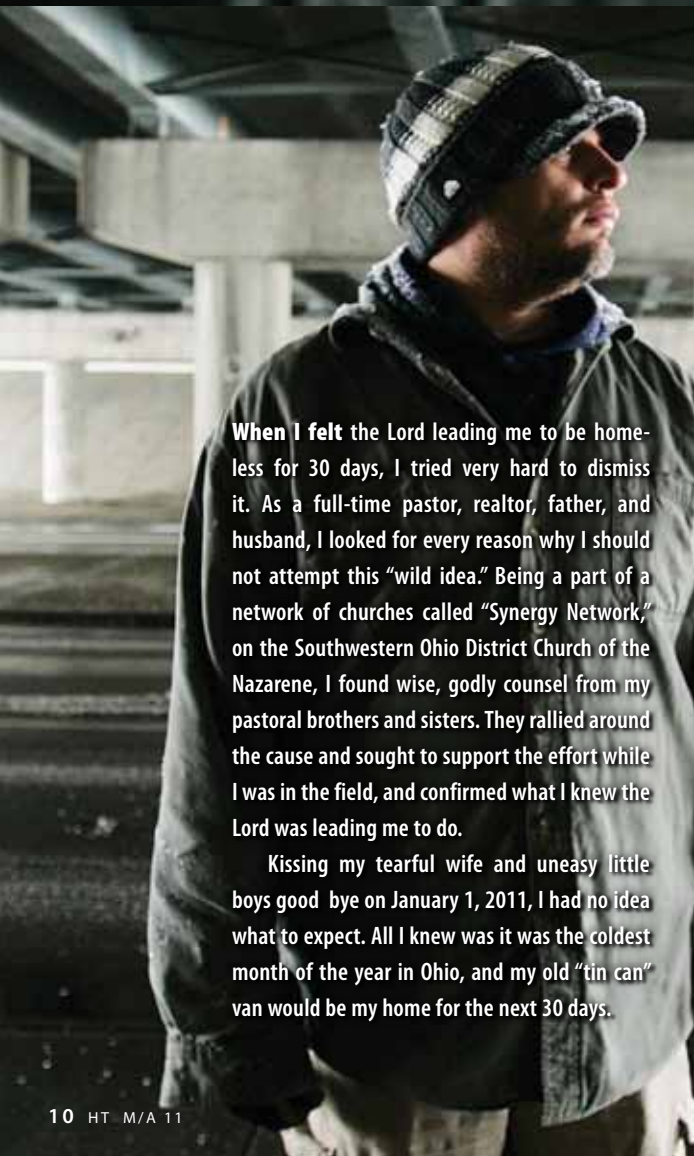


30 Days Homeless

A pastor takes a 30 day challenge and discovers the blessings of reaching out to the “least of these.”

by RYAN RIDDELL



When I felt the Lord leading me to be homeless for 30 days, I tried very hard to dismiss it. As a full-time pastor, realtor, father, and husband, I looked for every reason why I should not attempt this “wild idea.” Being a part of a network of churches called “Synergy Network,” on the Southwestern Ohio District Church of the Nazarene, I found wise, godly counsel from my pastoral brothers and sisters. They rallied around the cause and sought to support the effort while I was in the field, and confirmed what I knew the Lord was leading me to do.

Kissing my tearful wife and uneasy little boys good bye on January 1, 2011, I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was it was the coldest month of the year in Ohio, and my old “tin can” van would be my home for the next 30 days.

The following were my four concrete missional objectives:

1. To experience personal spiritual sacrifice and renewal.
2. To reach homeless people by being homeless just as Jesus became like us to reach us.
3. To bring awareness to homelessness within 15 minutes from where we all live.
4. To raise awareness and support for the 60 percent of 18-year-olds who age out of foster care and become homeless.

No matter how hard I tried, I was not really homeless. In order to keep the integrity of the mission experience I followed these guidelines:

1. Sleep in a van for 30 days.
2. Do not go home for 30 days.
3. See Beth, my wife, and the boys every three or four days.
4. Do not shave, and limit showers to two per week.
5. Spend as much time as possible walking the streets.
6. Read the Bible as much as possible.
7. Eat in missions and food pantries.
8. Pray for God’s blessing and support for the homeless.
9. Establish personal relationships with the homeless community.
10. Use Twitter, Facebook, and video blogging as much as possible to share my journey.

When my time on the streets concluded on January 30, I entered my church sanctuary, which was packed with people. I was scheduled to speak, and everyone was waiting to hear what I would say about my experiences. That morning I received several phone calls from news crews wanting permission to be at the morning and evening gatherings.

