

If You Pray Right: A Study of Prosperity Theology's Role in the
Shaping of American Christian Faith-Based Social Services
Organizations

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore the role of prosperity theology in the shaping of the landscape of American Christian faith-based social services organizations (FBOs), with specific attention focused on those FBOs that serve people experiencing homelessness. Prosperity theology refers to a Christian theological framework that emphasizes a personal and transactional relationship with God that necessitates strong faith in order to receive material and financial blessings from God on earth. Through analysis of discussions with four Christian FBOs that serve people experiencing homelessness, I explore the extent to which particular FBOs implement prosperity thought into their theological frameworks and practice. This mainly manifests in an organization's understanding of the causes of homelessness, as well as what is necessary in order to escape cycles of poverty and homelessness. I conclude that some American Christian FBOs do incorporate elements of prosperity thought into their frameworks of operation to varying extents, while others openly reject prosperity theology. I conclude by discussing the implications of organizational inclusion or exclusion of prosperity thought for individuals experiencing homelessness, personally and psychologically. I conclude that organizations that incorporate prosperity thought into their frameworks may add to senses of guilt or shame that an individual may feel on account of being homeless, but also offer a theological framework that provides more certainty for a better future. Conversely, organizations that do not incorporate prosperity thought into their frameworks likely do not add to senses of guilt and shame that may already be felt by homeless persons, but also cannot offer the same kind of theological certainty that other FBOs can. These implications are important for donors and supporters of FBOs to consider when deciding which organizations to give monetary resources and support to.

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Section 1: Introduction to Prosperity Theology

It was the summer of 2019, and I was living in Berkeley, California, while interning with a nonprofit organization in San Francisco and working a second job lifeguarding and teaching swim lessons to kids. One night, a coworker and friend walked home with me from a social gathering. As we made our way down the street towards my building, we passed by a homeless man who was lying on the ground beside his cart of possessions, likely attempting to get some sleep. Seeing me glance over at the man, this coworker emphatically instructed: “Don’t even look at him. That bum doesn’t deserve your eye contact.” I was astounded. “Why?” I asked. Unable to offer an explanation, he promptly changed the subject.

Despite the severity of his remarks, this was not the first time that summer that I had come into contact with actions and opinions that reflected the pervasive and dehumanizing stigma surrounding the issue of homelessness in modern America. Throughout the entire summer, I witnessed words and deeds, such as this comment, that were actively hostile towards people experiencing homelessness. However, even more prominent was the general sense of apathy directed towards the area’s homeless population. Day and night, while many sat along the streets experiencing severe physical and mental impediments to health, the rest of the population traveled on by, entirely desensitized to the suffering on stark display before them. My experiences in Berkeley and San Francisco led me to reflect upon what could possibly be the root of such a profoundly inequitable and widespread stigma. What could possibly bring someone, in the wake of witnessing their fellow man’s extreme poverty or illness, to confidently declare that such a state warrants one undeserving of something as simple yet important as eye contact?

One likely contributing factor is the widespread religious and cultural influence of prosperity theology in modern American society. This thesis will explore the connection between

prosperity theology and modern Christian American attitudes towards homelessness, as is exemplified by Christian faith-based social services agencies (FBOs) that serve people experiencing homelessness. Prosperity theology, or the prosperity movement, refers to a broad twentieth-century American Christian movement. Although the prosperity movement has manifested in a large variety of resulting churches, congregations, and smaller sub-movements, the common denominator of its theology is the assertion that, rather than waiting for the bliss of heaven, God wills for the faithful to live in wealth, health, and perfect victory here on Earth. Faith is regarded as a tool that Christian believers can use to directly secure access to God's blessings.

Churches that align with the prosperity movement assert that what Christ accomplished on the cross through the sacrifice of his life enables his faithful to tap into the endless wealth of God's abundance on command. In other words, Jesus' death on the cross not only gives Christian believers of this theology the ability to make material requests of God in His name, but the right to do so.¹ Prosperity theology adherents believe that this is promised through scripture. Therefore, poverty, disease, mental illness, and really anything that could be considered some variant of earthly failure is a direct result of a lack of faith, an internal, personal failing, rather than attributed to societal factors of systemic oppression. Rather than denying the existence of systemic oppression entirely, prosperity theology asserts that it is not a significant impediment to well-being, as Christians can always utilize their relationship with Christ to bypass systemic factors such as poverty, racism, and mental illness, and achieve earthly bliss.

