

## **Proposal for Establishment of a Homeless Overflow Shelter Ministry at St. Aidans June 15, 2010**

Ann Doyle, Bill Sweeney, and Deacon Don Burt would like to offer the following proposal. We would like to begin with a few selected excerpts from St. Aidan's 2007 Vision Statement:

St. Aidan's will become a ... presence marked by activity seemingly all day and all night: lights always on and doors always open. ... a relevant Christian presence to those who pass our doors every day ... we would be likely to see large numbers of ... the poor whom we are serving on our campus ... [with] programs to assist the ... poor in the community, [and with the] campus used more intensively, including support for ministries of service and outreach.

While the vision can certainly be read through other filters, this particular vision of the duty of a Christian community to serve the poor is well founded in Scripture; Jesus addressed it many times in both parables and instructions. This emphasis on service is not just for the benefit of God's poorest children, but also for the benefit of those who serve. He told his disciples "Now that you know these things [that you are to serve one another], blessed are you if you do them (John 13:17) Truly selfless service is one of the purest expressions of love. Its practice enriches our capacity to both give and receive love, and our ability to love is the essence of our relationship with each other and with Christ.

We suggest that St. Aidan's actively adopt this vision and begin moving towards it by offering our campus as an "overflow" shelter for the homeless, beginning next October. Our goal for the Vestry, and then the parish at large, is to consider what this form of the vision of community service entails, and assess our commitment to it. This includes how we understand the risks and ways to mitigate them, and how we see the rewards and ways to share them. Finally, we would encourage vestry participation in our efforts to engage the parish with these same issues.

A BOHO shelter facility normally operates on a fixed night of the week, and we suggest we operate the shelter on either Monday or Thursday nights (subject to BOHO's other arrangements). Between mid-October and mid-April our facility would be opened on the designated weeknight if the weather required it, which would be most nights during mid-winter. A summary of the normal activities at our shelter would be very close to the schedule in the attachment following this proposal.

There would be a small team of St. Aidan's liaison people who would provide the oversight of the BOHO operation and address any issues on behalf of the parish. It is not considered necessary for any parish members to participate in the nightly BOHO operations as described. This is the standard BOHO operating practice, and they ask us to conform to it as much as possible for their benefit.

However, our purpose as the Church would be to go beyond the BOHO goal, which is saving lives and offering dignity. As the Church, we are also committed to offer Christ's love, both in worship and in relationship. We can see a number of ways to engage in this Christian hospitality without creating an imposition on the BOHO staff. For example we could offer a morning service at 7:00 A.M., which would be open to the overnight guests after they have checked out. Or, we might offer a "to go" cup of coffee or snack outside following checkout. No doubt other options will present themselves in the course of time. These will also provide opportunities to engage a larger section of the congregation than is possible with just the liaison team. While we recognize that there will be challenges, rejections, and failures, we also know that sincere and selfless love in Christ's name is never a mistake.

Some of those challenges, rejections, and failures will have an impact beyond the oversight group, to our St. Aidan's family. It is likely that fear and anxiety about them might have even more impact than actual events. It is one of our goals to prepare the hearts of our representatives to this ministry, and also of the congregation in general, to have grace and patience to meet the unexpected issues without ill will or any form of division.

Some of the fears and anxiety will be out of concern about the safety of our parishioners and others who use our parish facilities. Safety, in this sense, will range from an expectation of physical attack or verbal abuse to awkwardness in the presence of people we don't know and don't understand. In fact, the actual risk of physical violence is historically small. This is not a normally violent population, but it is one subject to intoxication or mental illness that can have that expression. The BOHO staff is experienced in recognizing and de-escalating such situations, and will not hesitate to use 911 if that seems necessary. Beyond these concerns however, it is true that the awkwardness and lack of connection can create real discomfort. It is also true that the primary response to that is in our hands, as the body of Christ. The only way to realize our vision as a place where God's love is manifest, is for that love to be manifest in us.

Other legitimate concerns will be about the upkeep of our facility; casual or even deliberate damage, cleanliness, odors, and similar issues. The experience of other overflow shelters has been that these are real issues, but minor ones when compared to the value they receive in offering the service. We suggest it would be appropriate to establish some budget to address this set of concerns.

Finally, there will be concerns about the presence of the homeless at times when we are not operating the shelter. Again, the experience of others is that this has not been a problem. Generally the daytime presence has actually decreased instead of increasing. This may not be the case at St. Aidan's, as we are somewhat more accessible to the homeless daytime facilities than are the other centers. However, if it proves to be an issue, we can consider ways to address it; for example with policies that are firm, but fair. Conceivably we might have volunteers present during normal staff hours to assist with the labyrinth as well as attending to "homeless assistance". In any event, it would seem quite incongruous for us to be concerned by St. Aidan's acquiring a reputation as a place of care and compassion.

To insure there has been an opportunity for concerns to be voiced and that an adequate response to them has been prepared, it is our intent to bring this program before the existing groups within St. Aidan's between now and August. Our goal is to be prepared to make a commitment to BOHO as of August 27<sup>th</sup>, about six or seven weeks before they begin next year's operations. The groups we would like to address include the Men's Breakfast group, the Natters, the Choir, Canterbury Core, Book Club, Wednesday Morning Toast, and the morning and evening prayer groups. While it is expected this will reach most of the members that are active in the parish, some more global congregational event will also be needed. We would like to do that broader event near the end of the interval when we have a better understanding of the concerns and level of support.

As we proposed at the beginning, we would like to consider the Vestry as one of these groups, and we welcome your feedback. We also would request your support within other groups of which you are a member when we have occasion to present to that group.

## Typical BOHO Operating Schedule

- 4:00 P.M. Latest time for a decision about evening's overflow operation
- 6:00 P.M., BOHO staff arrives and begins to set up by clearing space in the hall and preparing for intake. St. Aidan's will supply sleeping space for 40 to 60 persons, restrooms, and storage for blankets. The kitchen will not be available and no food will be served.
- About 6:45 P.M., guests begin to arrive, possibly earlier. They wait outside until the intake begins.
- 7:00 P.M., the staff begins intake, which includes welcoming and registering all the guests, assessing them for risk of violence, and separating them from weapons (typically pocket knives). Each guest gets a blanket for the night.
- Somewhere around 8:00 there is a "smoke break" outside.
- By 9:00 or 9:30 P.M. lights are out and guests are expected to sleep. Typically two BOHO staff and at least one BOHO volunteer spend the night with the guests.
- Between 5:30 and 6:00 AM the guests are wakened
- 7:00 A.M., all guests have been checked out.
- The BOHO staff will clean up and restore the hall to its normal condition. They will typically be done by 8:00. A St. Aidan's liaison member will review the condition of the church after each night's shelter operations.