

## Opinion

# Soup Kitchen Director Speaks Out

BY ALVIN MASON

*Director, Brethren Nutrition Program*

As the Director of the Brethren Nutrition Program (BNP), the Soup Kitchen located in the Washington City Church of the Brethren, I sense two different attitudes about our program in the community. One attitude is that the Soup Kitchen is a nuisance in the neighborhood. The other attitude is that the Soup Kitchen is a needed facility to ensure no person in the community goes hungry.

All the people who do not want the Soup Kitchen on 4th Street are not cold, callous, and insensitive. And not all those people who have pity on the less fortunate are really helping them with some of their generosity. One of my challenges as director of BNP is to bridge the gap of different attitudes within the Capitol Hill community.

I want to be at the forefront of the peaceable coexistence of all people on Capitol Hill. Why? You only have to watch the news to see the result of people who refuse to coexist. I believe that if the Soup Kitchen can coexist in the same building as a preschool, then we can coexist with the Capitol Hill community at large.

I have gone to community meetings and heard some of your concerns. However, some people have the perception that our Soup Kitchen harbors criminals. Without knowledge, I will concede that some of our clients probably have criminal records. Now should any of them have a violent criminal past, or if any person who has eaten at our Soup Kitchen is currently a danger to society, it is not our fault. You can blame the criminal justice system. I recently finished two years of grand jury service, and I believe that a major reason we are not allowed to discuss our sessions is to protect sloppy prosecutors and negligent police work.

Every crime on Capitol Hill is not committed by the people who eat in our facility. If our Soup Kitchen did not exist, there would still be crime on Capitol Hill.

Some people have told me that they have been in the Soup Kitchen, and it is utter chaos. (Anyone who believes that has not been in our Soup Kitchen recently. If somebody tells you the Soup Kitchen is out of control, come see for yourself. However, I will warn you to expect an occasional loud conversation before, and the day after, major sporting events.

## The Problem With Panhandling

The one legitimate concern I have heard at meetings is that of panhandling. I agree panhandling is a major problem. At times my wife and I shop in the suburbs to avoid panhandling in our neighborhood (Kenilworth). I have stated at meetings that I wanted a video of people voicing their dislike for panhandling, and I would play the tape during lunch for as long as necessary. I am willing to voice my dislike on the video, as well.

The biggest concern I have with panhandling is

the potential harm to small business people. I am not very familiar with the law as it pertains to panhandling. There should be a law prohibiting panhandling close to businesses. A panhandler's rights should not supersede a merchant's right to do business. If there is a law, why isn't it enforced? I will tell you why. There is no revenue enforcing panhandling laws. However, the city is perfectly willing to enforce parking violations or put cameras at intersections to collect fines from tax paying residents.

In too many cases I think panhandlers lose their dignity. One of my goals is to help panhandlers who eat at the Soup Kitchen find their dignity. The truth is the vast majority of people who panhandle lack the malice in their hearts to commit a violent crime. Wouldn't you rather have someone ask you for something than take it from you?

When someone asks you for money, you can always say no, or ignore the beggar as some of you do. People have told me they will buy a person food, but not give them money. However, many good-hearted people are willing to give panhandlers money, which is why panhandling is a way of life. Many neighbors give some of our lunch guests work at odd jobs, which I think is admirable and courageous.

Our guests need to hear your feelings. They need to be told how their actions are affecting the neighborhood, especially businesses. We are not just going to advocate for the people we feed. I promise to address neighborhood concerns to our guests.

## Why A Soup Kitchen?

The Washington City Church of the Brethren does not operate the Soup Kitchen alone. Other churches on Capitol Hill are in partnership with Washington City Church. The Soup Kitchen would not exist without the faithful support of: Capitol Hill United Methodist Church; Christ Episcopal Church; Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church; Lutheran Church of the Reformation; St. Peter's Catholic Church; and St. Mark's Episcopal Church. All of the aforementioned churches and other churches in the Brethren denomination donate food, send volunteers, and contribute much needed money. The Soup Kitchen runs largely on volunteers and contributions. Churches sacrificing to support the Soup Kitchen of another church are an example of real Christianity. However, Washington City Church receives most of the credit in the Christian community and receives most of the criticism within the Capitol Hill community.

The most effective way to explain why we believe in the Soup Kitchen is to lay all of the cards on the table. In doing so you are hearing from three of my personalities—the Christian, the college graduate, and the street dude.

Just as you have a right not to believe in God, we ask that you respect our right to be believers and execute what we think God would have us do. Programs like the Soup Kitchen originated from Christians with the gift of mercy (Romans 12:8).

*Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.* (Matthew 5:7)

I believe that one day God will judge all of us (Revelations 20:12). I also believe if I am insensitive to my fellow brothers and sisters that God will show me less compassion. I honestly believe that I will be rewarded for showing compassion. I also believe that God has always provided for every creature.

Today I believe that God uses regular people like you and me to help the less fortunate. Is that different from Old Testament times, when God commanded that tithes be used to provide for widows, orphans, and strangers (Deuteronomy 14:29 and 26:12)? I think the widows, orphans, and strangers of Old Testament times could mean the less fortunate today. I could be wrong.