In modern America, the prosperity gospel is perhaps most recognizable in its megachurch format. Some of America's largest churches, which usually label themselves as

¹ Bowler, "Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel", 14-18.

nondenominational and evangelical, preach some form of prosperity theology to their massive number of attendees. Televised, well-dressed churchgoers can be seen and heard vocalizing their agreement and praise throughout these services. Even better known than America's prosperity churches are the preachers of those churches: big names like Joel Osteen and T.D. Jakes who preach to in-person and TV audiences of thousands, have sold millions upon millions of copies of their books, and live lavish lifestyles that have, at times, come under the scrutiny of the public.

Joel Osteen is the head preacher of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, which can hold up to nearly seventeen thousand in-person attendees each week.² Osteen's style of preaching focuses on the goodness of God and the importance of having a positive attitude throughout experiences of adversity. His uncomplicated and positive messages draw in a national crowd of ten million weekly viewers. Osteen also emphasizes that God does desire for all believers to live a happy and complete life, and that He will bring His followers into realization of that promise. However, personal faith is a tool that is absolutely necessary to allow God to work miracles in the lives of individual believers.³ In a sermon titled *Remember What God Said*, Osteen preaches:

Now, do like Job and keep thanking God for what He said. Keep declaring, 'My Redeemer lives.' All through the day in your thoughts, 'Father, thank You that your plans for me are for good. Thank You that You will fill my mouth with laughter again.' When you are under pressure, it is so important what you allow to play in your mind. Thoughts will tell you all the reasons why it's not going to work out. Sometimes people will tell you how you'll never break the addiction. 'You can't start that business.' You have to go back to what God said, not what people said. No disrespect, not what the experts said, not what your mind says, not how you feel, but to what God promised. Maybe you're discouraged over how long your dream is taking, how impossible it looks. God is saying, 'Did not I tell you what I started, I will finish? Did not I tell you, if you delight yourself in Me, I will give you the desires of your heart?'⁴

For Osteen, the word of God is absolutely and positively good. It is a promise to each believer that they will experience very literal victory on earth in material and social ways.

² "Nation's Largest Church Opens In Stadium", NBC News.

³ Sintiere, "Salvation With a Smile."

⁴ Osteen, "Remember What God Said", Youtube.

Addiction, disease, lack of progress, even office politics: despite their seriousness, these are earthly barriers to complete fulfillment that can be knocked down with hardly any effort by the “Most High God” that Osteen refers to again and again in his sermons.. The table set before a believer by God is set here on earth; the barrier that He raises up, He will raise up here on earth, just in time to defeat the worldly force of addiction, of disease, or whatever an individual may be struggling with. To Osteen, all is possible on earth through the power of God. This is what He promises. Yet, it is surely transactional. In another sermon titled *It’s Going to Happen Quickly*, Osteen takes on the voice of a doubtful parishioner, and then responds to it:

‘Well, Joel, this is encouraging today, but I don't believe that it's going to happen quickly for me. I've been dealing with this a long time.’ Then you're right. It won't happen for you. This is for believers; this is for people that will let the seed take root, people that will dare say, ‘God, I agree with what you said, that you will hasten your word to perform it. Lord, I believe for a quick work [sic]. I believe enemies are hurrying out of my way. I believe I'm going to see a rapid turnaround.’⁵

God does not just bestow good works upon anyone, argues Osteen. Much like a capitalist economic system requires one to have money to make purchases, faith is the currency by which observable results are granted to believers. If a believer does not see visible results of their faith and prayers, it cannot possibly reflect some fault of the Most High God, according to this theology. A believer must re-examine themselves and locate the imperfections pertaining to their faith. Once the problem within the individual has been located and corrected, that person will begin to see the results they were looking for by the power of their newly perfected attitude.

In addition to Joel Osteen, Bishop T.D. Jakes is a prominent prosperity megachurch preacher. His church, The Potter’s House, in Dallas, Texas, fits over eight thousand people inside its walls each week. Combined with worshippers viewing from home, The Potter’s House has over seventeen thousand people in attendance every week, making it the tenth largest church in

⁵ Osteen, “It’s Going To Happen Quickly”, Youtube.

America.⁶ Although Osteen and Jakes are certainly not identical in their beliefs and mannerisms, they are cut from the same theological cloth. Like Osteen, Jakes views faith and tangible life improvements in a transactional relationship with one another. In his sermon literally titled *The Currency of Faith*, Jakes says:

I am healed in my spirit before I am healed in my body. It means I am prosperous in my spirit before I see it in my wallet. It means I'm whole on the inside before it shows up on the outside...we understand that things that do appear were not made by things that do appear. This is why you are not to discount the treasury that God puts in your spirit... You say, 'Good Lord, I don't want a spiritual blessing. I want a natural blessing.' Yeah, but before it's natural, it's going to be spiritual. Before it shows up on the job, it's going to show up in your spirit. Before you get the promotion, you're going to be that before they call you that. You're going to be a Bishop before they call you a Bishop. You're going to be a doctor before you're conferred your doctoral degree. It's going to happen on the inside before it happens on the outside.⁷

Similar to Osteen's assertion that tangible results will only come to those who believe, Jakes articulates that an individual must be in spiritual alignment with God before they see the material and social changes in their lives that they would like to see. Further, Jakes asserts that it is not just a relationship of correlation, but one of causation, between spirit and material results. A righteous spirit is one that is responsible for bringing about blessings.

