

The opposite of homelessness

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [July 23, 2014](#) issue



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Eyes brimming with emotion, Earl and Ashley grasped hands. They stood before the altar in the converted garage that houses the chapel of Love Wins Ministries. Sarah McCoy stepped forward and preached about the wedding at Cana. She began to speculate about the biblical couple and how their lives turned out in the end. What happened when they didn't have Jesus with his miracles to get them out of difficult situations? Did their marriage last?

Then Sarah looked at Earl and Ashley. "I wonder about that biblical couple, but I don't worry about you." Sarah smiled. "We know you have a love that will last through the tough times."

The couple beamed and stole eager glances from one another during the homily. Then, in echoes of that wedding feast where Jesus performed his initial miracle, we celebrated communion as the first act of their married life. It felt no less miraculous.

Sarah, associate pastor at Love Wins Ministries, knew that Earl and Ashley's relationship would survive because she knew that the newlyweds had already worked through many challenges. Like many people to whom Love Wins ministers, they are experiencing homelessness and would spend their wedding night in a tent in the woods.

Hugh Hollowell, a pastor in Mennonite Church USA, began Love Wins in Raleigh, North Carolina, seven years ago. Believing that homeless people need a pastor in their lives, Hugh began to care for people in the park. The idea was that simple. He

wasn't trying to change anyone. His mission was not to shelter people, convert souls, provide services, lobby politicians, sober up addicts, or do any of the myriad things that people expect when Christians minister to those who sleep outside. Sometimes those things happened, but he was not focusing on outcomes. Hugh wanted to take the time to walk with people, build relationships, and pray with them, like any pastor would.

Over the years, Love Wins has grown. The ministry has acquired a building, begun a worship service, and added staff.

"Homelessness is a relationship issue." Hugh said this so often that it seems like a mantra at Love Wins. He talked me through a "What would you do?" exercise. If you lost your job, what would you do? If you lost your home, what would you do? Eventually, you open up your address book. You see who you can ask for help. The more contacts you have, the less likely it is you will become homeless. Love Wins works on those connections, strengthening community. "The opposite of homelessness is community," Hugh said.

Love Wins not only educates the larger church about homelessness but also shows us a different model of sustainable ministry—built on relationships.

Churches and individuals around the nation support the ministry because they believe in what the community is doing. Even if they have never sat in a folding chair during a service, even if they have never enjoyed a cup of coffee in the morning with a guest who sleeps in the park, they invest in Love Wins.

"Think about it," Hugh said. "People are so excited about what we're doing, they send checks even when they've never been here. What if every church had ministries that were so great that outsiders wanted to support them?"

Love Wins has not only been building relationships with the community and other churches, it has made a conscious commitment to build those relationships in public.

"The first person I hired at Love Wins was a communications director," Hugh explained. He needed someone who would blog, tweet, and maintain an active Facebook presence. That virtual infrastructure became crucial when Love Wins sent volunteers to the park to hand out biscuits, as they had done for the last six years, and a police officer told them that they couldn't feed the homeless without a permit and probably wouldn't be granted one if they applied.

Showing hospitality to a person shouldn't be a crime. Hugh and the staff expressed their outrage with a hashtag, and #biscuitgate was born. Soon Hugh was on every media outlet from *Good Morning America* to Al Jazeera.

As people joined in the hashtag protest, they took part in holding up a mirror to our nation. Do we want to be a people who say feeding the homeless is a crime? The city of Raleigh decided that it didn't and began creating the Oak City Outreach Center to give people a place to sit, enjoy air conditioning, and use a toilet.

At the wedding, Hugh blessed Earl and Ashley and thanked them. "You have reminded us of what it means to love." The couple embraced one another, and their smiles spread to everyone crammed in that chapel. I was, once again, grateful to the Love Wins community and their commitment to the hard work of relationships. They love fiercely and publicly, showing us all how it's done.