

You Are Wel come HERE

A unique Dallas ministry provides hope and love
to those with mental illness

by Steve Blow

“WOULD I BE WELCOME HERE?” the man asked. That simple question sent the Rev. Joel Pulis’s life in a whole new direction—a path that may, in fact, be unique in all the nation. That’s because even as Pulis quickly answered yes, he wondered if he was telling the truth.

At the time, Pulis, a 1995 Baylor graduate, was the youngest associate pastor at Dallas’s Cliff Temple Baptist Church. As such, he had informally landed the duty of greeting and talking with the homeless and destitute who showed up at the church’s offices. The church sits in the Oak Cliff area of southwest Dallas, a part of town enjoying economic revival but also home to some of the city’s poorest and most troubled residents. Normally Pulis merely exchanged a few pleasantries with those who stopped by before referring them to the church’s nearby food pantry and clothes closet operations.

But Pulis had begun to sense that such well-practiced exchanges were just a little too easy, a bit superficial, and dismissive of people. “Some of them seemed to want to talk about spiritual needs as well as physical needs,” he said. “But we were pretty much focused on meeting only the physical. It had all just begun to feel a little disconnected—the charitable work and the church work.”

The dirty, shabbily dressed stranger in the church foyer on that day—homeless, by all appearances—had been more explicit in



JOINED IN SONG: Arthur Cyrus sings during Bible study.



FRIENDS INDEED:
Becky Wilson (l) and
Pat Beggiato share a moment
at the Well Community

Photographs by Dan Bryant

asking about spiritual things, and Pulis welcomed the opportunity to minister to his needs of the soul as well as body. Something was said about the man returning for a worship service. But then came a simple, sincere question. “Would I be welcome here?” he asked.

Pulis’s mind whirled. “Cliff Temple is an open and progressive church. Anyone is welcome,” he said, reflecting back on the thoughts that raced through his mind that day. “I immediately said, ‘Yes, you are welcome here.’ But even as I was saying that, I felt like I was deceiving the man. While no one was going to run him off, I really didn’t know if he would feel welcomed with open arms. He then asked, ‘Can I wear anything? Am I dressed okay?’ And again, I said yes, but I felt like I had deceived this man. I didn’t think that culturally he was going to connect.”

A new direction

The encounter continued to weigh on Pulis’s mind, and it wasn’t long afterward that he resigned his comfortable position as associate pastor to young adults at Cliff Temple Baptist and began anew as a roving pastor to a whole new congregation—the street people, the down and out, and the disenfranchised who made their



FROM THE WORD: Rev. Joel Pulis, community pastor and executive director, leads Bible study with members of the Well Community.

home in that corner of Dallas. Taking its name from the place of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman, the new church was called the Well Community.

“This was January 2002. There were seven of us to start with,” Pulis said. “And we simply began to walk the neighbor-



hood on Sunday mornings, talking with anyone we met along the way, having prayer and trying to share God’s love.” The seven included Pulis and his wife, Laura Leftwich Pulis ’97; his brother and sister-in-law, Joshua Pulis ’01 and Celeste Sarpaulius Pulis ’98; and friends Scott Coleman ’86, Kristi Kuykendall Coleman ’87, and Michael Hammond.

All seven lived in Oak Cliff, and most had grown up there. They thought they knew what to expect from their sojourn into the community. The plight of the homeless and near-homeless seemed fairly obvious and well documented. But while they traveled on foot—taking time to talk and listen, and seeing up close the flophouses that dotted the area—something unexpected emerged. “We began to see this invisible population,” Pulis said. “Everywhere we turned, we found people with mental illnesses. I had seen some of them before and just assumed they were homeless. But we realized there was this whole population of the mentally ill that was below the radar.”

Pulis, now thirty-four years old, had always felt a call to serve those outside the usual reach of the church. His plan while at Baylor was to head to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. He only lasted a year there. “In seminary, there are these definite boxes they try to fit you in. And I knew I was being called to something different, to something outside the box.” He left the seminary and returned to Waco to study at the less traditional Mission Training School affiliated with Antioch Community Church.

Four years after graduating from the program, Pulis found his mission field on the streets of Oak Cliff. Seeing the devastation of untreated and under-treated mental illness, Pulis knew he had definitely stepped outside the box and into a ministry that would be his life’s work. He saw an instant connection between the mentally



AT HOME: Steve Johnson leads a discussion during Bible study (left); members Charles and Connie Wilson (below) are among those who come to the Well Community, located in the Oak Cliff area of southwest Dallas, for spiritual sustenance and a helping hand for those suffering from mental illness.

ill today and the lepers of biblical times—a people suffering both an illness of the body and the plague of social isolation and stigmatization.

