

On Friday nights, a Covenant church provides burritos and blessings for Seattle's homeless teens. | RICK LUND



Safe Haven

As the rain blows sideways on a late-autumn Friday evening in Seattle, the neighborhood around First Covenant Church is teeming with activity. An ambulance screams by. Police-car sirens blare in the distance. A group of young boys saunter down rain-slickened Pike Street, looking like they're going nowhere in particular.

Stately-looking Seattle First Covenant Church takes up a good chunk of a city block in this urban setting, its familiar golden dome glittering in the night sky. The building is dark on this night—except for a light above a doorway on the alley side of the church.

Young men and women down on their luck are drawn to this light. Every Friday evening from 6:30 to 8:30, volunteers at First Covenant Church put on a dinner called "Free Food for Teens," though visitors up to age twenty-three are welcome.

Inside, Brent and Linda Oliphant, their daughter Janie, and several students from nearby Seattle University are busy preparing a meal of burritos, rice, and hot dogs. One by one, the teens come into the kitchen, say hello, grab a plate of food, and sit down to eat with one or several of the volunteers.

Interim pastor Bud Palmberg is seated at a table with "Casper," a well-known "urban camper." Casper, a stocking cap pulled tightly over his shoulder-length hair, eats quietly. He's in his late twenties and one of the older regulars at the Friday night dinner.

"It's very low-key," says Palmberg,

after finishing off his burrito. "It's food. It's a cup of cold water. They know where our church is. They know there are certain things we won't tolerate—fights or profanity. I go around, sit at a table and eat with them and try to get the conversation going without probing. If they want to talk, fine. If they don't, fine."

The street kids who enter First Covenant's doors on Friday nights come from a world of drugs, prostitution, and violence. Some have AIDS. Others have been abused by their parents or boyfriend.

Their bed is a park bench or a flattened cardboard box under a freeway ramp. First Covenant is a safe haven from their world, if only for a few hours.

"For many of these kids," says Brent Oliphant, "they've had failed adult relationships. They've failed at school or family life. For some, life has failed them.

"In the streets, they live for the moment. They're not worrying about when the taxes are due. They're worrying about the next meal, whether they're going to get high, or which park

they'll sleep in tonight."

The teens' nicknames provide a window into their plight. Names like Anger, Shadow, Angel, Damien, Crazy, Dante.

Self-esteems hit all-time lows. A girl once told Oliphant how he could remember her name: "Stephanie," she said, "as in 'step on me.'"

The Friday night teen feed, however, is a move in the right direction, and the dinner draws anywhere from five to sixty kids. Oliphant and Matt Anderson started the ministry nearly three years ago. Bill Notehelfer, who preceded Palmberg as the church's interim pastor, was actively involved in the Friday night program as well.

"I cannot say enough about what I learned through participation in this ministry, as well as the joy of participating in a community of friends devoted to serving Christ in the lives of the most needy in our society," says Notehelfer. "It is certainly 'a cup of water in his name' ministry and one of the more significant things undertaken at First Covenant Church.

"Most of [the kids] come from seriously fractured homes. Many of them



A girl once told
Oliphant how he
could remember her
name: "Stephanie,"
she said, "as in
'step on me.'"

Rick Lund is assistant sports editor of *The Seattle Times*, news editor for the North Pacific Conference, and a member of Bethany Covenant Church in Mount Vernon, Washington.



Brent Oliphant talks with a young man on the street near First Covenant Church.

The Oliphant family is committed to this program. Every Friday night is family night—Brent and Linda preparing the food and teenage daughters Janie and Diana do what they can to help out.

Brent Oliphant is personable and relates well to the teens. A former Los Angeles police officer and Fresno, California deputy sheriff, he sees through the con games and knows when to be tough. He also knows when to be tender, because of the grace he's experienced in his life after struggles with drug and alcohol abuse. He considers himself one of "God's minor miracles."

"While I don't believe that you need to have made all the same mistakes I made to work with users," Oliphant says, "I am certain that I have authenticity and credibility with the kids that I just could not have without being a recipient of his grace.

"When a new kid says to me, 'You just don't understand,' I answer, 'You know, I think I do.'"

Both Notehelfer and Palmberg have praised Oliphant's work in the ministry. "Brent has done a magnificent job not only in relating to the street kids, but also in mentoring the wonderful young college students involved in the

program," Notehelfer says.

"You have to earn your spurs, and Brent knows what he's doing and knows how to handle it," adds Palmberg, who helped launch Seattle's Operation Nightwatch street ministry in the 1960s.

First Covenant allocates \$300 a month to the ministry. The standard fare is burritos, "because they're relatively inexpensive to make, and they're nutritious," says Brent.

The congregation has a long history of programs that help the poor and powerless in Seattle. For years, the church had a human services director, Linda Stordahl, who organized a clothing room and food cupboard at the church for the homeless.

