“Hour of HOPE:” A Spiritual Prayer Program for Homeless Adults

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Abstract Self-expression of one's life history within the context of a spiritual program focused on prayer may be important to homeless adults. We explored a 22 weekly evening one hour program called *Hour of HOPE* (Hearing Other People's Experiences), with working poor adult women and men living within an affluent suburb to a major metropolitan US city. Participants ($n = 7$) and team leaders ($n = 7$) completed a very brief open-ended survey asking the most/least helpful session, what should be retained or changed moving forward, and a reason why they felt someone should participate. Response rate was low, but overall emerged themes were extremely positive. Individuals felt that this program gave them a voice, a place where their life story could be heard and expressed in a safe setting. Implications for expanding similar spiritual programs among homeless adults are discussed.

Keywords Homelessness, Spirituality, Prayer, Poverty, Qualitative Methods

1. Introduction

According to contemporary psychological scholars (e.g., Oman, 2013; Tsang & McCollough, 2003), conceptualizing *spirituality* (i.e., searching for the sacred through religious affiliation, religious beliefs, and religious service attendance) is multi-dimensional and complex. Tsang and McCollough stated that research on spirituality must focus on both works and worship practices. Oman proposed that spirituality focuses on seeking of something held sacred as an end, and religion as the broader set of ways that sacredness may enter into a search. In the present brief, exploratory study we examined the satisfaction in a very simple, small faith and life sharing group composed of homeless men and women.

The practice of religious belief mostly happens in congregations with others at a place of worship (Armstrong, 1993). The experience of community seems essential to most religious practices. Congregations bring people together who, though sharing a religion or belief, may be from very

different walks of life and backgrounds. Many religions at their heart have the notion of the commonality of man, the idea that we are all born equal and share the same traits, possibilities, and failures (Gabriel & Geaves, 2007). Furthermore, to be accepted by a community without prejudice as an equal is a very real comfort (see Paloutzian & Park, 2013, for details).

The act of *prayer* is also common to many religions (Armstrong, 1993; Gabriel & Geaves, 2007). Like meditation, prayer allows people to create distance between their problems and their abilities to address those issues. Consequently, creating opportunities for individuals to enter into communal prayer in safe and secure settings seem essential to well being and personal spirituality.

We believe, particularly by homeless people, acceptance by others in faith and life sharing is essential. Among the homeless, the sense of order, meaning and purpose that religion may give must be emphasized given their history of social neglect and ostracism (Gravell, 2013). Given the chance to pray and to share one's life may provide hope and optimism for future self-governance among homeless adults. For homeless men and women, communal life sharing and prayer may not produce miraculous and immediate material benefits, but they may provide momentary relief from hopelessness and despair. Unfortunately, homeless people are hardly ever asked about faith and spirituality by service providers, let alone encouraged to engage with their religion and worship if they desire (Gravell). Secular service provider models do not provide these faith-based activities.

In the present program, homeless adults as well as families were provided an evening shelter rotating among sites in a western suburb of Chicago, IL, U.S.A.. Recently, the Brookings Institute found that suburbs of major metropolitan areas (like Chicago) are now home to a larger, faster-growing poor population than urban areas (Brookings Institute, June 5, 2013). The Institute reports that during the 2000s, the number of poor people (i.e., a family of four making less than \$22,000 annually) living in the U.S. suburbs grew by 64%, more than twice the 29% growth in cities. In Chicago's suburbs the number of poor increased by 99% in the last decade, to over 720,000 people by 2011. This

suburban growth is higher than that of New York City or Los Angeles.

The present program focused on Chicago-suburban homeless adults, at a Thursday evening shelter who were given an hour's opportunity every week to share together their life situation on a themed topic (e.g., hope, anger, fear, love) and then to pray with other homeless adults. The hour of prayer was led by one or two community volunteer facilitators. The shelter program is a non-profit secular initiative staffed in the evenings by community volunteers who provided dinner, next day breakfast and bagged lunch after an evening's change to sleep within a warm and dry community center.

We had no expected results; instead, we captured the thoughts, opinions, and reactions after over five months of this program of both the homeless participants and the team facilitators. Based on these emerged themes, we wanted to see how such a simple program for homeless adults might be expanded to other sites with other teams.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Survey

A total of 4 women and 3 men adults self-identified as homeless and 5 men and 2 women team facilitators (all in their 20s to early 60s in age) responded to an open ended survey. We kept demographic information to a minimum, in order not to inhibit cooperation.

We asked homeless attendants and team facilitators to complete a short open ended survey. The survey asked for a respondent's sex and the total number of weekly sessions they attended from the set of 22 meetings. Participants reported that, on average, they attended 9 out of 22 (41%) weekly evening sessions. Respondents also were asked what aspect of the sessions pulled them back to return, what aspects they found most helpful and least helpful at the sessions, and what they learned about themselves from participating. Furthermore, respondents were asked what component of the meetings they would keep the same or change, including whether the sessions length of time should be expanded, shortened, or kept the same, as well as whether music or art should be included for enhancing a meeting. Respondents also were asked why, in their opinion, someone should participate in the *Hour of HOPE* session.

