

A City of Angels for the Homeless

How one church in the nation's homeless capital is responding. By Troy Anderson

Editor's note: In the last issue of *CT*, editor in chief David Neff interviewed "homeless czar" Philip Mangano, who described his vision for ending homelessness in ten years. This month, we look at how one church in one of the most challenging cities in the nation is trying to do that. This is part of our continuing effort to report on how congregations and nonprofits are responding to the economic crisis.

GAZING OUT a large window in the pastor's office at Bel Air Presbyterian Church, Arlene Epps-Gray explains how a mother who once owned a four-bedroom home surrounded by a pond and a barn became a homeless drug addict. She recalls a pivotal event, a childhood trauma seared into her memory.

"It all started out wrong," says Epps-Gray, looking out over the valley from the hilltop church once regularly attended by Ronald Reagan.

"My mother was killed by my father, and I was there. I was young, but I was still there. From there, things just progressed. I was passed around by my family members and never felt I belonged anywhere because they made me feel like I didn't. I guess getting high took me out of all that."

After spending 24 years addicted to alcohol, crack cocaine, and other drugs—along with a decade spent in and out of substance abuse programs and ultimately living on the streets of Los Angeles—Epps-Gray, 41, says the Lord brought Bel Air head pastor Mark Brewer and his church into her life to save her family. She has been free of drugs and alcohol for three years.

A beneficiary of the Imagine LA program, Epps-Gray has reunited with her family, is living in a spacious, two-bedroom apartment in Inglewood, southwest of downtown LA, and is training for a career in substance abuse counseling.

Brewer, who founded Imagine LA, says the transformation of

Epps-Gray illustrates how churches and synagogues can help the growing number of homeless families find homes and jobs. With 8,000 houses of worship in the Los Angeles region, and 8,000 homeless families with 18,000 children, Brewer imagines a day when no child sleeps on what are some of the nation's deadliest streets.

'A SOLUTION, NOT A BAND-AID'

Imagine LA (ImagineLA.org) began several years ago when Brewer heard local officials describing Los Angeles County as the "homeless capital" of the U.S. As a pastor in the wealthiest county in the nation, with 250,000 millionaires, Brewer was troubled.

On any given night, 73,000 people in LA are homeless—1 in 10 of the 744,000 homeless people nationwide. Living amid such extremes of wealth and poverty, Brewer talked to his elders—many of whom remembered former President Reagan's heart and generosity for the homeless on skid row—about what the church could do to engage and bless the community.

Describing Los Angeles as a 21st-century Babylon, Brewer draws on the prophet Jeremiah telling the exiled Israelites to seek the "peace and prosperity" of the pagan city. In 2006, believing the Lord was calling him to help these homeless families, Brewer founded Imagine LA, whose goal is to mobilize the faith community to sponsor and mentor homeless families to get into long-term housing and become self-sufficient.

Since the pilot program launched in late 2007, three churches and

Outreach





Divine Plan: '[The Lord] put it in their hearts to help me,' says Arlene Epps-Gray, with her sons, Dontay, 18, and Dareyn, 16. 'This was his plan.'

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two synagogues have sponsored five homeless families. But dozens of major churches and synagogues are now coming on board, and Brewer expects the number of family sponsorships to grow to 30 by the end of this year, and to 200 by 2011. The program is attracting national interest because it seeks to address some of the root causes of homelessness—primarily unemployment, domestic violence, and substance abuse—and provide “a solution, not a Band-Aid,” says Jill Govan Bauman, executive director of Imagine LA.

BIG NEEDS

The emergence of Imagine LA comes as a growing number of families—even intact, middle-class ones—are joining the ranks of the homeless as people lose jobs and homes in the financial downturn.

The face of homelessness is changing across the nation, as shelters and government agencies report unprecedented increases in the number of families losing their houses. A recent report by the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates an additional

1.5 million Americans are likely to experience homelessness over the next two years, in addition to the 2.5 million who are already expected to become homeless during the course of this year. This includes hundreds of thousands of children who are living with their families at crowded shelters and campgrounds, in vehicles, garages, and abandoned buildings, or on the streets.

