

Helping the Poor in Our Community

An Interview with

Very Rev. David Carter, JCL, JV, Pastor and Rector of the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul
and
Dr. Jimmy Turner, Chief Operations Officer of the Chattanooga Community Kitchen

January 12, 2021

Full Transcript of Interview

On Jan. 12, 2021, Fr. Carter interviewed Dr. Jimmy Turner, Basilica parishioner and Chief Operations Officer of Chattanooga Community Kitchen, a social service provider that is here to meet those most basic needs of hungry, homeless, and vulnerable people in our community, while also offering them a clear path to self-sufficiency. The full interview can be found on the Basilica's website along with Fr. Carter's Pastor's Notes for Jan. 24, Jan. 31, and Feb. 6, 2021, accessible at stspeterandpaulbasilica.com/pastors-notes.

Fr. Carter

Dr. Jimmy Turner, welcome! You're with the Chattanooga Community Kitchen. Can you give us the full title of your position?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Yes, I'm the Chief Operations Officer.

Fr. Carter

Okay, and what does the Chattanooga Community Kitchen do?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

We are a social service provider that is here to meet those most basic needs of hungry, homeless and vulnerable people in our community, while also offering them a clear path to self-sufficiency.

Fr. Carter

Excellent. Well, thank you for all the work that you do, in that very vital and important work in our community. You know, our faith teaches us that we have to have a special solicitude for the poor amongst us - that when we see the poor and the homeless and those who are without clothing, without food, without something to drink, that we are supposed to see in them Christ, because when we serve them, we serve Christ. So there's an imperative to serve the poor. But sometimes our charity lacks the prudence that it needs to truly serve our brothers and sisters who are in need. I've seen documentaries like Poverty, Inc, and other things on the Internet, documentaries about panhandling and homeless who ask for money on the street. And the question always comes up in my pastoral work. What do I do with the person that's in front of me on the street? What's the best way to serve that person? And I know that a lot of our parishioners have the same question. If somebody comes up to them on the street and ask them for money, is it a good idea to give them money? Or are there better ways to serve the poor? Especially this issue of panhandling?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

So I'll start by saying that doing something is always better than doing nothing. You know, the Scriptures tell us that, what good have you done for somebody to see them hungry or in need and wish them well and a full belly, and do nothing to actually meet the need? I believe that the prudent thing to do is to connect people with the experts in the community who are already there for the help that they need. It's similar to: you call a tradesman to come work at your house to fix the plumbing, the electrical, whatever you have. You call the people who work in the field to help people experiencing homelessness or other needs, to connect those people with them to meet that need. And so we would almost always discourage giving somebody money. Because that money can go further at an agency that has the leverage to make that dollar go further than what a single individual might be able to do with it. A great example: I shared last week on social media that the Chattanooga Community Kitchen provided nearly 175,000 meals last year in 2020. And we did it on a food budget of fewer than \$10,000.

Fr. Carter

Wow. That's pretty awesome.

Dr. Jimmy Turner

So when you give that dollar, that \$5, that \$7 that you would have handed out your car window to us, or another agency like us, instead of to the individual, we are in a better position to maximize the impact of that dollar.

Fr. Carter

So that makes a lot of sense on an economic level. But when it's on a relational level - you meet the person in the street - what do you say to a person who asks you for money on the street? You may say, "Well, I give to the Community Kitchen." Is that enough? Or do you have any advice on alternate ways of interacting with the poor?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

My advice is to be prepared for it. And so we can do that by, one: Instead of making sure we keep cash on us to give somebody a need, stop by a fast food restaurant and pick up a \$5 gift card. And so when someone stops you and says "Hey, I'm hungry, can you give me a few dollars?" you're prepared for it. You are prepared to help somebody. I mean, what a great Christian virtue for us to live out, to be prepared in advance to help the person in need that we come across. We can work together as a community, as a church, as small groups, as co-ops to say, "Hey, let's put together these little kits that we can all carry with us in our cars that have basic things that someone might need, including that gift card; things like socks and deodorant; and toothbrush and toothpaste; and a washcloth and a gift card. So that when we come across that person and they say, "Hey, I need some help; my socks are soaked," you can give them a whole bag full of things that are going to be helpful to them. And so we can do that individually; we can do that as a household; we can do that as a church community working together.

