

The New York Times

February 6, 2007

No Altar, No Pews, Not Even a Roof, but Very Much a Church

By [NEELA BANERJEE](#)

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5 — Homeless off and on since 1991, Rickey Robinson figures he needs to get close to God as often as he can. So on an especially icy Tuesday afternoon, as on many Tuesday afternoons, he bundled himself in a long black coat and joined a small group gathered in a corner of Franklin Square Park, where they prayed, sang a hymn and recited the 23rd Psalm.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,” the men and few women standing in a circle said. “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.”

Some men could not bring themselves to look up from the grass. Others could not stand still. Most are homeless. They sleep at a nearby shelter and spend the daytime, when the shelter is closed, looking for warmth and food. They are the parishioners of Street Church, an outdoor worship service held on Tuesdays by the Church of the Epiphany, a downtown Episcopal parish.

“This gives me strength to deal with things,” Mr. Robinson, 49, said of the service and the meal that follows it. “I think God is with me. If it wasn’t for him, I don’t think I could survive all this.”

While churches have long provided meals, occasional shelter and indoor worship services for the urban homeless, a small but growing number of congregations now recognize that many homeless people will not attend traditional services indoors. So these congregations now go outdoors to bring church to the homeless and anyone else who happens along.

“When you become homeless, you become very aware of how people treat you,” said the Rev. Anne-Marie Jeffery, who runs Street Church. “It’s hard to walk into a church, and it’s even harder when you are homeless because you’re worried about how you will be received, or if you smell bad. Some people never go inside at all, because they worry that they can lose all their stuff,” as in shopping carts that must be left outside, “or be sent to a mental hospital or to jail.”

Street Church began last February. Though Epiphany keeps its doors open during the day for everyone, and offers breakfast and an indoor service for the homeless on Sundays, the rector, the Rev. Randolph Charles, had wanted to expand into some type of outdoor worship, Ms. Jeffery said. So Mr. Charles met with the Rev. Deborah Little Wyman, another Episcopal priest, who started an outdoor worship mainly for the homeless in Boston 11 years ago and who wanted to find a church in Washington to begin a similar service.

Ms. Wyman, trying to introduce outdoor worship elsewhere as well, says she is working with churches and other groups, about half of them affiliated with the [Episcopal Church](#), in 40 cities in the United States and abroad. Already some such worship is under way in cities including Asheville, N.C.; Atlanta; Cincinnati; Portland, Me.; and San Francisco.

“Our theology is to love and not try to fix them and just to be present where they are,” Ms. Wyman said of the outdoor congregants. “We’re not trying to sell any one theology or denomination.”

If people do ask for help, Street Church, like others that work with Ms. Wyman, refers them to social service agencies. In addition, an outreach worker attends the Sunday indoor breakfast at Epiphany.

A small homemade sign hanging from a shopping cart announces Street Church to people at Franklin Square Park, and volunteers hand out fliers alerting prospective congregants to the service. In the summer, Street Church has drawn 40 or so people, in winter about half that.

The worship service lasts 15 to 20 minutes. People line up for Communion (expect grape juice, not wine) and then lunch on two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches each, along with chips, fruit and water. Office workers sometimes stop by. Street Church volunteers hand out bulletins as they would to congregants at a Sunday service, and stay afterward to eat and talk with whoever shows up.

All this is not without considerable effort. Epiphany must get permits from the city, find and train volunteers, and withstand problems among the homeless that may cause some of them to ask for money, or a stay at someone’s home, or a date, or whose mental illness leads them to threaten and swear. As for the homeless themselves, they must sometimes walk for miles to get to the service. They must brave the weather. They open themselves to strangers and to God.

Billy Ray was sitting out Communion on a park bench the other day. His legs hurt from walking across the city that morning to get to Street Church. He has a hardness to him, which he admits to, but he said he considered the service a blessing.

“I was way out of touch with the Savior,” Mr. Ray said, looking at the Communion line. “This here keeps me in touch. Otherwise I’d be thinking devilish thoughts, and this helps me stay positive.”