



Walking with the homeless – Colleen Lewis

Working with street people has great difficulties. They are mostly observed through working with them for a number of years. This is a sad tale that shows some of the frustrations while trying to assist street people. Below are some salient highlights of our interaction with one particular woman.

Sally* was a young pretty girl when I first met her in Cape Town in 2000. She left her two children in the Karoo in the Eastern Cape for the purpose of finding work, but it did not turn out as she planned. I was informed by people currently living on the street that a young and beautiful girl had started living with them.

She was soon to discover that living on the street was going to be dangerous. Sally first got involved with a man named Jerry*. He contracted a terminal disease and passed away. Sally then found herself with a man named Harry*. During this time Sally fell pregnant and give birth to a child. Sadly poor living conditions meant that the baby was not looked after and soon it died.

When Sally fell pregnant on the street for the second time she was offered a place in a home for moms and babies. Sally returned to the home drunk on a number of occasions. Eventually she left on her own accord. Being unable to provide adequate living conditions, the decision was taken by social services to remove her child. After some time Sally fell pregnant again. The baby was born on the streets. The U-turn staff was phoned to take Sally and her baby (still attached to the placenta) to hospital. This time social services intervened even before she left the hospital and the baby was again placed in a care home.

Part of the problem that Sally faced was that in order to cope on the streets she turned to drinking. Over time Sally developed a very strong alcohol addiction. In order to try and help, I invited Sally to live with me for a trial period. Sadly this did not work as she returned home drunk on a number of occasions and sometimes did not return home at all. Eventually the accommodation option was stopped and Sally returned to the parks in our area.

The U-turn staff has come up with a number of suggestions to help Sally move from her current influences. She was offered a work placement scheme complete with a rehabilitation scheme. Although rehabilitation was accepted no change has been seen. The money she earned has been shamelessly used to further a destructive lifestyle and so the opportunity will soon pass to someone else.

Looking at Sally now, scarred through years on the streets it's hard to believe that she was once the young pretty girl who had just appeared in Cape Town. Sadly the 8 years that I've known her has scarred her in more than physical ways.

Reflecting on all of this I have learnt a number of things that are worth mentioning:

Contrary to popular perceptions, most women are driven to the street due to home circumstances and not directly because of drugs or alcohol. Drugs and alcohol only become a problem when they remain on the street.

Another observation is that it is common for a woman to attach themselves to a guy for protection. These relationships may tend to become abusive but with little or no support networks available to ladies on the street it's often a matter of choosing the 'lesser' of two evils.

The people on the street are not aware of the danger of HIV and Aids and so they need to be taught and educated about this. The homeless people lead a very communal lifestyle which brings conflict when attempts are made to rehabilitate individuals. Most importantly, the only thing that will change Sally is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Due to unemployment in rural areas people come to bigger cities and end up living on the street. They become vulnerable and may be taken in by people whose only goal is to use them for illegal financial gain.

Homeless women often fall pregnant, but are unable to look after their children by themselves. There is a need to have social workers get involved. In most cases the best option is to take the child away from the parent on the street so that they might avoid living the same lifestyle as their parents.

Working with homeless women is very hard and we pray that by God's grace we would learn how to best to change their circumstances so that they may be afforded the dignity that comes with being a person created in the image of God. My prayer is that Sally will truly accept Jesus as her Lord and savior so that she can look forward to an eternity in heaven. The good news is that Jesus promises her that she'll have her own room in heaven. (John 14:1-4) Please pray with us that she might accept this invitation

*names have been changed to protect identities