Given such a controversial theology, some might wonder: from what Biblical basis was prosperity theology drawn up and transformed into a mass Christian movement with millions of followers? Biblically, prosperity theology has been largely built through constructing a larger cohesive narrative of what it means to have and maintain a covenant with God, through similar approaches of interpreting passages from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.⁸

Covenant theology, as understood in the book of Exodus and the story of the Israelites, is a major foundation of prosperity beliefs.⁹ Covenant theology articulates that God will bless those who are

⁶ "With Gifts From God", The Washington Post.

⁷ Jakes, "The Currency of Faith", Youtube.

⁸ Cotterell, "Prosperity Theology", 10-11.

⁹ Ibid.

faithful to Him and keep His Commandments entirely. He will show favor to those who honor Him by blessing them and providing for them. However, if His Commandments are broken in any form, the covenant is broken as well, and those previously faithful will fall from prosperity and into disfavor.¹⁰ Therefore, poverty, disease, and other ails serve as visible signs of disfavor and a broken covenant. Conversely, wealth, health, and victory reflect an intact and thriving covenant. Several passages from Deuteronomy, the fifth book in the Hebrew Bible, illustrate this concept. Deuteronomy 28:1-14 states:

If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands ... The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but borrow from none. The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom.

This passage speaks to a transactional relationship between properly obeying God and experiencing a state of well-being physically, emotionally, and socially.

As for the New Testament, certain verses throughout lend support to prosperity ideas while placing less emphasis on the need to keep God's commandments. Instead, it focuses more on God's good will for humankind as expressed through Christ. Philippians 4:19 states: "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Additionally, 3 John 1:2 teaches: "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." Although these New Testament passages illustrate less of a blueprint for obtaining a state of well-being, they still lend support to prosperity thought ideas, as they outline the intent of God to be good and for all of His people to experience joy and plenty on earth. These sentiments, combined with other covenant theology ideas, paint a picture of a God that is both strict and benevolent, a God to be both feared and rejoiced in. For prosperity theologians, the

¹⁰ "On Covenant Theology", Introduction.

Hebrew Bible does not necessarily hold greater authority or significance than the New Testament, or vice-versa. What is authoritative and significant is the availability of multiple passages across the Hebrew Bible and New Testament that can be woven into a larger network of covenant theologies and interpreted within a similar vein to validate the importance of faith in and obedience to God in exchange for hopeful earthly prosperity.

This thesis seeks to analyze the extent to which prosperity theology has had, and continues to have, an impact on American Christian attitudes surrounding the issue of homelessness by examining the operational frameworks of currently-operating, Christian-identified faith-based social services organizations (FBOs) that serve the homeless. These FBOs provide social services such as food, shelter, mental health services, and other services to homeless populations. Prosperity theology asserts that one's circumstances are essentially one's own fault; with a little more faith, or a little more hard work, in the secular sense, one should be able to transform their own situation from one of despair to one of abundant blessings. To what extent do Christian FBOs attribute the circumstances of the unhoused to some kind of internal, moral failure, whether of faith, or simply of character? Conversely, how extensively do they cite external, societal factors as contributing to their experiences with poverty? This will be explored through close analyses of interviews with four American Christian FBOs that serve those experiencing homelessness. Specifically, what do these organizations understand to be the root causes of homelessness? Additionally, what resources does a person need to be relieved from a cycle of poverty and homelessness? An organization's conceptualization of how to address an unhoused individual's needs largely speaks to their understanding of the roles of agency, individual choice, and systemic oppression as factors that lead to situations of poverty and homelessness.

The major takeaway from this research is that American Christian FBOs operate in vastly different ways in their structures of service, and it is integral to differentiate between these FBOs according to their structural frameworks, rather than assuming that Christian FBOs operate in highly similar fashions in terms of their attitudes regarding social problems. Some American Christian FBOs have structural frameworks of service that are largely built upon prosperity ideas. Others outright reject prosperity theology as problematic. Still others sit in a more messy space between these two ends of the spectrum. Based on their incorporation of elements of prosperity thought, or lack thereof, I argue that organizations have differing psychological and personal effects on their unhoused clients in terms of being able to affirm or dismantle feelings of guilt and shame that homeless folks may already harbor in light of their situations, and in terms of providing comfort and confidence that a future of greater resources and opportunities awaits them. These effects are important to analyze in regards to financial donors and other supporters of Christian FBOs that may select organizations to support on account of what social services they provide individuals, and to what extent. However, individual and organizational donors that are not familiar with the structural differences between Christian FBOs in light of theological frameworks may enter into the support process assuming similarities of particular organizations that are just that: assumptions. They may simply not be aware that there is a large spectrum of theological principles by which Christian FBOs operate. The aim of this thesis is to bring these differences to light.