Pulis had stumbled upon—or been led by God to—what many consider one of the country’s most shameful situations. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the closing of mental institutions across the nation was hailed as a great step forward. Improved medications and increased understanding of brain illnesses meant people no longer had to spend their lives locked behind asylum bars. A new era dawned in which those with mental illness were to be treated in their communities and live in small group homes when necessary.

It was a grand plan, but the smaller local treatment services never appeared in sufficient force after the big mental institutions closed. The problem is especially acute in Texas, which ranks forty-ninth in the nation in spending on mental health.

“Deinstitutionalization was great. These people don’t need to be locked away,” Pulis said. “The whole move was to community support, but there was no community and there was no support.” That accounts for much of the homeless problem that exploded on streets all across America. Pulis discovered another group of the mentally ill that, though not technically homeless, lived a life almost as cruel. They lived in dilapidated, profiteering group homes that were shocking in their squalor.

“One of the first houses we served had five bedrooms and four guys in each room,” Pulis said. “They were sleeping on the floor,

and there was feces all over the bathroom. We took a volunteer in to do some outreach, and after just a few minutes in there he literally ran out into the front yard and threw up.”

Growing while serving

Soon after its creation, the Well Community narrowed its focus to minister specifically to those with mental illness. Coleman, who was one of those who first went out to walk the streets with Pulis and now serves as president of the board of the Well, said he initially resisted the idea of focusing the ministry in such a way.

“I thought that would really limit our outreach. But as we discovered, there were just more and more,” Coleman said, laughing ruefully at his early naiveté about the extent of that mission field. “Man, we haven’t had a problem with it being limited,” he said.

As this new calling became clear, Pulis began searching around for other ministries to the mentally ill. “I wanted to learn from them. But what I was saddened and surprised to learn is that there were no ministries to the mentally ill,” he said. To this day the Well remains the only faith-based provider of services to the mentally ill in Dallas-Fort Worth. And as far as Pulis knows, the Well’s Saturday-night worship services represent the only church in the nation specifically for those with mental illnesses.

“People who know the national scene tell us they’re not aware of anything like this happening anywhere else,” said Coleman, who is director of the missions and urban division of the Dallas Baptist

GUITAR MAN: Joshua Pulis, director of programming, sings and plays guitar during a Saturday Night service.

Association. It's rare enough that *People* magazine published a feature story on the Well last year.

From its modest start as a sidewalk ministry, the Well has grown into an impressive, multifaceted operation—funded mostly by individual donations. Though an independent ministry, the Well still operates within the facilities of Cliff Temple Baptist Church. After a few months as purely a street church, the Well began conducting Sunday morning worship services at the church. Services were then switched to Saturday evenings to better meet the needs of the congregation.

Though his heart was in the right place, Pulis soon realized that he lacked the expertise to address many of the mental-health issues facing his flock. Fortunately, he did not have to look far to find well-qualified help. His thirty-year-old brother, Joshua, had been a volunteer with the ministry since that first Sunday-morning foray into the neighborhood. It also happened that the younger Pulis had the technical expertise needed. After graduating from Baylor, Joshua began his career as a social worker with the state's



Child Protective Services. While working, he continued his studies at the University of Texas at Arlington, earning a master's degree in social work. Joshua joined the staff of the Well as program director. "I had always felt a call to hurting people, so this was a perfect fit with my calling," he said.

And the need was great. The Well branched out to begin weekday programs. The Community Life Center is open three days a week now, but there are plans to expand to five days later this year. A whole range of services is offered—case management to help people navigate the confusing mental health system, housing assistance, faith-based support groups, a clothes closet, and a free lunch program. Above all, a visit to the Community Life Center reveals a spirit of fun and camaraderie. For members of the Well Community, it's a place to hang out and be themselves.

"None of us quite realizes how important our social connections are to our own mental health," Joel Pulis said. A special cruelty is that those who already have fragile mental health often end up living in social isolation that is further crippling to them. "There's the scriptural command to love one another, and that's what we're doing at the Well," he said. "We're creating a community where people feel loved, where they feel they belong, where they feel needed. I think that's the greatest therapeutic benefit we bring to our folks."

LET US PRAY: Well Community member Danny Randall prays during Bible study.



