

## **Moments of Welcome Ministry**

Megan Rohrer

Last Sunday, while I was sitting in the pew waiting for worship to start, I witnessed the most amazing event. A woman who was participating in the beginning part of the service asked the man in front of her to watch her purse. The man she asked was homeless. As I watched this event take place, I was not only impressed by the trust that the woman had with her homeless friend, but also by how much it changed the homeless man. The homeless man smiled deeply and turned to me and whispered with tears forming in his eyes: "I can't believe she trusted me. I knew she liked me, but I never knew she trusted me."

At that moment I felt very proud. The Welcome Ministry longs with every ounce of its energy to build caring and trusting relationships with our homeless and hungry friends. In that moment I got to witness the difference that we are making in the community.

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A few days ago I was speaking to a Sergeant in the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) about the homeless people that congregate in front of the church. For some time the Welcome Ministry has been involved in dialogue with local residents and with Old First Presbyterian to try and create a community experience that is supportive of our homeless friends, the members of the church and members of the neighborhood. The Welcome Ministry has been trying to balance our longing to welcome homeless people to be a part of our church, the Welcome Ministry and our community with our longing to create a safe environment, a place free of illegal activity and unpleasant odors. As a part of this ongoing dialogue I found myself in conversation with the SFPD. The Sergeant was very helpful and also very surprised, because this was the first time that he had ever been at a meeting where people actually wanted to welcome the homeless. The Sergeant also said something else that surprised me. He said: "It must really be great to be involved with a program like this, you actually get to see people change and turn their lives around. I only get to see them when they've done something wrong."

The Sergeant's words struck me. So, in this moment I am thankful for the changes we have seen in the lives of our homeless friends and neighbors. During the past year we have welcomed over 100 new guests (including 45 women) and developed friendships with most of them. Development of trusting relationships with 60 of these new friends has led to counseling and close relationships with 45 of them. Since June of 2002: 25 of our guests have moved indoors; the Welcome Center has served 6,720 meals; provided counseling for guests 1,260 times; given out over 2,520 bags of toiletries; helped 144 individuals get health care; 9 people have started working; and 15 have begun rehabilitation programs.

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