"The church is very supportive," Palmberg says. "They're not necessarily involved, but very supportive. I haven't encountered any complaints about 'those kinds of people in our building.'"

Oliphant doesn't pretend the Friday night program is turning Seattle upside down. But it "feels right" to him, and hopes they are doing some good.

"We're planting seeds," he says. "Some will mature soon. Others may not mature for years. We do our job, and we leave the results up to God." □

have been abused in every way imaginable. Many of them were open to talk about God and how they thought of him. Most of them are impacted by the drug culture and some of them are struggling with serious addictions."

Some of the young guests at First Covenant have turned their lives around through the ministry.

Franz Jones is one of them. Wearing long overalls and short-cropped hair, he ducks into the kitchen on this night and introduces his mother to the volunteer crew. He moves around confidently and smiles easily. As someone Oliphant described as "really wiggled out" when he first started attending, Franz has a new direction in his life. He lives in an apartment now, and is training to be a restaurant waiter.

The boy named Damien was angry and withdrawn when he first showed up. Janie Oliphant began playing games of hackey-sack with him. He returned one week to find Janie wasn't there and asked, "Where's that little red-headed girl?"

Damien is now enrolled in a faith-based, alcohol rehabilitation program in Bakersfield, California.

"I see this as a speed bump for these kids," Oliphant says. "As long as they keep showing up here, or someplace else, we have a chance. This is just a piece of the puzzle. It's not the whole program."



Watching Over the Night

BOB SMIETANA

In the late 1880s, lumberjacks in Seattle used to send logs skidding down a hill on what is now Yesler Street to a saw mill at the bottom. "Skid Road," as it was called, was lined with saloons and brothels, which remained in place even after the mill burned.

In 1967, Covenant pastor Bud Palmberg found himself wandering this original skid row, looking for the son of two of his parishioners. He eventually found the young man, living with friends in an abandoned house. All of them were heavily involved in the local drug scene.

Palmberg, then pastor of Mercer Island Covenant Church in a nearby suburb, befriended the young men, and began visiting them.

"I would go down on Wednesday nights after choir practice and pull up the edge of a mattress and talk to these guys," Palmberg says. "I got quite an education."

One night, Palmberg arrived and found the house empty. "It was their way of saying they didn't want me around anymore," he says.

Palmberg decided to stay and see what happened. Around 11:30 p.m., Rick Cate wandered in. Cate was a former drug user, and over the next few hours, told Palmberg about the street preacher in San Francisco who'd help him kick his habit.

"We need someone like that around here," Cate told Palmberg. "Are you interested doing that?"

"It was about two in the morning, and I will agree with just about anything at two in the morning," says Palmberg, laughing at the memory.

Soon after meeting Cate, Palmberg began recruiting ministers for Operation Nightwatch, a kind of "rescue mission on foot." Having little luck with the church pastors he knew, Palmberg began calling ministers who advertised in the Yellow Pages.

"You get some pretty strange guys when you look in the Yellow Pages," he says, "but the strange ones were the only ones who were willing to go."

On their first visits to Skid Road, the original group of eight volunteers went out with a guide who could give them "street ears and eyes" to keep them out of trouble. Before long they were on their own, going to "bars, go-go joints, and porno parlors," wearing clerical collars and listening to anyone who wanted to talk. Most nights they arrived on Skid Road at 9:30 and didn't get home till

homeless people who are disabled.

Palmberg, sixty-nine, moved from Seattle in the early 1990s to become pastor of an English-speaking congregation in Lucerne, Switzerland. He and his wife, Donna, are now back in the area and live at Covenant Shores Retirement Community in Mercer Island. Their daughter and granddaughter volunteer at Nightwatch, and he hopes to get back out on the streets when his interim pastorate at Seattle's First Covenant Church ends.

He is amazed by the changes in the old Skid Road, now known as Pio-



Bud Palmberg (right) sits with guests at First Covenant Church.

after 6 in the morning.

The first year was full of hair-raising adventures. Palmberg got tossed through a plate glass window, and most of the volunteers ended up in the hospital after run-ins with unfriendly types. They stuck it out, and began to earn the respect of people on the streets.

Today, Nightwatch is a multidimensional ministry to the homeless of Seattle. Along with outreach work by clergy, Nightwatch (www.seattlenightwatch.org) feeds about 200 people a night, provides about 35,000 referrals a year to local homeless shelters, and houses about twenty

neer Square. What was once a long strip of run-down buildings and bars has become gentrified.

"Some of the places that were once so dangerous we were afraid to go into them are now high-rent districts," he says. The need is still there, he says, just more spread out.

"You used to get out of the car at 9 p.m. and start walking, and not get back till 3:30 a.m.," he says. "Now you get out of the car, walk for fifteen minutes, and then go back to the car to drive to the next spot." □

Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*.