

# MORE THAN A BAG LUNCH <sup>1</sup>

by Christopher Murphy, as told to Mark Cutshall

**How offering food to hungry people in the inner city also provided opportunities to share the Gospel.**

When I was a freshman at Whitworth College, in Spokane, Washington, my life changed in a way that I hadn't expected. It began one Sunday night when a friend, Chris Koch, came to my room and told me about a chapel speaker whom he had heard earlier that evening.

The speaker had challenged the campus audience with the question: "How can you be more effective ministers of Christ?" One way, he suggested, was to make lunches and then give them to needy people in downtown Spokane.

The idea intrigued Chris and me, and what started as a casual chat turned into a late-night discussion of how we could minister to people downtown. We prayed and asked God to direct us as to how to put our Christianity into practice.

Over the next few weeks the idea of reaching out to the downtown poor didn't go away. In December our ministry began to take shape. Chris and I shared our idea with the manager of the college food service. He agreed to supply lunch meat, bread and paper bags at cost. We told our student friends about the plan, and they responded with small donations, enough to pay for making 50 lunches. Later that month, while I was on choir tour, Chris and our friends, Jessica and Aaron, all freshmen, made their first trip together into downtown Spokane. They gave away all their lunches to residents in low-income hotels and to street people.

Eventually we had six people in our group, which we called "En Christo." In Greek that means "In Christ." I'll never forget my first trip downtown. We visited one of the hotels located in a run-down section of the city, across from the bus station and near an adult bookstore. The front of the hotel was no more than 15 feet wide, bordered by tired neon signs.

We opened the door and walked into the cramped lobby. The odor was bad; the carpet was torn.

Our team split up, and I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. There I knocked on a door and a man answered. Shirtless, he was thin and smelled of alcohol.

"Hi," I said. "Would you like a lunch?"

The man said "yes." I was surprised when he invited me inside and asked me to take a seat. As we talked, I learned that George had been in the Air Force. His life had taken some rough turns. Now he worked as a janitor and lived in a bare hotel room with not much more than a bed and a television set.

I looked for opportunities to tell George how much God loves him, but this didn't seem to be the time.

However, the next person I met was ready to talk about the Lord. His name was Steve; he was big and muscular. I found him in his room two doors down the hall, grasping the hands of Chris and Jessica. He became teary-eyed as he told his story of how he had been kicked out of his house and had lived on the streets for years. Steve candidly poured out his life story to us. It was a story of fear and of weakening temptations.

"I know Jesus is out there," he said. "I know Jesus has brought you here tonight. I know he has forgiven me." Then he began to cry.

We stayed with him for about an hour. Then we gathered together in a circle, linked arms and prayed, thanking God for Steve and for the opportunity to meet him.

When I left Steve's room, I sensed that what I was doing that night was more in line with the Gospel and with what Jesus did than anything I had ever experienced. I felt a tremendous sense of peace and love, even though I was stepping out of my comfort zone.

As we drove back to Whitworth, my friends and I realized that we had to keep doing this. We discussed the possibility of taking a group of students downtown every Saturday night. We wanted to get to know the people living in downtown Spokane.

And that's what happened. Eventually word got around campus about our ministry. Other students wanted to be involved. By spring we were regularly preparing and handing out 200 lunches and giving away Bibles. Our core group remained at six, but at least 15 more students began to spend time with Spokane's downtown poor through an established city ministry.

Every week we met hurting people who just wanted someone to trust, someone who would listen to them and not judge them. Each week two or three people would open their doors and invite us in to their hotel rooms. I believe that they confided in us because they knew we would be there every Saturday. In our conversations with the people, they often asked, "Does Jesus really love me? Does God really love me?" We would assure them: "Yes, God loves you."

**"I may have given them lunch, but they have given me much more--the peace of knowing that I am right where Jesus would be"**

Though we would be leaving school in May, we wanted our ministry to continue throughout the summer. I met with a pastor of a church near campus and asked him if church members would want to take part in the ministry. He was supportive and told the congregation of our need. That spring we took a group of six church members downtown so that they could see if they wanted to take part in the ministry. They did.

Vanessa, a student from our original team, planned to stay in Spokane for the summer, so she took responsibility to coordinate church volunteers. By the end of the summer 35 to 40 church members had become involved in the ministry.

That summer Vanessa met Bob, a quadriplegic. Bob could "talk" only by punching letters on a typewriter keyboard on his lap, but his needs came through loud and clear.

"I feel empty," he told Vanessa. "I'm looking for something and I don't know what it is."

Vanessa asked, "Bob, do you know that Jesus is the Savior of the world?" Bob said "no." Then Vanessa read John 3:16 to him:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."<sup>2</sup>

She also read: "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever."<sup>3</sup>

The more that she read from the Bible, the more Bob listened. She asked, "Would you like to pray to receive Jesus into your life?"

Bob answered, "I don't know how."

Vanessa prayed the words out loud for him, and Bob accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord. Bob was the first person whom Vanessa led to the Lord through this ministry.

Not everyone with whom we share the Gospel becomes a Christian, but often we are able to tell our own stories. When I tried to communicate the Gospel to a woman named Mary, she asked, "How do you know Jesus? Why are you so sure about him?"

I told Mary that, when I was 14 years old, I had had heart surgery to correct a narrowing in my aorta. "When I faced the prospect of not living," I explained, "I had to trust God. I couldn't live without trusting him." And, in fact, I never felt God's presence more than when I faced this problem that was bigger than I was.

I told Mary about God's love for her and, though she hasn't yet accepted Christ, I still pray that she will.

I have made friends among these people who live in downtown Spokane. I may have given them lunch, but they have given me much more--the peace of knowing that I am right where Jesus would be: serving the poor and being blessed by them.

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted with permission from Decision magazine, May 1992; published by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:16, NIV.

<sup>3</sup> John 14:15-16, NIV. Bible verses marked NIV are taken by permission from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright 1973, 1978, 1984. International Bible Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado.