

More than a social service program

Through sharing the Eucharist in a public park, homeless people and those with houses become one body.

By [Jonathan Grieser](#)

November 23, 2016

On a recent trip to Washington, D.C., I visited the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany. My interest in Epiphany's work was piqued by several of their programs. On Sunday mornings they have something called [The Welcome Table](#). Oriented toward members of the homeless community, it begins with optional Bible Study or 12-step programs at 7 a.m. A worship service in which members of the community take active roles follows at 8 a.m. and breakfast is served at 9.

On Tuesdays Epiphany, with volunteers from neighboring congregations, organizes [Street Church](#) at nearby Franklin Park. I took part in that and talked with Catriona Laing, interim associate rector.

When I arrived at Epiphany, I was greeted on the street by a man who talked with me about the *Street Sense* newspaper, produced by members of the homeless community. It operates at Epiphany as well. He proudly pointed out the articles in the current edition that he had written and directed me to a woman nearby who was selling them. *Street Sense* operates on the same model *Street Pulse* in Madison, where I live, but the presence of its offices at Epiphany means that there is a constant stream of traffic, vendors, volunteers, and staff.

In the kitchen, volunteers from Epiphany and the community were preparing sandwiches for the Street Church lunch. While they worked, Catriona and I chatted about Epiphany's ministries and future. They are currently in the search process for a new rector, so it's likely that there will be changes in the coming years. The physical plant clearly suffers from deferred maintenance. In fact, replacement of the Parish House's slate roof, funded by a grant from the D.C. Preservation Society, is

currently underway.

As we walked through the building, I could hear music. Epiphany has a weekly concert series at noon on Tuesdays and the [Washington Bach Consort](#) was rehearsing its program—Bach's Cantata: *Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele, BWV 69*. Also on the program was Bach's Prelude and Fugue in A Minor, BWV 543 with organist Julie Vidrick Evans. My sympathies were torn. I would have loved to take in the free performance but had already committed to being with Street Church.

Eventually, we made the several blocks' walk over to Franklin Park. Supplies for the Eucharist, tables, and the food were transported in shopping carts. As we walked, I chatted with one of the volunteers pushing a cart. He told me that he had been volunteering with Street Church for several years. He had heard about it at his church and thought that it was something he could easily do. His office was nearby.

It was a warm afternoon. Around the park are several food trucks and there are tables with folding chairs at various places. Many of the tables and park benches were taken by office workers eating their lunch and enjoying the balmy weather. But the area that Street Church staked out seemed to be something of a boundary area that separated the lunching office workers from the homeless people who were occupying many benches with their belongings.

When the service started, the volunteers and visitors seemed to outnumber the homeless, but as we continued, people began to gather. The liturgy is adapted from the Book of Common Prayer. On this occasion, one of Epiphany's seminarians offered the homily. Several familiar hymns were sung. After communion, the lunch was laid out for all.

Street Church was a powerful experience for me. It was a profound witness to the grace and love of Jesus Christ to hear the gospel preached out in a park at mid-day, to see the body and blood of Jesus Christ shared with people whose lives have brought them to this place, where passers-by (and politicians) perceive them as nuisances, disgraces, and eyesores. But we saw their dignity and the community created around the Lord's Table. It was obvious that there were deep bonds of love, care, and trust among the volunteers and the people who came to the table.

Catriona and I had talked about how easy it is for churches' social justice ministries to function as and become social service agencies. Street Church provides its meal in the context of the Eucharist. The proclamation of the Word of God and the sharing

of Christ's body and blood offer nourishment for the soul, and place the distribution of food in the context of the sacrament of the Eucharist. That shatters the barrier between service provider and guest (client?). As we come to the table we are all one body.

It's also powerful symbolically that at the same time as preparations for Street Church took place, the [Washington Bach Consort](#) was rehearsing for its noon concert. Clearly there are tensions—musicians and volunteers share the same space in the last few minutes before they go their separate ways. But still, I was deeply touched by the presence of both of those groups and the way they were sharing their gifts and their passion. The church can be many things to many people. It can connect spiritually in many ways—through the beauty of music or the beauty, grace, and love of communion with pita bread and grape juice in a park.

Originally posted at [Grieser's blog](#)