"We're having success. We're seeing people recover." — Joshua Pulis



A WHOLE NEW WORLD: Anne White (below) became a receptionist at Cliff Temple Baptist Church after finding a way off the streets through the Well Community. Halburt Bowens (right) works on his drawings during art class.



Fortunately for White, her stay was short. A jail diversion program placed her in a supervised housing facility. “And there I heard about the Well,” she said. “So the first Saturday night I was there, I got dressed and I came down here. And I’ve been here ever since.”

such a congregation—members who pace rather than sit, others who blurt out comments, and those who suddenly get up and noisily gather their things in the middle of the sermon. But Pulis never misses a beat. His preaching style is conversational and engaging, and most of the congregation is right with him from start to finish.



SINGING PRAISES: Well Community member Susanna Von Drashke lifts her voice in song during a Saturday Night worship service.

Signs of success

The greatest testimony to the Well is that it works. “We’re having success. We’re seeing people recover,” Joshua Pulis said. “We’re seeing people who were in and out of psychiatric hospitals when we first met them. We’ve been working with some of them for two years now, and they haven’t been back. We’re seeing progress, which is why we keep doing what we’re doing.”

In fact, many first-time visitors to the Well see its handiwork before they even realize it. Whether their contact begins with a phone call or a visit to the Community Life Center, most visitors will first encounter fifty-eight-year-old Anne White, church receptionist for Cliff Temple Baptist Church. She is a well-dressed, well-mannered model of professionalism. It’s almost impossible to believe she previously lived on the streets, her mind ravaged by schizoaffective disorder.

“I wouldn’t take my medications, and I would just drift from place to place,” White explained. “I was in and out of the state hospital in Terrell all the time.” In the winter of 2004, White was homeless and doing her best to hide out in the warm, hidden corners of Parkland Memorial Hospital, Dallas’s huge public hospital. Over and over, hospital security would drive her off. Dallas police would write her tickets for criminal trespass, warning that after her third violation she would go to jail. And finally she did get hauled to jail. In many ways, jails and prisons have replaced state hospitals as the place where people with uncontrolled mental illness end up.

Once she was back on her medication, White’s transformation amazed everyone. When the church needed a new receptionist, she was quickly hired. She has her own apartment now, takes her medications faithfully, and rejoices in the stability of her life. “I’m so grateful, you just wouldn’t believe,” she said.

The Saturday night worship services remain the heart of the Well Community, and they are as distinctive as the ministry itself. Services are conducted in the church fellowship hall, with seating at round dinner tables. About one hundred people currently attend. The doors open an hour before service time, and members are often there waiting, eager to experience the bonds of fellowship that mark the Well. The sound of lively conversation and the aroma of strong coffee fill the air. Dress is highly informal. T-shirts and jeans are standard. Personal grooming ranges from meticulous to nonexistent. But all are welcomed equally.

In addition to his duties as program director, Joshua Pulis is worship leader at the Well, and he begins the service strumming his guitar and leading praise choruses. Spontaneously, a man joins him at the front and begins dancing along to the songs in a freestyle interpretive dance that looks more like an aerobic workout. Off to the side, a woman lost in her own world dances to the music in what can only be called a hootchie-kootchie style. The congregation is unfazed.

On this night, Joel Pulis preaches from Galatians on the fruits of the spirit. He has learned to deal with the distractions that go with

Meanwhile, in the kitchen at the back of the fellowship hall, dinner is being prepared. Different churches from around the Dallas area regularly volunteer to provide a meal following Saturday-night services. On the menu tonight is barley chorizo jambalaya, prepared and served by members of Journey Church in North Dallas.

Journey Church’s pastor, Danielle Grubb Shroyer ’98, said she is impressed by the Well. “There is something really beautiful in the relationships there,” Shroyer said. “And it seems like the Well came about in the way these things ought to come about. It was very organic. They simply recognized there was a need, and they filled it.”

For a visitor to the Well, there can be no doubt that a need is being filled. Given the opportunity to talk about their church, members literally line up to sing its praises. Church member Paul Taylor was especially eager to praise the church, and he sounded uncannily like he could have been the man whose simple, direct question began all this.

“After fifty-five years of being in churches where I did not fit in—whether it was clothing, finances, mental health, or what have you—I found a church where I fit in,” Taylor said. “I just love the people here. I am at home here.” ■

Steve Blow is a columnist for the Dallas Morning-News. To learn more about the Well Community’s ministry, visit wellcommunity.net.



MOMENT OF REFLECTION: Well Community member David Favors looks over a passage of Scripture during Bible study.