“Homelessness is much more prevalent than we realize,” says Kurt Fredrickson, chair of the Faith Community Subcommittee of the Simi Valley Task Force on Homelessness and director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena. “The homeless people you see on the streets are really only about 10 percent of the real homeless population in the community. There are lots of people who stay under the radar. They are living in their cars, have kids, and don’t want their kids taken away from them. They are not on the streets begging. They are moving from parking lot to parking lot at night.”

While many homeless ministries focus on feeding and emergency shelter, Imagine LA puts faith, government, education, housing,

and business together. Working with nonprofits and government agencies, program officials identify homeless families and match them with a sponsoring team of volunteers from a church, synagogue, or mosque. The program does not work with parents who have substance abuse problems unless they are in recovery and enrolled in a 12-step or other recuperative program. The faith partner team works with professional case managers to help the family create a budget and a two-year independent living plan, and find a permanent home.

“One of the main things we do is to rapidly get them into permanent housing,” Govan Bauman says. “What’s not working today is providing all the services to treat all their problems, but not getting them into housing. We get them into housing right away and surround them with a whole budgeting and mentorship plan that addresses all those issues.”

Katie Volk, director of training at the National Center on Family Homelessness in Newton, Massachusetts, lauds Imagine LA, adding,



Homeless No More: Bel Air Presbyterian, and pastor Mark Brewer, gave Arlene Epps-Gray and her family a lifeline.

benefits for which it qualifies.

‘HARD AND MESSY WORK’

“I’m excited to see what happens once they take it on a national scale.”

To start the program, houses of worship deposit \$5,000 into a special account managed by Imagine LA. The congregation can hold fundraisers or donate money to be an Imagine LA faith partner. The program retains \$1,000 for administrative expenses.

The sponsorship money helps a family rent an apartment; Imagine LA contacts the landlord and pays for the deposit, plus first and last months’ rent. The faith partner team outfits the home with household supplies and donated furniture.

Over the next two years, the rest of the money may become a down payment on a car, school supplies, or tuition and fees to help train the parents. Imagine LA works with homeless services and government agencies to ensure the family receives all the

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Team members, who undergo background checks, help the family follow its living plan and stay on budget. They provide the family with transportation, life skills coaching, child care, and mentoring. And while the program does not require families to attend religious services or activities, volunteers are free to talk to them about their faith and invite them to attend their church, synagogue, or mosque.

The program helps nudge houses of faith into doing the “hard and messy work” of helping homeless families rent an apartment and get a job, Fredrickson says.

“It’s real easy to live in the suburbs and go to skid row and pass out sandwiches,” Fredrickson says. “It’s a whole lot harder to circle around another person and say, ‘I’m going to be with you for the long haul—the next year or three years—and we are here for you and we are not going to let you fall.’”

Watching the volunteers work with these families is like “watching a miracle grow,” Govan Bauman says.

“They start having that light in their eyes again,” she says. “They do wonderfully in school. It’s really quite magical.”

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Kurt Fredrickson

like to become a counselor for troubled teens. He will be the first person in his family to attend college.

Epps-Gray, who attended church with her grandmother as a child, has recommitted her life to Jesus and is thankful the Lord worked through people at the church to save her family.

“He put it in their hearts to help me,” Epps-Gray says. “They didn’t do this on their own. It’s through the love of Christ that they are able to help other people. I have all these people in my life because that was his goal. This was his plan.”

Since Epps-Gray was reunited with her children—two of whom wound up on the streets for a time, too—she has been “blown away” by how much Bel Air Presbyterian volunteers have helped and blessed her family’s life. Her youngest son, Dareyn Gray, 16, is getting As and Bs in school, and aspires to be a brain surgeon. Two of her older children, Dontay Gray, 17, and Karen Gray, 19, have earned 4.0 grade point averages. A church volunteer helped Dontay get an internship at the fashion company GUESS, where he designed his own pair of jeans.

He’s been accepted to California State University, Sacramento, and would

Troy Anderson is a reporter for the *Los Angeles Daily News*.

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