

Understanding the Client

Who is the person we are called to serve? How do we see that person? How do we describe or define that person? How do we think God sees them? How do we compare or contrast them with how we see ourselves? Your answers to these questions are key to your potential for future ministry.

We will begin the discussion with a definition of "homeless." You may be surprised to learn of the variety of definitions of this word. The government has defined homeless as people without a permanent dwelling, or people without fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes living in a place "not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or are exiting an institution where they temporarily resided." Previous definitions, no longer used, include "those who do not have an address," "persons without a home," or "displaced persons." Although we have to have some knowledge of the legal definitions in order to help our clients access government assistance, the sense of homelessness goes much deeper in the minds and hearts of those we serve.

Our own understanding will affect how we advocate for our clients with donors and the general public.

Some common descriptions would include:

- Those down on their luck
- Society's broken people
- Persons lacking a support system
- People who have lost their home
- Victims
- Irresponsible, addicted people
- Persons who do not pay for their own housing
- Persons with no usual residence who move frequently
- Vagabonds
- People without a regular dwelling

Here is a collection of answers I have received from staff from various Rescue Missions when I asked them to give characteristics of the people they work with at their Mission. Please note how their approach to a client might differ depending on the label they might give them:

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|---------------------|------------------------|
| • Hopeless | • Helpless |
| • Beaten down | • Addicted |
| • Low social skills | • Unloved |
| • Frightened | • Low academic skill |
| • Defeated | • Victims of abuse |
| • Lots of regrets | • Option blind |
| • Impulsive | • Liars |
| • Rebellious | • Self-protective |
| • Manipulative | • Had poor role models |
| • Untrained | • Adaptive |
| | • Survivors |

How we see others affects how we respond to them. Consider these ways:

- People who need a relationship with Jesus
- People who need another opportunity
- People who need to see truth
- People who need healing
- People who need redirection

How do you develop an understanding of each client you are called to serve? When we clump everyone together with the same diagnosis, we are fooling ourselves and limiting our ministry. The only way we come to an understanding of our clients is to engage them in conversation, asking the right questions to find out the how and the why of their current situation and their desire for change. It could be that most have some similar characteristics, like a sense of hopelessness or option-blindness, but there is a huge variety of experiences and abilities.

What can you do to maintain a right response to individuals? Remember, your source of strength to do your job comes from the Lord, so does it not make sense that your best response to each person could also come from the Lord? The source of grace, mercy, patience, and love, is the Lord. We just have to know where to get a fresh supply every day. Early in my time at the Mission, I learned to rely on Romans 15:13, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

How do you keep from lumping everyone together and labeling them? What is going on when it seems that everyone has the same problem? We need to face the fact that we are human, and as we minister to others, we can get caught up in human deficiency. When, (not "if"), you begin to see everyone with the same issue, it is time to back off and take some time off. I once found myself getting engrossed in the study of what was labeled as "Borderline Personality," and soon I began to see everyone having this disorder! When we label people, we stop trying to understand them as unique creations. When you find yourself in the labeling mood, ask the Lord how He sees this person and take your direction from Him. After all, He has known this person a lot longer than you have!

How the staff views the clients makes a major difference in the effectiveness of what we can do. Here are some sample ways:

1. Clients are not to be trusted. They are masters at the art of deception and manipulation and are expected to be dishonest.
2. Clients are ignorant and somewhat slow to understand and grasp knowledge.
3. All clients are eager for someone to take care of them and do their work for them.
4. Clients are conniving and will usually be double-faced.

OR

5. Clients are people who have had a difficult time and need a break.
6. Clients have great ability that has not been tapped because of lack of mentoring.
7. Clients are God's creation and He may be specifically sending them to us for His purpose.
8. Clients are people who have not learned to utilize their choice-making for good.

How should I view clients in order to make the greatest impact on their lives?

I am not sure if you can ever know how your client feels unless you have experienced homelessness. It would certainly help if you could understand. There is wonderful, good news available to your client who is feeling hopeless and helpless. There are great verses in the Scriptures that address our sense of being "at home" with the Lord. By the way, Jesus would have been categorized as homeless, with no place to lay His head...what do you make of that?

One more consideration for pondering: you are in transitional living yourself...your home is in heaven. How does that affect your daily earthly life?

*"The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water,
but a man of understanding will draw it out."
Proverbs 20:5 (ESV)*