

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

Keeping the faith in an outdoor church

The worship group run by Ecclesia Ministries of New York meets every Sunday in public parks in hopes of drawing a congregation of people living on the streets or in transitional housing.

By [Leah Greenbaum](#)

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Shelton Thompson worships in group aimed specifically at people living on the streets. Phoebe Lytle / Staff Photographer

On Easter Sunday, Bill Cooper, 54, returned to his favorite worship group in Marcus Garvey Park in Central Harlem, and prayed that he wouldn't end up on the streets again.

The worship group run by Ecclesia Ministries of New York meets every Sunday in public parks in hopes of drawing a congregation of people living on the streets or in transitional housing.

“Often times we think of a church as a building with four walls and a steeple ... but a church is really just people of God who gather,” Father Earl Kooperkamp of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Manhattanville said.

And most congregants don’t seem to mind outdoor services.

“What’s more beautiful than the outdoors? This is God’s green earth,” Cooper said, gesturing to the budding leaves overhead and a hillside blossoming with yellow flowers.

Clyde Kuemmerle, the executive director of Ecclesia Ministries, said “the church” has met outside in the park through snowstorms and horizontal rain, with as few as three attendees and as many as sixty-five over the last year.

He added that there has been a lot of fluctuations in the number of people who show up to services, mostly dependent on the weather.

During the services the worshippers named former congregants who had been incarcerated, hospitalized or housed in other parts of the city in the last year, and passed on God’s blessing.

But overall finding a roof to sleep under hasn’t been easy this year.

According to the New York Times, the number of people living on Manhattan streets and subway stations has soared 47 percent since March 2009.

Cooper said he’s been behind on his rent, and doesn’t want to return to a shelter. Going to services, he said, makes him feel closer to God and eases his stresses.

“It would be better if Sunday was every day. It’s always sad leaving church, because then I gotta deal with the trials and tribulations of Monday to Saturday,” he said.

Kuemmerle said these Ecclesia services, launched in New York three years ago, and in Marcus Garvey Park a year ago, are necessary because many homeless people can go to churches for social services, but feel uncomfortable joining churches for worship services.

“They just don’t feel welcomed in those communities,” he said, adding that bringing services to the homeless people is an essential component to the success of the program.

At each service, Kuemmerle said congregants take a first meal—communion—and a second meal of sandwiches prepared by the hosting church.

Kooperkamp leads services on alternating Sundays, along with clergymen from other local churches.

At the service on Sunday, regulars showed up on time and stood in a circle reciting the Serenity Prayer and the 23rd Psalm.

Paul Caruso, who is not homeless, was also in attendance. He said he goes to the service to stand in solidarity with the other congregants, and to support his wife, who works in social services. “This is about being spiritually fed. The point of it being outdoors is that you are embracing your own humanity and the humanity of those around you,” he said.

Latecomers and newcomers looked on before joining the service, and one woman riding her bike along the pathway stopped to lead the congregation in the hymn “Glory Hallelujah.”

“Folks who have been disinvested in this society really need a spiritual sense of belonging, and that’s what we try to give them,” Kuemmerle said. But Kooperkamp said designing a service for the homeless is no different than designing worship services for the housed.

“Let’s ask God to help us give up those things that are killing us, that are bringing us closer to death,” Kooperkamp said throughout the service, a message that may hit close to home for many homeless people who struggle with mental illness, alcoholism, and drug addiction.

But Kooperkamp said he tells all of his congregations the same message.

“Everyone struggles with the same sort of problems,” he said.

leah.greenbaum@columbiaspectator.com