Aggressive Panhandling" is illegal in Richmond. And remember, Sunday is not a holiday from serious crime in the central city.

Consider other ways to be helpful. Give of your time and treasure to one of the numerous organizations that have demonstrated their capacity to deal with the homeless. Our own Walk-in Ministries is one example. Others I respect are Freedom House, Homeward, CARITAS, Emergency Shelters Incorporated, The Salvation Army. The problems of poverty are not solved by feel-good gifts. They are solved by continuing effort and by changes in our political system that will encourage a living wage, more affordable housing, effective transitional shelter, and better mental health programs. A channel for advocating more compassionate public policy is the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy.

I offer these six points then:

1. Look the panhandler in the eye and smile.
2. Be cautious.
3. Do not give money.
4. Refer to established services.
5. Be prepared graciously to say "no."
6. Work for a more compassionate society.

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