Fr. Carter

Beautiful. I know that there have been parishioners in the past that have prepared - I think they call them like - "grace sacks" or "mercy bags" or something like that. So is it a limit? Let me just back up and say, is it a bad idea to give money? You already said there's better ways to give, but is it a bad idea to give money?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

It can be, because a portion of the people who panhandle are not homeless or in desperate need for the help that they're out there asking for. And so some people are taking advantage of a societal norm, that of seeing a panhandler and thinking they're in need, and they go and they replicate that for either an opportunity to not work and just depend on the good will of misinformed people. Or they use it to know that, well, I know this person has at least \$3, and now I have an opportunity to step up and potentially rob them of anything more that they might have. Because they went to show me kindness. Of course, the inverse of that is also we don't want people to be scared to help anybody. Because being generous to anyone or kind can open us up. But at the same time, if we take away the immediate appearance that we're going to be carrying cash on us, then we can at least mitigate ourselves as targets and make sure that even if what we give that person was as taken advantage of, we took prudential steps to protect ourselves in the process. Right?

Fr. Carter

You know, with the reality of homelessness, I understand that there's a lot of resources that are available. But why is it that people are homeless? What are the causes of homelessness?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Well, in my experience, the cause of homelessness is what we would call a breakdown in the family unit. And that doesn't just mean the nuclear blood family. That means the support network for a person. Because if I became homeless today, I have parents, I have siblings, I have neighbors, I have co-workers and colleagues, I have in-laws, who would all catch me and say, "Here, come, come take my spare room, come stay in our bonus room, come sleep on my couch, to protect me from being on the streets." The folks that we encounter have either walked away from that support network or been turned away from that support network. And so that's the underlying issue that we find now, what causes that can be a combination of things. It can be no fault of their own, everybody in their support network has died, they moved to a new town to restart and everything fell apart on them. And they really have no one to turn to. It could be that they aged out of the foster system and literally have no one to turn back to. It could be that their mental health became too much of a burden for the people who were there to take care of them. And the system isn't set up to catch everybody like we'd like it to be. It could be that their drug use or alcohol abuse or criminal behavior caused them to be isolated from that support network because they turned their support network into their victims. So there's a lot of pieces that that come out of it. But ultimately, it's that lack of a support network that break down to the family unit that causes homelessness.

Fr. Carter

So what can we do to help alleviate the causes of homelessness?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Well, the most important thing is to make sure that we see each other as people. We all have intrinsic value because we are made in the image of God. We are the pinnacle of creation. And the more that we treat people like the pinnacle of creation, the more that we establish for each individual in our network, that we are part of their support network. And so the best way to eliminate homelessness is to prevent homelessness.

Fr. Carter

Now, when you encounter somebody on the street, instead of giving them money, you mentioned having some kind of other thing, material goods that could help them in the immediate moment. Could we also refer them to some other agency? And what are those agencies in town that can help people?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Absolutely. So obviously, the Chattanooga Community Kitchen; we serve three meals a day, every day. We have a day center for people to come in. And they can use our physical address to get an ID to check mail.

We have a clothing store where they can come in, no questions asked, and get a change of clothes that won't cost them anything. We have a family shelter for families, the moment that they become homeless, that they can have a place to go where the family stays together.

You have agencies like Metropolitan Ministries that is there for homeless prevention. And so if you're in that situation where you can't make your rent and you're facing eviction, you go see them, and they're going to help you to avoid that. They're going to help you to keep your power on. It's not better for you to go sleep in your car where you have heat than to sleep in your home where you don't. So that's a great agency for you.

You have agencies like La Paz that is there really for the Hispanic community to help them with most of those social needs that they're going to come across.

You have agencies like Welcome Home of Chattanooga for those people who have no one to care for them and no ability to receive hospice care for their end-of-life transition. It's there for them. It's that place for them.

You have Mustard Tree Ministries. It's what's grown from that mustard seed - that operates at First Centenary United Methodist and First Baptist Church - that is going to provide meals and connect people to other resources that they might need, like travel arrangements or rehabilitation.

You have the Volunteer Behavioral Health Center, their crisis unit for somebody who is facing a mental health break. They can go there and just walk in the door.

You can call the police and ask for what we call a CIT officer (Crisis Intervention Trained officer), who can come in. They know how to deal with people in the middle of a mental health crisis and then can get them moved to that crisis unit for stabilization. And then, if rehabilitation due to substance abuse is part of that, that crisis unit can also be a place where you can take somebody to be assessed for what we call a charity bed to get into a local rehab center, at no cost to them.

