

Saving Graces

BY NANCY M. PARIS

On a cold, wet morning, homeless women and children crowd into three rooms at the Atlanta Day Shelter, waiting for the staff and volunteers of the Mercy Mobile Health Program. At 9 AM the large "clinic on wheels" lumbers up to the curb outside the shelter. A health advocate comes to the door of the mobile clinic and begins to make a list of the women and children who need to see a nurse, case manager, or counselor.

In other medical settings, these clients' needs would be viewed as "simple." Colds, flu, and rashes are their chief initial complaints. But as staff and volunteers establish trust with clients, the underlying causes of homelessness—alcohol and drug dependence, job loss, and abusive relationships, among others—begin to emerge. Each of these conditions suggests more serious medical problems, making it increasingly challenging for the care giver to get to the root of the problem. Taking care of clients who have immediate, "fixable" needs comes first, but we try to save extra time and energy for persons with more complex problems.

FROM ORDINARY TO EXTRAORDINARY

It seems to be a normal day—too many pressing needs to be addressed in too little time. But the routine is instantly transformed into the extraordinary when Anglican Abp. Desmond Tutu of Cape Town, South Africa, pays an impromptu visit to the mobile clinic.

The lightness of his step and brilliance of his smile produce a hush among the women and children gathered on the sidewalk. Someone exclaims, "It's Tutu; I can't believe it!" Then, "Bishop Tutu, my mother is so sick, can I have a blessing?"

Abp. Tutu moves freely among the crowd, no stranger to the despair and poverty of homeless women. Openly and lovingly, he receives the children

who dance around him on the sidewalk. Placing his hands on their cheeks, he blesses women and children in an African dialect, simultaneously unintelligible and universally understood. Staff, clients, and volunteers observe with reverence and glistening eyes as he prays with a woman in labor who is afraid to go to the hospital.

A TRANSFORMATION

Not surprisingly, the women who seemed despondent and preoccupied with their physical needs only a few minutes earlier are now animated and talking to each other about who they are going to tell that they met Desmond Tutu. The children sense his importance. One boy asks boldly, "Are you rich or what?" The archbishop laughs heartily and declares that he absolutely is not rich. Perhaps wealth is the sole measure of greatness that this little boy can comprehend.

The archbishop turns to me to say how wonderful our program is, and I feel almost guilty for receiving his attention when we are surrounded by so many homeless women in need. But as he acknowledges the staff and volunteers for their contributions, I see how deeply we need his blessing and affirmation also.

Abp. Tutu's presence seems to free us from our fixation on the immediate. His message is one of love and hope. His ministry, focused on impoverished spirits, is the ideal complement of the healthcare services offered by the Mercy Mobile Health Program.

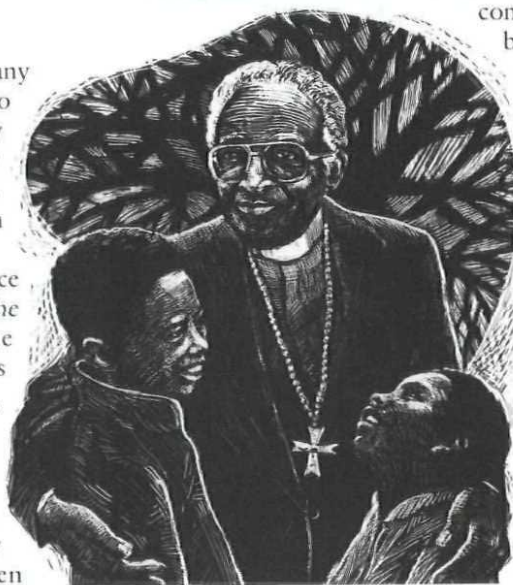
I am reminded of the obvious: Medical care, social work, and education, however important, are not the only factors that bring healing. Standing with our clients in the archbishop's presence, we experience healing and renewal from this hour of praise and celebration. As he leaves, these saving graces allow us to return to our work joyously. □

Ms. Paris is

president, Saint

Joseph's Mercy Care

Services, Atlanta.



Sim Gellman