

Heartbeats—St. Mary’s Downtown

“The Romanticism of Thunderstorms” by Bill Pickett



Early last Tuesday evening, rain and then thunderstorms rolled through Monroe County. These were not the dangerous, twister-spawning thunderstorms of my youth in Kansas City Missouri. These were the kind that encouraged a slightly open window to admit the cool breeze and the calming sound of rain against a house and yard. I found myself saying what perhaps many of us often say, “This will be great sleeping weather.”

It would be if you had some place warm and secure where you could enjoy sleep and coziness of a spring rain, even a rain storm. But if you had no place like that, you would be drenched along with whatever of your belongings you were able to carry with you throughout the day as you wandered from food program to food program. Rather than being cozy, your clothes would be dripping wet, your shoes water-soaked with no place to seek immediate shelter. Thus it was that the St. Mary’s Homeless Outreach found 25 men and women in the Civic Center Garage. One gentleman’s clothes were so wet that he had taken them off to dry and was covering himself with pizza boxes as he tried to sleep. Last January and February we found more than 40 people trying to spend the night in the Civic Center Garage because of the cold and snow. When you live on the streets, the elements can dictate the rhythms and locations of your life.

In the absence of a city or county funded homeless shelter—something that the other cities in New York State have provided—The Civic Center Garage has become a de facto homeless shelter for men and women who cannot find available beds in privately run shelters or whose life situation does not fit the requirements for extended stays in these private facilities. Beginning next November, the Civic Center Garage will be secured during the evenings and only monthly parking customers will be allowed to enter. One can hardly argue with this policy. The CCG is the only facility in downtown Rochester that is not secured during the evening. It is not a shelter and actually should not be used as one. Homeless people have been tolerated in the CCG because there was no other option. Now the issue before those who provide shelter and really to all of us is this: How are we to accommodate the need for shelter when the CCG becomes unavailable? Private shelters are reassessing some of their residency requirements. St. Mary’s, St. Joseph’s



House of Hospitality, and House of Mercy are collaborating on a residence program that will address that population, Dorothy Day Hosue. In addition, there is a public policy issue for all of us. What is our responsibility as Christian disciples to deal with this situation? Is it something we will just continue to ignore?