Section 2: Why Are They Homeless? : Prosperity Thought's Presence in FBOs that Serve People Experiencing Homelessness

Faith-based social services organizations make up a broad category of organizations that include operations from a large variety of denominations, and with a wide array of structural frameworks, central missions, and values. Placing many of these organizations under the same umbrella of faith-based, although technically not incorrect, can often be misleading, as attitudes and approaches towards the structural issues they aim to address differ widely within this category. This section will discuss how, and to what extent, prosperity theology plays a role in shaping the attitudes and approaches of FBOs that aim to serve those experiencing homelessness.

For some organizations, prosperity beliefs comprise the backbone of the operation and closely affect how the organization understands the issue of homelessness, as well as how staff interact with those they serve. For other faith-based organizations, the connection between the two exists, but to a lesser extent, as systemic origins of homelessness and other issues related to homelessness are also taken into account and honored in the methods used to provide services. Yet for other organizations, prosperity beliefs are rendered absent from their attitudes and methodologies, instead basing their understanding of homelessness solely on systemic factors. I found that faith-based organizations that identify as evangelical are more likely to incorporate elements of prosperity thought into their operational frameworks and values, while those that are based in other, non-evangelical denominations are less likely to do so. This being said, there is still a wide variety of ways and extents that prosperity theology manifests under the umbrella of evangelically-identified social services organizations.

I spoke with staff members from multiple faith-based social services organizations. Two identify as evangelical organizations: God's Mission in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Welcome

All Mission in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. For the purposes of this work, I have changed the names of these two organizations and their staff members to protect their anonymity.

Additionally, I spoke with Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, and Rising Hope Mission Church in Alexandria, Virginia, in regards to their outreach programs. I spoke with staff from each organization regarding their beliefs behind the root causes of homelessness, and how this impacts their approaches to serving people who are homeless.

“You let it happen when you are living in the sin.”

When I reached out to God's Mission in New Orleans, Louisiana, Matt Goodville was more than willing to speak to me about the Mission and its approach to serving homeless men and women. Mr. Goodville is a graduate of the God's Mission's Discipleship Program for men. The discipleship program is a one-year retreat program for men experiencing addiction and homelessness. During the year, the participants work to overcome addiction by finding and accepting God and turning towards a Christian life. Mr. Goodville graduated as the named salutorian of the program, and is now employed at God's Mission. He used to struggle with alcohol addiction, but since graduating from the program, he has no desire to drink.

Of all of the organizations I spoke with, the framework of God's Mission most closely resembled a prosperity thought approach to understanding why people become homeless, and what people can do to put themselves in a position to no longer be homeless. Despite some acknowledgement of systemic factors that can lead to situations of poverty and homelessness, the Mission places much more emphasis on spiritual elements as the underlying cause for situations that cause homelessness, such as addiction. When I asked Mr. Goodville what God's Mission teaches as an organization regarding how someone comes to be homeless, he answered that for men, the most significant cause is addiction, and for women, the most common cause is domestic

abuse. When I asked what causes addiction in the eyes of the Mission, Mr. Goodville explained, “You let it happen when you are living in the sin,” referring to one’s life before they “accept Christ” and thereby become a Christian. To accept Christ in this sense refers to the process of coming to terms with one’s own sinful nature, and therefore, one’s necessary relationship with Christ as savior for both heavenly and earthly well-being. With this transformation comes salvation after death for the individual, as well as protection within the person’s current earthly life. According to Mr. Goodville, before this transformation in one’s life, a person can be tempted by the devil to sin. But people have free will, so they ultimately choose to fall into sinful states such as addiction. The devil acts as an external force of evil that causes people to reckon with internal competing interests of what is sinful and what is not, according to this belief system. Therefore, the devil is a separate force from individuals, but awakens the sinful elements of an individual and brings them to a point of choice.