More important than the publicity, my friends from the 30-day journey were at church. Eddie was there.

Eddie

I met Eddie on day 12. He allowed me to interview him while he sat at the end of an exit ramp panhandling (“flying a sign”). Eddie was 18 and had aged out of the juvenile system—he had absolutely nowhere to go. He said he slept anywhere he could find shelter. I shared about Eddie on my video blog, Twitter, and Facebook. My church family, Synergy Network Churches, and others following these posts provided Eddie with a restaurant job, new clothes, a bus pass, shoes, groceries, and college enrollment funded by scholarships, grants, and loans from the local community college.

Joe

Joe was there at church. Joe, at 19, had been homeless for two years. On day 14, when Joe and I tried to visit his girlfriend in the hospital, we were kicked out because we were homeless. I had never before felt so marginalized. Without my clergy badge and a shave and a shower, security treated me like most homeless people. Joe and I had a very difficult night.

We provided Joe with lodging at the church for a few nights because he had nowhere to stay. Now he has his identification, a job, and a sponsor who is looking out for him. Joe prayed with me and received Jesus into his life. It was as real as it could be.

Melissa

Melissa was also there. She has been homeless for the five years since she aged out of foster care at age 18. Pregnant, she miscarried in the hospital on day 14. Having only known me for two days, she listed me as her emergency contact. Melissa is still seeking employment. She now shares housing with four other women because two churches agreed to sponsor her. In the hospital on day 16 Melissa told me she wanted to pray and receive Jesus.

Joshua and Elizabeth

Joshua and Elizabeth were there. On day 2 I found them sleeping in a dirty tent on the backside of a trestle, previously known as “tent city.” Many of the homeless sleep there in the summer, avoiding the shelters. Josh and Elizabeth were both kicked out of the shelter and were living on the street, sleeping for three months in a tent during some of the coldest snowy temperatures, just 10 minutes from my home, 5 minutes from church, and 500 yards from a hotel.

Josh and Elizabeth were blessed by people from three different churches in the Synergy Network who agreed to fund two weeks in a budget motel until they could get something more permanent through government assistance. These two people were an incredible blessing to me. We fed them, clothed them, loved them, fought with them, and teased them. They started calling me Uncle Ryan. I made sure they knew there were boundaries and expectations to our new friendship.

Rex

Rex was also there that Sunday. Rex, 49 years old, lost his job last February so he built a shack with a hatchet and rubbish he found scrapping through junk piles and numerous dumpsters. He settled in a private, secluded, corporate-owned wooded property behind a grocery store not far from the church.

I first met Rex on day 10. I had never seen anything like this. Rex, who had not showered in a year, worked four hours a day gathering wood for his homemade stove to burn through the night and next day. His broken bifocals were taped along the frames. Rex was a survivor. He was not what people would normally think of the homeless.

Rex did not drink or use drugs. He just fell on hard times without the safety net of a family. I posted his need on-line and was amazed how people responded. Calls, support, and concern ran across Facebook accounts and all the social media outlets. Rex received one month’s supply of food, new glasses, a shower, coveralls, clothes, gloves, and a whole lot of love. We are trying to find Rex an apartment and a job. He wants to work and be productive. This responsible homeless man is one of the hardest working people I know.




NO LONGER WILL I DISMISS SOMEONE AT THE BOTTOM OF AN EXIT RAMP “FLYING A SIGN” AS LAZY AND NEEDING TO GET A JOB.

Others in Need

Henry, J. P., Ray, Earnest, Twitch, and Cassandra, all with slightly different backgrounds yet using similar survival tactics on the street, were also there. Their presence that Sunday morning made the experience worth it all.

Reaching out to those who have seemingly nothing to offer was the most incredible blessing I have ever received in ministry. No longer will I dismiss someone at the bottom of an exit ramp “flying a sign” as lazy and needing to get a job. I am not advocating just giving a hand out. I would challenge the Church to give a hand up.

Leading up to the homeless experience, the Lord had convicted me. I felt God saying, “Ryan, you talk about being missional and reaching out to the hurting, the dying, the empty, and the lost, but what are you really doing about it?”

My January journey resulted in attention from local and national news outlets, including Dayton Daily News, USA Today, ABC, CNN, a featured story on K-LOVE radio, and even a political cartoon. I did not know this interest would be generated—it was not my intention. This I do know, God blesses a church and a community when we reach out, giving a hand up to those Jesus considers the “least of these.” 

Ryan Riddell is lead pastor of Shelter Community Church of the Nazarene in Dayton, Ohio. You can read more about his experience at www.30dayshomeless.tv.