Fr. Carter

So where are you physically located with the Community Kitchen?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

We are located at 727 East 11th Street in downtown Chattanooga. We actually take up the one side of the entire 700 block of East 11th Street. And then on the other side of the street from us is the homeless healthcare center that's run by the Hamilton County Health Department. So you can come to the 700 block of East 11th Street

and get everything from a hot meal to your primary care physician, and a permanent place to stay if you're a family and ended up in one of the apartments that we have.

Fr. Carter

Are there enough services to provide for the people that come? Because I'll give you an example. I have a lot of people where I will refer them to the Community Kitchen, they say, "Oh, I've been there, and they don't they don't have enough services; they turn me away." Is that true? Does that ever happen?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Well, it would depend on what the services that they need. If they come to us and they're saying that, "I need to go to work, but I need a tool belt to get there." Well, I might not have a tool belt that I can give them to get to work. So we can't be all things to all people. But if it's a meal, we have that. If it's a place to come and get out of the elements during the day, we have that. If it's a place to get a change of clothes, we have that. If it's a family in need of shelter, we have that. If it's case management support, to help somebody start moving towards permanent housing, we have that. We have a lot of services. And we will do the best we can with what we have. But again, we aren't all things to all people. So sometimes, we might not have a service. But I'm always available. I'm here, just about daily. So anybody can always call. If somebody has told them they've been turned away for a service, by all means call me. And I'll be glad to clear up any confusion that might be around that.

Fr. Carter

So we'll throw your name around. Well, I'll call Dr. Jimmy Turner.

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Absolutely.

Fr. Carter

They'll say, "Oh, no, never mind."

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Ha ha.

Fr. Carter

You know, there's a lot of prejudice, maybe against the homeless, that we see, that maybe they say, "Well, why don't you just get a job?" Is it as simple as just going and getting get a job, or is it a process to get people off the street?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Everything is a process. Income is important. But remember, to get a job, you have to fill out an application; and to fill out an application, you have to have identification. To have an identification, you have to have a physical address. And to get that ID you had to have either a birth certificate or Social Security card. If you're homeless, you're not carrying the file cabinet around with you where you have all your important life documents. So we might have to call the state, whatever state you were born in, to get your birth certificate. Then we have to call the Social Security office to get you a Social Security card. And these things can take time.

You know, if you're born in Tennessee, we can get you a birth certificate pretty quick. But if you were born in New Jersey, that can take months for us to get, because each state has their own requirements to be able to get that - and their processing times. To get that ID, we can give you a physical address here. But then we got to come up with \$12 or \$18 to take you down and actually pay for that ID to be made for you. Or we have to find another agency willing to pay for it to get that ID. But then we also have to find a way to get you down to the courthouse or the DMV to get that ID made for you. Then, yeah, we have to figure out your skill set to try and find you the right job. And then we've got to see, are you somebody who has a criminal background? And we need to find an employer who's willing to work with that. Are you a sex offender and on the registry? And we have to find an employer who's willing to work with that, as well as a location where you're legally allowed to work so you're not violating the terms of your registry. So everything is a process. Sometimes the process goes a lot quicker and easier for some people than others. But for some people, it's a real challenge.

Fr. Carter

So it sounds like you do a lot of good work there. I know that we as a parish have committed to supporting the Community Kitchen. We've done so for, I think, since the beginning of the Community Kitchen.

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Yes.

Fr. Carter

And besides the monetary support we give, we also have volunteers that come and help. What are some of the volunteer opportunities at the Community Kitchen?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

That's a great question. So, first and foremost, you think about it, the Chattanooga Community Kitchen is a place where people get meals. We need volunteers to help us prepare and serve meals. And that can be done from the safety and comfort of your own home, or here on site with us. So you can call us or come by and say, "Hey, what do you need cooked? I can cook it for you." You can bring us the food. We can supply you with something that maybe we have on the shelves that you can cook for us. And then, you can come up here and you can serve it because we're serving three meals a day. So come up here and be a breakfast server, be a lunch server, be a dinner server - whatever is going to work with your schedule and your opportunity. It doesn't have to be every day. It doesn't have to be every week. Maybe you can come once a month. And hey, that's once a month that we know we got somebody for those 12 meals out of the year covered. So, thank you; come and do that.

Our day center is where people come and they need to take a shower. They need to check their mail. And we need people that help our staff to check mail, to sort mail, to put it away, to check it for people, and make sure that they get their mail; to hand out soap and shampoo and towels for people to go take their shower; to help us to sweep the floor and keep the place looking nice for those who want to come in for services. We need help in our clothing program to sort through clothing. We get a lot of stuff donated. We have a very generous community. So we need people to help us sort clothing, hang it, put it out on the floor help people find the sizes and the items that they need when they come in needing something. That's a big help to us.