However, once a person turns to Christ, this acts as a kind of force field that will allow them to be protected from the devil and delivered from the fallout of their sins. It will allow a person to “rebuild and become a whole man,” in Mr. Goodville’s words. It is transactional, as one must trust in God and, “let God transform them through the dedication of their heart.” God has everything He needs to make tangible change in a person’s life. He is simply, “waiting for us to choose Him,” says Mr. Goodville. Within this framework, there is a strong element of personal responsibility for situations, such as addiction, that people find themselves in. Although it does not actively accuse individuals of seeking out their own misfortune, there is a sense that, at the end of the day, people end up in difficult situations because they give in to sin, despite recognition that people are put in difficult situations that set them up to “give in” in this way. People allow these situations to occur, rather than having the ability to properly fend them off.

Within this rhetorical framework, people choose sin by allowing it to happen when they have not properly put their faith in God. It is interesting to note that Mr. Goodville spoke about this dynamic mainly in regards to addiction, and did not articulate this framework of belief surrounding other major leading causes of homelessness, such as domestic abuse and violence. Nonetheless, this framework still plays a major role in the organization's understanding of homelessness, and therefore, its approach to serving its clients.

According to Mr. Goodville, people's lives can only be turned around through the Grace of God, once one comes to Him and trusts in Him properly through the recognition and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Son of God and personal savior. Mr. Goodville spoke of a young man who came to the mission facing a nineteen-year prison sentence. After giving his life to Christ and becoming a Christian, a wonderful thing occurred: his sentence was reduced to two years with parole. This is something that man could never accomplish, only God, said Mr. Goodville. God works through man, but the power comes not from man, but from God. In order for this man to have experienced such a miraculous transformation in his life, he first had to give himself to God. He had to accept Christ as his savior and "give his heart" to God, as Mr. Goodville said that this is all God asks of people. To God's Mission, this narrative stands as an example of the power, and the necessity, of having a "willingness to submit" to God, according to Mr. Goodville. Had this man not given his life to Christ, he would not have been able to enjoy God's gift of a reduced sentence and the ability to earn parole. Mr. Goodville paused several times as he teared up remembering stories of families that have been reunited and healed through the Grace of God, such as children being returned to parents who had reclaimed their sobriety. "I have seen things happen that no man could create," he said. This framework of understanding establishes a direct link between having faith in God and reaping physical, tangible benefits.

Therefore, remaining in an unfortunate situation, such as a cycle of addiction, reflects a failure to accept Christ in order to protect oneself from harm through His power. This sentiment is echoed in an excerpt from the Mission's website, in a letter written by the Chief Executive Officer:

“We do not believe that someone has to be labeled an addict for life. We are witness to the powerful truth of God's word every day found in 1 Peter 2:21-25. ‘By His wounds you have been healed...’”¹¹

Just as major prosperity preachers like Joel Osteen articulate, the Mission believes that what Jesus accomplished on the cross can save people from peril here on earth as well as in heaven. In the eyes of the organization, the people who come to the Mission for assistance have a need to be saved, just like any other human being; only through an authentic, faithful relationship with God will individuals begin to see growth in terms of their own earthly fortunes. This framework is also emphasized in one of the Mission's “God Moments” videos, which can be found on its website. Chief Operations Officer of the Mission John Larson, within his video message from October of 2016, urges hurting individuals to find healing through a relationship with Christ:

The beautiful thing is...God blesses His children. God gives favor to those that are in Christ...Be free today in Christ. Even if we go through trials that we have caused in our own lives, know that God causes everything to work out for good for those that have been called, justified, and redeemed by Christ Jesus.¹²

The transformative work of Christ effectively allows someone to start anew and receive favor through earthly blessings, but only those who are truly “in Christ” with proper faith and dedication.

¹¹ God's Mission Website

¹² God's Mission Website

Despite the inherent organizational understanding that those in need must undergo a religious transformation in order to be made “whole,” Mr. Goodville articulated how important Mission staff felt it was to maintain a non-judgmental and loving attitude towards those who came to the Mission for assistance. I asked Mr. Goodville what the most important value of God's Mission is. He answered that it is to communicate to people who are hurting that they are loved by Jesus, describing The Mission as the “emergency room of the church.” Mr. Goodville says that God's Mission strives to “love people where they are” because “we don’t know what people have gone through.” Although this rhetoric hints at systemic causes of homelessness hitting the radar of the organization, through the Christian education it provides, God's Mission communicates that sin is a major factor that leads people into struggling societal positions. However, to label any FBO as solely attending to religious or systemic factors would, for sure, be an oversimplification.

This is clearly demonstrated by the Welcome All Mission and how it comprehends the root causes of homelessness as pertaining to both spiritual and systemic elements. Executive Director Dr. William Edgar, who insisted on being addressed as Bill, enthusiastically agreed to speak with me about Welcome All Mission’s thoughtful and nuanced teachings regarding the causes of homelessness, and the resources that an individual needs to escape cycles of chronic homelessness and poverty. On a sociological level, Dr. Edgar expressed that addiction, financial adversity, loss of employment, physical or mental illness, injury, and domestic abuse all significantly contribute to the problem of homelessness in America. Additionally, he named five deeper root causes that Welcome All Mission recognizes as contributing to these sociological issues that often bring Americans into a state of homelessness.

