

PASTOR DAN BRYANT FOMENTS AN AFFORDABLE HOUSING REVOLUTION WITH ALL 10 OF HIS FINGERS STUCK IN THE DAM OF HUMAN SUFFERING *by Ben Ricker*

A couple degrees colder and the rain would freeze.

“Hi there. Hello. Excuse me,” Pastor Dan Bryant says to a crumpled heap of blankets and backpacks. “It’s time to start collecting your things.”

Silence and darkness. Only select corner marts, coffee joints and gas stations are open at this hour.

“I just need a sign of recognition,” Bryant asserts.

A corner of fabric folds back, and out from the confusing wad signals a tiny hand.

“Thank you,” Bryant says, and continues on.

He perimeters the First Christian Church of Eugene before sunup every day, rousing half a dozen prone figures strewn hither and yon in the damp concrete courtyard. Numbers have been down lately. Possibly the cops have been patrolling this end of downtown more vigilantly, Bryant guesses.

He disturbs two more campers spread out on the landing atop the chapel steps. It pains him to have to do this, but he has no choice; there’s no way to operate a functioning church with bodies splayed everywhere in the way.

Everyone’s heard fables about towns up and down I-5 that supply undesirables with one-way Greyhound bus tickets to Eugene. That’s partly why it’s so much worse here, people say, because everyone knows Eugene’s a soft place to crash. The city’s exquisite services make it a magnet for the nation’s destitute, others complain.

Most of the unhoused who seek services within Lane County report that their last address was either in Eugene or Springfield. Bryant can only surmise why so many extraordinary tales spring up around the homeless.

As is the case with any legend, there are probably kernels of truth at the root level, but it all sounds to Bryant like a lot of excuses propagated to deprive our poverty-stricken brothers and sisters the empathy they plainly deserve.

Nonetheless, he wastes little time agonizing over where the multitude originates. They’re here, Bryant says, and that’s good enough reason to ask how we can help.

It’s simple, he adds, but not easy.

Other than some empty waterlogged boots, a discarded pair of camouflage pants, a few loogies and the words “Thank You” written in the corner in black marker, the courtyard empties out before sunrise.

When the clock strikes nine in the church administrative office foyer, a lanky, disheveled man with long, drooping features races in and yammers at the receptionist. Several leitmotifs emerge from the streams of garbled language: Guy needs the bathroom. And a phone, if that’s alright.

The moment he storms off down the hall to the lavatory, a woman enters, also needing the facilities. Next a young couple walks in with loads and loads of baggage needing bus passes in order make separate Springfield court appearances on time.

Typical morning, says the receptionist, who has seen it all many times before.

Hours from now a volunteer will arrive and hear requests from hard-up supplicants who come in search of basic supplies: a bite to eat, toiletries, bus fare — Bryant worked out a bulk rate with the Lane Transit District years ago so that he could afford to hand out a few bus passes every day — and whatever other little necessities most Americans take for granted on a constant basis.

Until then, the office foyer is filled with the city’s bedraggled needy, coming and going. One couple, probably in their early 20s, hopes someone can help them add minutes to their shared pay-as-you-go cell phone. They’re flat broke, they say, and it kills them to think they might be missing callbacks from any of the number of places they applied to work last week.

Everyone who wanders in fills out a little card that lists some vital information and the reason for today’s visit. The volunteer Good Samaritan does everything in her limited power to help them. It’s an imperfect system the pastor set up years ago, after walk-in traffic had swelled beyond the point where he was having to constantly shunt important church business to the back burner.

It’s not always a handout they’re looking for, Bryant says. A lot of people come in just needing to be heard. A woman who spent last night curled up in a cardboard box “somewhere dry” tells today’s volunteer that she’s feeling depressed enough to hit up an AA meeting just to have somebody to talk with.

It’s not yet noon when word reaches Bryant that the dryer at Opportunity Village Eugene is on the fritz again.

Wedged deep down in the out-of-the-way industrial zone belonging to Eugene’s Trainsong neighborhood, OVE is the modest gated micro-community initially conceived to provide the city with some transitional housing. For the dozens who live there, sharing a single washing machine and dryer set, it’s a neighborhood catastrophe any time either machine craps out.

Unfortunately for the villagers, Bryant is about as qualified as any other trained theologian to mend busted household appliances. He’s plumb out of ideas after checking the electrical and fiddling with a few wires.

Pastor Bryant never howls an obscenity, but the look on his face says he might be thinking some.

Bryant must at times feel like he’s standing in the middle of a slow-moving train wreck, bodies continuing to pile up around him. Inspecting Eugene’s homeless crisis simultaneously from a bird’s eye and street-level view must confound and devastate from time to time.

But not today. Too much needs doing.

Bryant stews over whether to summon the same repair guy who charged OVE an arm and a leg weeks ago to repair the same busted dryer or send someone to purchase a gently used replacement from St. Vinnie’s.

Decisions, decisions.

Originally the OVE idea was this: For a dollar a day, “villagers” could stay as long as it takes to get back on their feet.

A small cot in a dry shack with a fixed address is everything in the world when compared to sleeping in the freezing mud all winter long.

Unfortunately, scraping together enough cash to cover first and last month’s rent, plus security deposit, has gotten so difficult in Eugene that a lot of villagers are having a hard time making the leap to independent housing arrangements, Bryant says.

That, and some are dogged by rap sheets that make it hard for landlords to select them over other qualified tenant applicants.

Seeing the goalposts vanish further into the distance, Bryant beefed-up the OVE model and began working on building something permanent nearby. Much to the neighbors’ chagrin, Bryant’s nonprofit, SquareOne Villages, recently snapped up a vacant lot beside the train tracks not far from here, where they plan to break ground this summer on a new kind of a housing development.

Architectural mockups show a neat formation of tiny houses — renting at \$250 — garlanded by walkways and ringing a landscaped central clearing. On the same lot, a spacious community center sits apart from the clustered homes.

SquareOne will set aside a small percentage of one’s monthly rent payment and hold the money in a separate account as a kind of equity. People moving out will be reimbursed that amount, plus interest.

Furthermore, it will encourage a sense of pride in ownership, Bryant adds.

To get to this point, the pastor has had to rope together a wide coalition of architects, planners, nonprofit executives, advocates, clergy from nearby churches and even certified accountants. His afternoon simmers away in a monotonous boardroom meeting with SquareOne’s finance committee.

The only time Bryant yawns all day is in the second hour of an arid back-and-forth about nonprofit tax filing.

Bryant swears later it’s all really fascinating stuff.

His day ends long after dark. He sneaks in late to the Tuesday evening OVE community powwow. Any 35 people hoping to live harmoniously together are going to have to learn to face community challenges openly and directly, and Bryant likes to attend whenever his schedule permits.

This isn’t exactly the life Bryant saw for himself when he first set out to become a preacher. The world has changed a lot since then, though. And barring an actual miracle, the situation is not going to improve on its own.

Nobody told Bryant that his path would someday lead to breakneck crash courses in accounting, zoning and land use.

“I guess I missed that day in seminary,” he says. ■