All Christians are not in agreement with the view I just espoused. Many Christians believe the concept of II Thessolonians 3:10, *If any would not work, neither should he eat.*

I contend that many of the Soup Kitchen lunch guests would be working in the agricultural era. However, in a high tech society, many of our guests lack the skills to be employable.

Another reason I wrote this article is so some of you reading this will soften your position toward the less fortunate. My question to any of you who oppose the Soup Kitchen is what would you do with our lunch guests? Are you willing to let them drop dead of hunger or freeze to death? I don't believe that any person reading this article wants to see any panhandler drop dead of hunger.

Even if the 80 to 120 people we feed on a given day all disappeared, the problems the Capitol Hill community and the city of Washington faces would persist. My four children are in D.C. public schools and the sad truth is that I will be feeding some of my children(s) classmates if I am still in this business in 10 years.

Please understand that having a facility like ours eliminates a person from saying, "Your honor, I hit that person over the head and took their money because I was hungry." Our Soup Kitchen and other meal programs eliminate that excuse.

Remember that if the people who make it in society refuse to throw some crumbs toward the less fortunate, society could become chaotic. What would our society be if people had to rob and steal to eat? Isn't it bad enough when people have to steal or beg to get high?

I concede there is a thin line between helping someone and enabling him. We don't always draw that line in the right place, but when we err, isn't it acceptable to err on the side of feeding people?

In economic times like the present, when jurisdictions are facing deficits such as the District's

\$230 million deficit, programs like ours become more important. When the government cannot or will not provide, then the church must step in.

We have about 50 guests who eat in the Soup Kitchen regularly. If you got to know them, I bet you would like them and appreciate the service we provide for them. I challenge you to come in and get to know them.

Perhaps my biggest challenge is to change the hearts of some of our guests. However, changing the heart is not as difficult as encouraging a person they can change his or her life. I have worked very hard to win the confidence and respect of our lunch guests. Many of our guests have shown admiration toward me when they see me with my kids. A common thread between the middle class and the homeless is both groups respect people trying to raise their children. I try to share with our lunch guests that they can also enjoy the benefits of their children once they become responsible.

The time is right for me to use my influence to encourage people to change their lives. The problem is I have to have someplace to send a person at that time when they're ready and willing.

### Help is Needed

What I need from you, the Capitol Hill community, is your patience and cooperation. It will take time for you to see the results of what we at the Soup Kitchen want to do. It will also take some money. It will take several hundred to a couple of thousand Capitol Hill residents to make a commitment of \$100 a year for several years. The Soup Kitchen needs \$25 a year from you to continue feeding and encouraging people. You can also support the Brethren Nutrition Program by walking in the Fannie Mae Help the Homeless Walkathon or designating us as your combined federal campaign choice (CFC# 7313). You should also consider giving \$25 to Capitol Hill Group Ministries (CHGM).

CHGM is the safety net in the community performing many necessary functions to insure stability. CHGM has programs that pay rent and utilities which keep people from being homeless. CHGM is as effective as any government agency.

There is also a need for you to make an annual \$25 contribution to organizations that promote youth activities so that the soccer and baseball programs and the dance and other fine arts classes can continue to work with our youth. The final \$25 should be collected by a community organization for the purpose of helping to fund programs that are willing to accept the Capitol Hill residents who are serious about changing their lives.

If 1,000 residents committed \$25 for the purpose

of helping people change their lives, then the Capitol Hill community would have \$25,000 as bargaining power. A program might be willing to give Capitol Hill residents preference if this community contributed to such a program. But the community leadership should make the decision which program. There should be no chance of impropriety. All contributors should have full confidence their money was used properly.

Understand there will be disappointments. Some people will turn the corner and fall back, and everyone who we invest in will not live happily ever after. Despite the possible disappointments isn't it worth investing in people and the community?

Then if you detest panhandling you can reply to someone who asks you for money, "I care about you, and that is why I give annually to the Soup Kitchen and Capitol Hill Group Ministries. (Maybe we can get cards printed up directing people to the Soup Kitchen.

There is already cooperation within the community. Capitol Hill Day School sends students every Monday to serve our guests. Payne Elementary School held a mini-walk for the Soup Kitchen's benefit during the Fannie Mae Help the Homeless drive. Brent Elementary School had a food drive for our benefit. Frager's Hardware sells us the gloves we use to handle food at cost. Numerous restaurants on the Hill, especially Firehook Bakery, have donated food. But this is only the beginning. We need the greater community to come together as one.

I have a vision that most of you who read this article will not only become annual contributors, but also occasional visitors. I want people to come in and see what their contributions are doing. Come in and enjoy a good bowl of soup. A couple a times a year we can have a guest chef. The spirit of community will encourage people to change their lives.

I hope the words of my hand will have you, the reader, reexamine your position. I hope the words from my mouth will have our lunch guests reexamine their lives.

*NOTE: Interested persons may send contributions to:*  
Brethren Nutrition Program  
337 North Carolina Avenue, SE  
Washington, D.C. 20003

Capitol Hill Group Ministries  
421 Seward Square, SE  
Washington, DC 20003  
Website: <http://home.earthlink.net/~cobnutritionprogram>  
E-mail: [cobnutritionprogram@earthlink.net](mailto:cobnutritionprogram@earthlink.net)  
202-546-8706