First, he said that sometimes, some people make poor choices. Some of these choices have an ethical dimension to them, and are therefore sinful. Others do not share this kind of ethical dimension, and are therefore not technically sinful, even though they are not ideal decisions in terms of benefitting one's overall well-being. Secondly, others often sin against people in a way that contributes to them becoming homeless. For example, Bob spoke of a young man that came to the Mission who had been repeatedly raped by a church official when he was a child. The trauma that was inflicted upon this young man through repeated gross violations of his body majorly contributed, along with other factors, to his later experiences of poverty and homelessness. Thirdly, Dr. Edgar additionally articulated that, besides sin committed by people, the organization believes in an evil being called Satan, who is against God and all people. Satan works through people to actively harm others. Different from Mr. Goodville's articulated conception of the devil, Dr. Edgar's articulation of Satan is of a being that wholly and directly inflicts harm on others, manipulating their circumstances, rather than tempting individuals into choosing sin. Fourthly, homelessness exists in our world because our world is a fallen world. This was not the world that God intended for us to live in, and the fall introduced a variety of systemic issues into our newly-flawed societies, such as disease and financial hardships. Lastly, the wrongs and evils of people become institutionalized and manifest themselves in laws that disproportionately affect and oppress particular populations. Here, Dr. Edgar gave the example of American systemic racism societally sanctified through the institution of American slavery, and then later, through Jim Crow laws.

Although it is articulated through a Christian framework, Welcome All Mission places far less emphasis on the responsibility, or even culpability, of the individual in its understanding of what brings someone to experience homelessness. It comprehends the issue of homelessness

through a larger Christian narrative of a fallen world whose broken state allows oppressive systems to take root, systems that disproportionately affect individuals based on race and socioeconomic status, among other factors. Sin is still a causal factor that is discussed and affirmed, but in a different, more nuanced sense. For Welcome All Mission, sin can take many forms: systemic, institutionalized, legalized, or individualized. People can make sinful choices themselves, or fall into poverty as the result of being the recipient of someone else's sinful actions. Therefore, Welcome All Mission's recognition of sin as a cause of poverty and homelessness does not automatically consider homelessness as a reflection of personal wrongdoing; it only leaves it open as one of a myriad of factors that often interact with one another and bring individuals to such situations.

This nuanced framework of understanding the interaction between individual and societal wrongdoing is illustrated in the way that Dr. Edgar relayed the story of a man named Sam who came to the Mission in the 1980s during the AIDS crisis. Sam was a gay man who eventually became addicted to cocaine, and would engage in paid sex work in order to fund his addiction. Through this, he eventually contracted AIDS, and came to the Mission for assistance. Dr. Edgar expressed that, in his opinion, Sam did not make the best choice in regards to his own health by choosing to engage in sex work. However, he fully recognized that Sam was in a difficult situation of deep poverty brought about by factors reflective of larger oppressive systems, and therefore much wrong had been done to him throughout his lifetime. Sam was a truly beloved member of the Mission, Dr. Edgar said. He sadly passed away shortly after 1990.

Perhaps what differentiates the perspective of Welcome All Mission from the approach of God's Mission to an even greater extent is the approach Welcome All Mission takes towards putting an individual in a position to no longer be homeless. Both Missions identify as Christian

organizations, and as Dr. Edgar put it, “[Welcome All Mission is] an evangelical organization. We do talk about sin, and about finding Christ.” However, despite how encouraged finding a personal relationship with Christ may be at Welcome All Mission, it is not the only method of bringing individuals out of poverty that the organization supports. In other words, Welcome All Mission emphasizes that people mainly need to have physical needs met and access to social services such as career and mental health services in order to put them in a position where they can support themselves and live a life free of addiction. If people can have those needs met, they can return to a life that feels dignified, whether or not Christ becomes a piece of their journey.

