



Unhoused Neighbors and COVID-19

by The Rev. Canon Cristi Chapman

BETWEEN 2001 and 2013, Tent City 3 (TC3), a movable community of people who have experienced homelessness, took up residence at Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle for three months each year. After a hiatus, they returned this summer in the midst of a global pandemic, arriving to set up camp on July 7. Tent cities began in Seattle in 1990, when a group of citizens experiencing homelessness came together to create a self-managing community run according to grassroots democratic principles. Thirty years later, the organization that grew out of this initiative, called SHARE/WHEEL, runs 11 indoor shelters and two tent cities, housing almost 500 individuals. During that time, the crisis of homelessness in the Seattle area has only become more acute. Today, Seattle has the third-largest homeless population in the nation, despite being only the 15th largest city.¹

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Per an agreement with the City of Seattle, Tent City 3 sets up its facilities on the property of a church or other host and stays for approximately 90 days before moving on. Living in a tent is not the secure, permanent housing that everyone deserves; however, for some of those for whom such housing is inaccessible, a Tent City can be a better situation than more traditional homeless shelters. Unlike many shelters, it allows mixed-gender couples to live together and some animal companions can join them. In addition, the residents are not bound to restrictive curfews, which removes a significant barrier to employment (most residents of Tent City are employed full- or part-time).

TC3 resident Mary moved to the camp in late August after returning from Florida. She says it has been difficult for her to figure out how to finalize her claim for disability after a recent accident. In Florida, she had

to meet with people in person to verify her claim, but with COVID-19, those offices were closed. She moved back to Washington, in part, because the state offers more pathways for her to receive benefits. Mary was grateful to find a home at TC3 while she sorted out what was next. About TC3 and COVID-19, Mary said, “You make the best out of whatever situation you find yourself in.” Mary’s motto was shared by many others who made their homes in tents outside the cathedral building this summer.

TC3 residents were not the only ones who had to adjust to COVID-19. So did members from Saint Mark’s. In the past, many different groups at the cathedral would regularly interact with residents from the camp. While this summer’s building closure and physical distancing requirements made that more difficult, it didn’t stop ministry from happening. Instead, new ways developed to connect residents with the community. Members of Saint Brigid’s Banquet provided meals while adhering to the governor’s precautions. The cathedral provided pallets of water. Individuals brought other basic needs like socks, jeans, t-shirts, and can openers.

Parishioner Kathy Albert recently said of the work done by Saint Brigid’s Banquet: “We need to continue doing this kind of work! We could conceivably shut down this ministry out of consideration for our own health needs and those of the people around us. But what about the needs of the most vulnerable among us? Our faith tells us their needs are to be considered first.”

Tent City 3 packed up and moved to their next host on September 15. In this extraordinary and dangerous time, their presence was a gift and a blessing to the cathedral in



so many ways. We continue to remember them in prayer, we decry and denounce the dehumanizing and degrading treatment to which those who have lost their home are subjected in this country, and we continue to work for a world in which all can live with safety and dignity. ♦

¹ Coleman, Vernal. “King County homeless population third-largest in U.S.” *Seattle Times*, December 17, 2017.

