
The En Christo Story

by Chris Murphy

In October of my freshmen year I sat studying in my dorm room, when my friend Chris Koch entered unexpectedly. "You missed an excellent chapel tonight," he said. Frustrated with my lost opportunity, I asked him to describe the talk. Chris continued, "Well a guy named Mark Cerbone spoke to us about loving the poor. He invited us take one Friday or Saturday night and give out food to the homeless. He challenged us to spend our weekends serving instead of just going to movies or parties with our friends." "That's a cool idea," I responded.

I expected my conversation with Chris to end there, so I could continue with my studies. After all, Whitworth had a lot of great guest speakers come to town. The words were encouraging but with a life filled with studies and friends, who had time to implement all the great insights that came our way? But Chris came in with a proposition for me.

"Why don't we visit the homeless of Spokane some Saturday night?," he suggested. "We can give out food and get to know them." Chris' words hung in my mind. For some time I had wanted to put my faith more into action. Maybe this was the opportunity. "Let's do it!" I said-not knowing that this decision would change my life forever.

A month passed and we all but forgot our desire to go downtown. In early November we finally got up our courage and made plans to visit the homeless late on a Saturday night. In order to be properly prepared we asked all our friends to pray that we might not get stabbed or robbed. Obviously we had seen too many movies about city life. The night came and Chris and I left Whitworth campus at 11pm. The time of departure was particularly planned, since we knew that the homeless came out of alley ways to party on the streets at night--or so we thought. We borrowed a friend's car and drove through the dark, cold, windy streets between Whitworth and downtown Spokane. After arriving at what we thought was the most dangerous part of the city, Chris and I were shocked to find no homeless people on the streets or in the alleys. "Where could all the poor be?- we thought. "Nice job God you lead us to help the poor and there are none to be found. What kind of ministry is this?" Chris and I sheepishly returned to Whitworth campus and greeted our relieved friends, who were happy to find us safe and sound.

After confessing to God our ignorance regarding poverty issues Chris and I began to think of a more creative strategy to care for the poor. Chris spoke to the Union Gospel Mission and learned that most poor and homeless people spend a lot of time in low income hotels. So we asked around and got the name of three hotels: the New Madison, the Norman, and the Jefferson. We decided to make some sack lunches and visit the New Madison.

In order to get the groceries for these lunches we walked around Baldwin/Jenkins freshman dorm soliciting funds. We got enough dimes, quarters, and dollar bills to buy \$25 worth of food. In each lunch we put a hand written bible verse. God had provided the resources, now we just needed the courage to visit the hotel.

Early in December, while I was away on a Whitworth Choir tour, Chris Koch, Jessica Larson, Aaron Ernst, and Machiko Momii, all freshmen students, made their way to the New Madison. I sent up prayers on Saturday night as I rode the greyhound to sing at a beautiful Seattle Church.

When I returned to Spokane Sunday night, I learned from my friends that they had an awesome time getting to know some of the residents in the New Madison. They couldn't wait to go again. Now it was my chance.

The next week we again gathered money from our friends and bought enough supplies to make fifty lunches. We packed into a sedan and drove seven miles to the New Madison hotel on first avenue. The area seemed fairly gloomy. The hotel was part of a large row of buildings connected to each other. To the right of the New Madison I saw an abandoned social service agency office with broken windows. Next to it was an adult bookstore, promising quick thrills to anyone who escaped inside. Further down, a dingy bar invited the poor and lonely in for acceptance and warmth. Thankfully a mission called City Gate also welcomed in the poor for food and friendship.

We entered the New Madison lobby and nervously walked up a steep stairway with torn carpet. Then we proceeded to knock on doors. During that night I remember meeting Bill and Steven. Bill opened his door wearing a pair of pants but no shirt. He had a thin frame but his belly bulged out. Inside his room there were few possessions to mark his life. He talked about years working with airplanes, but now he lived off of social security. I felt sorry for Bill. He seemed to appreciate the lunch and my visit.

My encounter with Steven was more intense. I walked into his room to find Chris and Jessica gripping his hand tightly. He wanted prayer and held onto us because we represented Jesus in the flesh to him. Stephen looked like a stereotypical tough guy. He had a muscular body, worn with years of fistfights. His bushy mustache and penetrating eyes revealed sorrow, anger, and fear all at the same time. We learned that Stephen had been hit over the head with a pipe while on the street. Apparently he also had a wife and daughter somewhere. We prayed for Steven and his family. He accepted the lunch, read the verse, and thanked us profusely for coming. Again we left that night knowing that God had called us to be downtown.

During Christmas Break 1990 I returned to Seattle to be with my folks. For part of my vacation I went to the Urbana Mission Conference, put on by InterVarsity in Illinois. I joined over 19,000 students in worshipping God and learning how to take the gospel to the world. There I became even more pumped up about missions and God's heart for the poor.

When Chris and I returned to Whitworth we agreed to pray before bed every evening for the ministry. We became more clear about the vision and talked to the vice president of the student body about becoming a club. Then we spoke to our religion professor Dale Bruner for the translation of some words in the Greek. We picked the name "En Christo" which means in Christ in English, since we wanted the ministry to be about being incarnational witnesses of Jesus Christ to our friends downtown. Originally the name idea was Cardia En Christo, but that sounded to medical so we shortened it.

The year continued and the ministry grew from five to seven members. We also began a group that visited the City Gate Mission once a week to serve meals. That group grew to about fifteen by the end of May.

After about the first three weeks of going downtown we made a deal with our cafeteria to buy sandwiches, meat, and bread at wholesale price. They were willing to sell us each lunch for about 50 cents. Each Saturday we came to Marriott's basement and made lunches. We stored the food in the cooler; then picked it up at night to go downtown.

To help raise support I wrote a letter to faculty introducing the ministry and inviting people to contribute money for lunches. Linda Yochum took care of our financial books and I served as the club treasurer. Faculty responded in an incredible way and before we knew it our financial needs were being met.

The first year Chris and I served as co-coordinators. Chris wrote out the plans for the director position, outreach branch, discipleship branch, prayer teams, and lunch maker teams during our sophomore year.

Before summer our freshmen year I made contact with John Thomas, Assistant Pastor of Whitworth Presbyterian Church. With the help of John and the deacons Whitworth Presbyterian became the first Church to take on the En Christo ministry in the summer.

During our sophomore year En Christo expanded to the Otis hotel. Discipleship also started to provide follow up service to friends met during the weekends.

Its important to recognize that Mark Terrel provided incredible leadership for En Christo in the third and fourth year of its existence. Mark served as director for two years. At one time during our junior year En Christo found itself \$2000 in debt. By a miracle of God \$3000 came in to save us. Mark carried a lot of the tension of leadership during this time, while Chris and I were away on the Central American Study Tour.

The whole story of En Christo is founded on Grace. God birthed this ministry through a prophetic speaker, willing freshmen, and the power of prayer. Our theme passage of scripture became Mathew 25.31-46. Verse 40 reminded us that as we loved our friends downtown in reality we were loving Jesus himself.

For all who serve with En Christo remember Jesus is your foundation and only by His grace do you have the power to minister in his name. Every leader who has served with En Christo feels insecure or inadequate at times. Remember God promises to equip those whom he calls. just trust in the Lord and he will provide for all your needs. Remember James 1. 5 encourages us to simply ask for the wisdom we desire. Go in the grace and peace of Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the power of the Holy Spirit.