The lack of a particular faith requirement in order to be assisted by the Mission is exemplified by the organization’s willingness to accept a Muslim man named Cal into their New Life Program, which operates similarly to the Discipleship Program at God’s Mission. Although each man attends the daily morning chapel portion of the New Life Program, Dr. Edgar believes that differences in Cal’s beliefs system were always respected, to the point where, upon his completion of the program, Cal confided in the group that his favorite part of each day was the morning chapel. He said he enjoyed them because it allowed him to begin the day with reflection upon God, even if he did not agree with some of the ideas that were put forth during the chapels. It is important to acknowledge that this narrative does stand somewhat at odds with a statement made in Welcome All Mission’s generalized grant proposal document:

Without exception, each man who comes to the Mission is extremely spiritually needy. Their only hope for a changed heart leading to a changed life is the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹³

This rhetoric aligns very closely with the rhetoric of God’s Mission’s perspective, that a Christian spiritual transformation is necessary to obtain a transformation in one’s material life

¹³ Welcome All Mission Grant Proposal Document

circumstances. It contradicts the supposed articulated lack of a faith requirement as exemplified through Cal's presence within Welcome All Mission. However, it is also quite plausible that this rhetoric is purposefully employed in this particular grant proposal document to cater to the document's donor audience, especially if Welcome All Mission is seeking grants from explicitly Christian foundations and organizations. Therefore, this statement may stand at odds with the lived experiences of non-Christian individuals, such as Cal, who have entered Welcome All Mission's New Life Program.

Welcome All Mission's comprehension of, and complete respect for, the necessity of tangible, non-spiritual interventions in order for people to obtain a state of self-sustainability is perhaps best reflected in the organization's rejection of the popular maxim to simply pick oneself up by their bootstraps. An additional excerpt from Welcome All Mission's grant proposal document dismisses this maxim as ignorant:

The common adage to 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' has no relevance to those stuck in deep poverty for the simple and tragic reason that extremely poor people do not have any proverbial bootstraps by which they can pull themselves up. The homeless men who come to the Mission are mired in deep poverty. The New Life Program provides the needed holistic intervention to lift homeless, destitute men out of deep poverty.¹⁴

This statement stands as a clear organizational affirmation that an individual cannot alter a personal situation of poverty or homelessness simply through their own will or "toughness", or even through faith alone. To assume this is to also assume that a person has landed in a less than optimal position due to some flaw in their individual actions, character, or, according to some Christian narratives, their faith. Conversely, acknowledgement of physical needs and services that a person requires to live an economically and personally dignified life is also an acknowledgement of systemic wrongs that have done great disservices to individuals living in deep poverty. Dr. Edgar outlined three specific non-spiritual categories of needs that individuals

¹⁴ Welcome All Mission Grant Proposal Document

must have met in order to attain a dignified life: basic, life sustaining needs such as proper nutrition and medical assistance, empowerment services, such as mental health and career services, and hope for a better future. He did not explicitly mention a religious transformation as a necessary component in obtaining physical resources needed to sustain a dignified life.

Welcome All Mission works to affirm the dignity of its men through both its words and its actions. Welcome All Mission staff believe that words make a difference in how someone experiences their time at the Mission, according to Dr. Edgar. They recognize that some FBOs treat the people they serve in a patronizing and condescending fashion, and believe that this is unethical. Mission staff members aim to speak with the men staying at the Mission as equals, and refer to themselves as fellow strugglers in the world. Through their actions, Mission staff members aim to love the men in their care with an extravagant love through the maintenance of high standards of care such as nutritional, high-quality food and the development of spaces designed to build community within the Mission.

These two Evangelically-identified organizations clearly have many similarities in their approaches to serving populations of homeless men and women. For both organizations, affirming the dignity and worth of each individual they serve is an utmost priority. Both organizations do recognize that they must meet the material needs of those in their care by providing the goods and services that will enable them to meet their own needs. However, they differ in their articulation of the essentiality of a religious transformation in obtaining and maintaining a self-sufficient lifestyle, despite both encouraging it. According to God's Mission, people are susceptible to difficult situations as long as they have yet to find and strengthen a personal relationship with Christ; Welcome All Mission encourages finding a relationship with Christ as a part of a personal healing process from painful life experiences. But the lived

experiences of non-Christian individuals such as Cal who completed Welcome All Mission's New Life Program demonstrate the organization's recognition of, and respect for, the fact that non-Christian paths to a life of self-sufficiency do exist, and are valid. Therefore, prosperity thought has been less woven into -- or perhaps more woven *out* of-- Welcome All Mission's organizational framework compared with that of God's Mission.

"We would literally never say that."

For some faith-based organizations that focus on serving those who are homeless, prosperity thought hardly enters into their frameworks of operation. For Pastor Rebecca Kirkpatrick of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, the thought of it is even humorous. When I spoke with her and mentioned that some organizations I had previously spoken with implicated ideas of sin and individual responsibility into their methods for addressing the issue of homelessness, she laughed a kind of laugh that usually arises from disbelief. "We would literally never say that," she said, and then after a pause, added, rhetorically, "Who are you talking to?"