2.2. Program and Procedure

We wondered if a weekly one hour prayer session could be created and offered for homeless men and women living in the western suburbs of Chicago, IL, USA. More specifically, we offered homeless, working poor adults to “tell their story” in a safe, non-judgmental setting where parish members facilitated sessions on a specific theme. The focus was Christian, but non-denominational; in fact, one did

not need to be affiliated with any religious faith to participate. Sessions focused on the following themes adapted by the first two authors from *Reflection and Recovery Resources* (St. Louis ISP Team, 2012): *Grace, Temptation, Hope, Patterns, Forgiveness, Relationship, Feelings, Relaxation, Learning New Behaviors, Letting Go, Who Am I, Suffering, Forgiveness, Honesty, Faith, Trust, Constructive Sorrow, Self-Perception,, Faith-Filled, God's Love, Self-Care, and Honesty in Relationships.*

Participants were members of a large homeless program in the Chicago suburb called **DuPage PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter)**, an independent not-for-profit 501c 3 Illinois corporation providing overnight shelter and meals, plus services, for people who are homeless, since 1985. DuPage Pads is the largest provider of interim and permanent housing, coupled with support services in order to help individuals work toward becoming self-sufficient. These vital support services enables individuals to receive case management and life coaching, employment support (e.g., GED courses and job coaching), as well as engagement with employers all targeted to effectively stop the cycle of homelessness. In this western suburb of Chicago, considered to be rather affluent, the homeless population generally would be identified as “working poor,” in that they earn minimum wage but not sufficient funds to be self-sustained.

By 2007, overnight housing operations emerged with 130 congregations and over 4,000 community volunteers, and DuPage PADS expanded to 123 funding partners. The present partner PAD site was a suburban Roman Catholic Parish (approximately 2,000 families), with meals and sleeping held in a medium size parish center (accommodating 45-60 participants per evening). Participants often arrived by 6pm with doors opening at 7pm for check-in each Thursday evening. Participants were provided a hot dinner meal, hot morning breakfast, and a bagged lunch before they departed on Friday morning. All meals were free to PADS members, and prepared by community volunteers (about 15 per evening). Each Thursday evening participants also may have their personal cloths washed by the volunteers. These community volunteers welcomed and engaged with residents as needed, cooked and served meals, as well as cleaned up, set-up and took down all beddings while providing general supervision and safety. Participants may use the toilet and washrooms off the parish center. At approximately 9:15pm, participants were invited to go to bed, sleeping on a pad on the floor with a clean pillow, sheet, and blanket provided. Adults with children slept in a separate room; single women were located in a separate room; and men occupied the main parish center room.

After dinner, at about 8pm, however, two *HOPE* facilitators would announce that the prayer session would start shortly in a small parish room located down a hall. Interested participants were escorted down the hall by one of the *HOPE* facilitators while the other facilitator welcomed them to the meeting room. Each team of facilitators often

was one man and one woman, who were trained previously in how to operate the program. Most facilitators were community volunteers in the PADS program and familiar with the participants and the operations at this parish center's Thursday evening.

We called the sessions **Hour of HOPE**, meaning "**Hearing Other People's Experiences**." At each session, a male or female facilitator would express the goal of the session was to listen to each other's story focused on a theme concept in a confidential, spiritual, environment with no judgment, no cross-talking over each other, and no lengthy discussions or teaching would be permitted. Instead, each person who wished to share how their life story related to the theme were invited to talk. The facilitator kept the process moving without judgment or comment. After initial introductions of first names, the facilitator would remind the gathered group of the purpose of the session, invite members to recite the Serenity Prayer used in addiction recovery 12-step programs, and then a brief definition and quotes based on the theme would be read. Each participant was provided a sheet of paper with the theme, definition, and quotes and asked to read along. During the last 5-7 minutes of the session, the facilitator summarized just what was said by participants in the form of a prayer offered to Our Creator, God. Finally, the gathered group was invited to pray aloud the Christian *Our Father* prayer.

The *HOPE* facilitators were community volunteers from local Christian congregations, including the host Roman Catholic parish, another local Catholic parish, an evangelical Christian congregation, and Lutheran churches. On each monthly Thursday evening, volunteers from each group staffed the PADS program while two of these members also were facilitators of the *HOPE* program. On those months where there was a fifth Thursday evening, the volunteers from the host Catholic parish were the *HOPE* program facilitators. All *HOPE* facilitators received a half day training session before the program started led by a member of the religious group whose script and format was used for the Thursday evening gathering.

The script/format for each evening gathering and the weekly theme originally were created by the **Ignatius Spirituality Project (ISP)**, a Chicago-based non-profit organization that works to end homelessness through retreats for men & women by feeding their spiritual hunger. *ISP's* mission is an optional spiritual growth program provided to homeless women and men with similar struggles in a recovery program and who are sober for about two months, willing and able to share their story, and to listen to another person's story. The themes and format for the current *HOPE* program were modified by the first two authors, themselves facilitators. The present *HOPE* program was the first such session offered at a PADS site in DuPage country, IL.