We need people who can help us with things like meal delivery. We have several camps in the Chattanooga area - over 100, actually. And so we go to some of those camps every single day and deliver hot meals and sack lunches so that they don't have to come down here and risk exposing themselves to a crowded condition, and therefore having a greater exposure risk for things like COVID-19, or even the common flu this time of year.

So that's some of the ways that people can help. And other things will come up that we can put we put on our website, and people can go in and see the different volunteer opportunities that we have and sign up online and then just show up ready to help.

Fr. Carter

Wow. So it sounds like y'all do a lot of things. How can someone make that contact with you, then? What's the best way to do they just show up? Do they email? Is it a phone call?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

The best thing to do is go online to homelesschattanooga.org and click on the [Get Involved](#) tab. And that right there is going to give you everything that you need to know from how to sign up to volunteer, where to drop off donations, numbers to call to people to get in touch with. Everything is right there available to you. If you don't have access to the Internet - if you're one of those people who's just not going to take that step - then give us a call at 423-756-4222 and either ask for me, or just say, "Hey, I want to volunteer. Who do I speak to?" and they'll connect you with our volunteer coordinator.

Fr. Carter

Great. That's awesome information. You know, the last little thing I just wanted to mention is that it was taught to me how much the relational aspect is so much more important sometimes than the material aspects, because there are so many services available. The one thing that's lacking with the homeless is that one-on-one connection and the dignity, the respect for them as a human being. So it was taught to me that when you encounter the person, it's as simple as asking their name, asking, you know, how they're doing, on an emotional level, and just making a connection on a human level, respecting their dignity as a human being. Not just giving them material help, but giving them also the emotional, and then, of course, the spiritual help to go the next step, and then say, "Can I pray for you?" What do you have to say about that?

Dr. Jimmy Turner

That is all absolutely true. It's actually how I got into Homeless Services. It was because I started to recognize that these are people just like you and me, people made in the image of God who deserved all the same dignity and respect that you and I would expect from other people and that we would give to other people. And we need to see people experiencing homelessness as people first. And so one of the things that I tell people is to change your language so that you always talk about the people, and then the circumstance: They're not homeless people; they're people experiencing homelessness. And so when we make people the first part of our language, we start to highlight that they're not an exhibit for us to be entertained by. So we're not asking their story, we're not asking them how they ended up homeless, because maybe that's a traumatic thing for them to relay, and they don't want to tell you, or they're just going to tell you something to entertain you, to get you to go away. Talk to them, like you would talk to meeting your new neighbor. Because that's what they are. They're your neighbor; they just live outdoors. So you talk to your outdoor neighbor, and you say hi. You get to know them, share information about yourself. Ask them questions that you would ask your neighbor, when

they move in. And, you know, if you bake them a casserole, don't expect to get the dish back - just like your neighbor.

Fr. Carter

Good point. And it's okay within that conversation to have to say no, about a lot of things, you know. They might ask, "Hey, can I have \$1?" You say, "No, I can't give you \$1." But we always say "yes" to the person, in the sense of, "I want to give you of myself. "

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Absolutely.

Fr. Carter

And don't think that saying no is a bad thing, as long as we're giving of ourselves and our time, which is which is so valuable. They may not want it, and that's okay. We have to respect their boundaries too.

Dr. Jimmy Turner

But something else that's important in that is people have told me that they feel awkward lying to people, when they might ask them, "Do you have any money?" and they'll say no. And they know good and well they had money in their pockets. One of the ways that I have responded to that is: I just say, "I'm sorry, I don't carry money for that." And so it's a simple turn of phrase that is not lying, because I may not have any cash on me. And it might be because I don't want to carry money so that I don't give it to somebody. And it might be that I do carry cash, but I don't carry it for giving to people in that manner. And so I would just encourage people to find a way that is comfortable with your own conscience to say no and be okay with that.

Fr. Carter

Very good. Well, this has been very helpful. Thank you, Dr. Jimmy Turner, and we appreciate your insights, your wisdom, and of course, the hard work that you do there at the Chattanooga Community Kitchen. And we're grateful for you and inspired by you. And I just can't say thank you enough and grateful that you gave us your time to give us some words of wisdom, so that we can also be proactive as people of faith when we encounter Christ in the streets.

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Thank you for the chance to share. I'm always glad to see that people who want to help are willing to do it in a way that's most helpful.

Fr. Carter

Excellent. All right. Well, thank you and God bless.

Dr. Jimmy Turner

Thanks. Have a good day.