

The following article appeared in Old Ottawa South's 'OSCAR' newspaper, April/13:

URBAN CHRISTIAN OUTREACH: Celebrating 20 Years of Working with the Poor, the Homeless and the Marginalized of Ottawa

Who Are We?

URBAN CHRISTIAN OUTREACH (Ottawa) Incorporated is a registered charitable organization founded in 1993, Charitable Registration # 13776 1928 RR0001. We are your neighbours, reaching out to the poor, the homeless and the marginalized. Some of us live or have lived in Old Ottawa South for many years.

What is our Purpose?

The main purposes of Urban Christian Outreach are: to establish contact with those in the city of Ottawa who are struggling to survive spiritually, physically, or psychologically; and to mitigate the effects of urban isolation on the life of the individual.

We do this by pointing people towards a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ; and offering ongoing pastoral and practical care, including Christian education, street literacy and life-skills tutoring.

Our work is relational. We especially (but not exclusively) develop ongoing relationships with those whose fragilities make it difficult for them to function in group settings. We seek to be present to their need, even when there are no apparent solutions, thereby offering hope, respect and dignity to the individual. We also help in practical ways with housing, employment, and by referring clients to social, medical, shelter, educational, employment and Christian organizations.

Where do we work?

Staff engage in mobile outreach on the sidewalks, and in the coffee shops, parks and other communal places of the city. Our work sometimes takes us into drop in centres, shelters, court houses, prisons, hospitals, and even under bridges where some of our friends live. In addition, we partner with the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre two afternoons a week, where we volunteer our time to teach literacy and math skills, etc. in a classroom setting.

It always makes sense! When I sit with a client and listen to their struggles, I am often amazed by how they are coping. Some of our clients have fallen into poverty and homelessness by making a series of bad choices. Some suffer from mental illness, some physical illness. Many are divorced, while others have broken ties with family members. Urban Christian Outreach (UCO) seeks to help our client rebuild their lives, by building a support network around them.

John (not his real name) struggles with Schizophrenia. When I met John, he was living in a park behind some bushes. He knew of the social agencies and churches around Ottawa where he could get a hot meal, and from time to time he would attend.

However, John wasn't on medication at the time, and would often forget to eat. Sometimes his paranoia would prevent him from being in a group situation. We have had the privilege of working with John for a few years now. Unable to navigate the systems himself, we were able to set up medical appointments, and to accompany him. John is now on proper medication and doing much better. We were able to connect him with a dentist, refer him to a lawyer to resolve outstanding legal issues, help him to secure housing, and even a part-time job.

Sarah (not her real name), a single mom on assistance, is undergoing chemotherapy. She has suffered so much in her life. As a child she was sent into foster care, when domestic violence tore her family apart. While in foster care, Sarah was sexually assaulted. She has lived on her own since she was 18, and has struggled to keep a job. She wants to work but is unable to, as her cancer has returned. We have come alongside Sarah to help in practical ways, to encourage her, to pray with her, and to share the hope that we have in Christ. Sarah recently joined a church, and is now getting extra support from her new church family. She no longer feels alone.

Sometimes, there are no obvious solutions to be found. One day, I received a phone call from a client whose first words were, 'I have a noose around my neck.' I knew that no words from me could possibly change the situation, and quite honestly I didn't know what to say, and so I called on God to help, and began to pray aloud. God showed up in mighty power, and revealed His love to this broken man. He filled us both with 'a peace that passes all understanding.' By the grace of God, our friend removed the noose from around his neck. Through an encounter with God, our friend now has hope.

We need the poor. When we come alongside the poor, whether is it directly, or indirectly, through financial and practical offerings or giving of ourselves, we are changed; we discover who we are. The poor have much to teach us, not only about life, but about ourselves. It is in these moments of true authenticity that we encounter God and who we are in His plan. Our perspective changes, as we come to accept that we ourselves are also broken, but that we are loved more than we could possibly imagine and as a result, we are challenged to see ourselves as we truly are, as people who need one another, because when we help one another, are we not really inviting God into that moment? When we intentionally engage one another we find ourselves smack in the midst of what God is doing in each of our lives. We need to help another – it is ingrained in each one of us. The poor are humble enough to receive this help. They fulfill *our* need. Suddenly the shopping malls, tennis courts, spas and vacations take a back seat to what it is we are truly seeking because they don't satisfy. Jesus said that we 'will always have the poor' among us. I believe this is so because we need the poor. We probably need them more than they need us. We need them because it is in them that we find God.

And so who are the poor? They are our co-workers, our neighbours, our relatives, our brothers and sisters. They are on our street corners, in our local coffee shops, perhaps even knocking on our doors. They walk among us. And, perhaps it is us. Perhaps we are the poor – the poor in spirit.

Jill Wilson,

Executive Director,

URBAN CHRISTIAN OUTREACH (Ottawa)