3. Results and Discussion

Program Perceptions by Participants

Among the 7 homeless participants, the most common theme reported on their open ended survey included noting *social connections to leaders and participants, learning coping and self-care skills, gaining spiritual growth, and receiving emotional support*. For instance, one male participant claimed "listening to spiritual guidance from someone more mature" was one of the most helpful aspects of the program. A female participant stressed that such guidance helped her realize that she's "on the right track," while a male participant said other people should attend "to learn how to feel better about life, themselves, and God."

In terms of the format, at least half of the participants enjoyed the focus on the Bible incorporated into each session along with the inclusion of music and art. One woman participant said that "The knowledge and Godly words and prayers to help us all keep the faith and make it through another week" are what keep her coming back. Additionally, participants generally felt nothing should be changed and noted that it would be important to "Keep those good volunteer leaders," as expressed by a male participant.

All participants stated that the sessions were very helpful, but two participants noted that the length of the sessions might be changed depending on the needs of who is attending. About half of the participants preferred longer discussion sections, and almost every participant had a preference for more session meetings than only once a week.

All participants were extremely appreciative and expressed gratitude for such valuable support that they have received. A woman participant exclaimed "God bless you for caring for the needy. Thanks for your time." We interpret these comments to mean that participants enjoyed the sessions, preferring them to be longer in length and more frequent. Consequently, we believe the next step would be to better recruit more homeless attendees to participate.

In sum, the participants indicated the most common benefits they received to be: *learning coping/self-care skills, social connection to leaders and other participants, spiritual growth, and receiving emotional support*.

Program Perceptions by Leaders

For the 7 leaders on their open-ended questionnaire, the most common themes expressed included an appreciation for the first author who facilitated the *HOPE/PADS* program, finding music and art inclusion to be beneficial, and concluding that the provided materials and topics was helpful. One female leader noted that the participants "appreciate the opportunity to share their story and their faith, as well as enjoy hearing from others." A male leader stated "The opportunity to share their stories and learn that they are not alone in their struggles" was one of the most helpful pieces for the participants in the sessions.

In terms of program format, the leaders thoroughly enjoyed the materials provided, as one female leader stated "I truly appreciate the materials given to us from the ISP in St Louis. It's a wonderful gamut of topics that help our guests to deepen their understanding of their own journey." About half of the leaders thought in the future the inclusion

of music and art would be beneficial. The majority of the leaders stated that the sessions were helpful to participants, and the length of session time was sufficient (although one leader mentioned that the time length was too long for some participants to attend). Again, about half of the leaders thought that providing sessions more often than once a week would be helpful to participants.

Leaders also stressed that the topics and scheduled session sequence worked very well. Additionally, a female leader noticed that the sessions found participants “...open[ing] themselves to the group and gain[ing] confidence in sharing experience and faith. They no longer seem nervous.” As one male leader expressed, “whenever two or more are gathered in His name” God is present.

4. Conclusion

Across Homeless Participants and Team Facilitators

Most participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for the leaders and the topics used. Also, most agreed that weekly meetings were the best time interval option. There was a consistent theme of wanting more inclusion and access to Scripture. Participants gave varying responses on whether in the future to change the time or include music; therefore follow-up interviews will be needed to determine changes to be made in those two areas. Some participants preferred longer and more frequent segments, whereas others had a preference for shorter or similar times – it may be beneficial to get a consensus geared towards a specific meeting time according to each group in attendance.

Participants clearly have a strong connection to gathering together to share their experiences, learn more about scripture, get advice, and be surrounded by others with similar stories. Additionally, participants enjoyed the guidance from leaders who were supportive and gave them strength, where the HOH allowed for much needed reflection, compassion, and reassurance.

Most leaders expressed that they liked the materials and topics that were being used. Also, many felt music and art would have a positive impact on the participants. Several leaders expressed appreciation for the assistance by the first author and his hard work for the program. Suggestions for improvement included making the time more flexible based on group size or willingness to participate, making the program more Bible based, and avoiding redundant topics or rules.

Leaders recognized that many participants continually felt more confident with each gathering and really enjoy sharing their stories, being heard, and listening to others for advice. However, leaders also noted that it would be relevant to gather participants’ viewpoint on length and amount of gatherings as to fulfill their needs best. Furthermore, continual assessments may help to ensure that participants and leaders are meeting their expectations of the groups and continuing to benefit. Additionally, it would be worthwhile

to have the leaders meet occasionally to share ideas, updated concepts, format changes, etc. with one another as to promote a connection among meetings and to continually improve as a unit.

In sum, we think offering spiritual programs for homeless men and women have benefits for both the participants and the team leaders. Our results are consistent to other researchers (e.g., Gravell, 2013). Simple interventions and committed leaders among the community are needed. We evaluated a short term program, but future studies of expanded similar programs are warranted.

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