

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 March 23rd, 2025

“Reflections on Sharing Humanity”

Walking up the sidewalk towards our church this morning, we all had to dodge the tents set up on our front lawn. Last night was pretty windy and chilly and our Youth Group and parents made it through the night in one piece! In a few moments, we’ll hear from many of them.

The FCCOL tradition of sleeping outside at church to raise awareness of those who are living day to day without shelter is one that dates back nearly 20 years. It has had many names, Box Night, No Room at the Inn and now we call it Sharing Humanity Night.

While it's true we want our young people to have some real-life exposure to the needs, challenges and reasons for homelessness.

We also want them to understand what Jesus meant when he said to the disciples, when you shared a meal with someone who was hungry, when you gave them a coat, when you visited them in prison, You did this for me (Matthew 25)

Ultimately, we want our kids to know firsthand that what matters most in life, faith and this business we call church comes down to this: sharing our humanity and loving “the other”! When you share your own humanity and reach across the divide of stigma and separation and arbitrary boundaries to connect with someone else.

when you dignify their own humanness and hear their story and know their name, and let yourself be uncomfortable, too...well. We all become more human ourselves; and that experience changes you for the rest of your life.

Therein lies the hope for our world.

It's why here at FCCOL we travel to Cuba and South Dakota, Palestine and New York City, Haiti and West Africa and New London.

Granted, Sharing Humanity night is only for one night and it wasn't below zero outside. And our kids all have blankets and beds waiting for them at home tonight. However, hearing from someone who has lived the experience of being without shelter makes the reality of what so many face in our community more than real. Who knows, maybe one or two of our young people will solve the intractable problem of homelessness and lack of affordable housing once and for all someday soon!

Thanks to Dana Dixon who is a counselor at the Homeless Hospitality Center we were able to meet and hear the story of Mr. Russell last night, a 70-year-old who joined us for tacos in our Fellowship Hall. As he said, “I never thought I’d reach this age, and ever end up homeless!”

We are so proud of all of our young people and their commitment to this project. I also want to thank our Director of God’s Neighborhood, Jolene Brant, her family and Erin and Justice Cameron for chaperoning last night. You’ll know them by their weary eyes and their halos!

According to the CT Coalition to End Homelessness, the numbers of those living without shelter has been on the rise in Connecticut for the past few years, which experts say is a result of rising rents and

lack of affordable housing. The latest data showed that there were more than 5,000 people experiencing homelessness, and about 900 of those are living outside in our state in 2024.

Sadly, the number of people living in their cars or in tents (If they have them) is rising- not just nationally but here along the shoreline. Last month, the Homeless Hospitality Center wrote in their newsletter that 100 people were seeking shelter, their highest number ever. If they're lucky, some people get a bed, some people get a corner of the floor, others end up in their cars, or under bridges in New London.

When I drove Mr. Russell home to the HHC last night, a staff member met us in the parking lot. When she heard we were from FCCOL she said, you're the church that makes those amazing bags for our guests! She went on to tell me how much people appreciate those handmade bags (by the Ladies Who Stitch)! The other day she told me she brought one to a couple living under the overpass and for the first time in a while they perked up and came inside to do laundry because they didn't want to get the new bag dirty. Those bags are so much more than bags. They are dignity.

Now I'd like to invite up five of our teenagers to share their reflections of last evening: Miles Coppola, McCoy Gosman, Maeve Gosman, Kalonji (Joe) Kazadi, and Naomi Cameron.

Reflection from the Sharing Humanities Night.

So last night we met with a man named Russell. He's been un-homed for a little bit now. He shared his experiences of being homeless and living within the New London hospitality center. He explained the steps the shelter took to help him and other homeless people to get a home and regain control over their lives. After we all chatted with him, we had a chance to go outside and sleep in last night's weather to experience what it's like being homeless. Yes, this was uncomfortable, but it's important for people to feel a little discomfort, especially when learning about others' discomfort. This helped me to better understand and connect the conversation we had prior to real life experiences.

Luckily though right before he left, I had a chance to talk to him one on one. And this conversation meant a lot to me. I've always struggled with friends and relationships. Making and retaining connections is a very difficult skill. We all have to learn, and I'm still learning. Russell talked to me about the loss he experienced in his life. Both with becoming homeless and just general loss of friends and family. He said we all lose too many people too soon. This really resonated with me because as he went on to talk about him losing friendships over small things or losing the connections he once had with his family.

He reflects that in his loss of his home it has taught him to hold on to things that are important and live his life to the fullest. He wanted us to always put ourselves in somebody else's shoes and have empathy for every single person we met. Russell made me realize the relationships I lost or friendships I let go because I did not hear their side of the story. And provide them with empathy, they also lost a friend that day. And I truly thank him for that, I don't think I ever had a more important discussion with someone. His words seem to carry more weight because of his past experiences he took every moment as a lesson and never stopped growing as a person and encouraged everyone to learn from every moment in their life. Even the low points.

The final topic that truly stuck with me was his assurance that it's OK to reach out for help. He talked about how in the shelter the people at the center cannot do anything for you if you will not personally work to get out of homelessness. We had a discussion about reaching out for help and working to get better. You are not any more or less of a person if you ask for help. Help is necessary. And anyone can give help just like we did here tonight.

Thank you
Naomi Cameron