Pastor Kirkpatrick is the Associate Pastor for Adult Education at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. She directs the church's outreach programs, and manages its relationships with its Philadelphia partner organizations with whom the church works to address multiple societal issues, including homelessness. When I asked her what the viewpoint of her congregation and its outreach programs is concerning what brings a person to become homeless, Pastor Kirkpatrick answered succinctly that drug addiction, mental health issues, and states of former incarceration all contribute majorly to the current prevalence of homelessness in the United States. She then added that forces of systemic racism, transphobia, and homophobia often play a large role in

determining who becomes homeless and who does not. In order for a person to no longer be homeless and escape a cycle of poverty, Pastor Kirkpatrick stated that the individual, along with service providers, need to locate and address the instability in their life that is keeping them in a state of homelessness, whether that instability be mental health, addiction, patterns of incarceration, or multiple factors. She also emphasized that each of the four organizations that Bryn Mawr Presbyterian works closely with and incorporates into their outreach initiatives are essentially on this same page regarding the causes of homelessness, and the appropriate methods for addressing the issue.

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian works intentionally to partner only with organizations that take a community-centered approach to providing services. This approach focuses on mobilizing resources to address the needs of the community as dictated by the community, rather than entering into a relationship with a community by dictating to them what approach they should take towards healing. In this way, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian recognizes the presence of the white savior complex within a broader network of organizations that serve those experiencing homelessness, and work to distance themselves from it through their approach to service. The white savior complex refers to the presence of white western forces that aim to intervene on behalf of often socioeconomically disadvantaged communities of Color in order to “fix” issues faced by those communities. However, these white organizations or individuals do not typically have a coherent understanding of the history and full context of the problems that the particular community is facing. This prevents them from approaching the issue at hand in a way that is seen as desirable by the community in need.

Like God's Mission and Welcome All Mission, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian recognizes addiction and mental health challenges as core contributors to the prevalence of homelessness;

however, the approach it takes towards addressing the issue sheds light on differing beliefs regarding its etiology. Namely, unlike what has been articulated by God's Mission, and somewhat by Welcome All Mission, Pastor Kirkpatrick does not vocalize a religious or spiritual dimension to recovery from a state of homelessness. Transformation from a state of poverty to a state of economic self-sufficiency is a secular one that involves locating and naming the systemic root issue pertaining to one's situation, and addressing that issue directly. It does not require a deeper delve into the individual's potentially broken spiritual self; one does not need to enter into a transactional relationship with Christ and become a Christian in order to be lifted out of a cycle of poverty. Faith in God is not emphasized as a means for obtaining initial or continued prosperity in the form of material improvements. Although there is clearly no spiritual transaction dictated by Bryn Mawr Presbyterian as necessary for obtaining a material transformation in life circumstances, this clearly does not mean that faith plays no role in the motivation behind involvement in outreach initiatives; likely, its faith is a major force that propels the church to provide service through the organizations it partners with. Yet, unlike for some other FBOs, for Bryn Mawr Presbyterian, the calling of faith does not require that outreach work brings others into its own faith, or even outwardly encourage the transition to a Christian lifestyle as a means of sustaining oneself on Earth and after death.

Similarly, Rising Hope Mission Church in Alexandria, Virginia, works to reject the evil of wealth inequality and approaches the issue of homelessness from the standpoint that it is a major systemic problem that must be addressed secularly and at a structural level. Rising Hope is a Methodist Mission Church whose membership consists both of individuals who are experiencing poverty and homelessness, and those who are not. The predominant aspiration of the church, according to Pastor Kameron Wilds, is to love everyone, include everyone, and

celebrate life. The existence and functioning of the congregation aspires to stand as an answer to the question of what it looks like to live so that the divisions between people on account of socioeconomic status are blurred. To Rising Hope, this kind of congregational body reflects Christ's true mission for the world to love one's neighbor. Although many of Rising Hope's members are homeless, the church more broadly focuses their role on the even larger issue of systemic poverty, in which the issue of homelessness is included, and works to address it at the level of policy. When I asked Pastor Wilds what tends to cause a person to become homeless, he responded that homelessness, "is often not to the fault of the individual [sic]." Rather, a person's situation must be evaluated holistically in order to understand what brought them into a life of homelessness. What was the person's childhood like? What was their education like? What resources were, or were not, available to them? Pastor Wild's analysis of the root causes of homelessness defines it as a systematic problem. He does not explicitly say that homelessness is *never* in any way to the fault of the individual, therefore avoiding making an entirely blanket statement that would imply that homeless folks do not have the cultural capital to ever make a decision that might contribute to a state of homelessness.

Yet it is clear from his analysis that his congregation's vision of homelessness as a whole is not one that actively considers or suspects individual failings, either religious or moral, to be a substantial component of its existence. Pastor Wilds' discussion of mending policy as the most effective means of combating homelessness emphasizes that point even further. "If you *just* focus on getting a man or a woman off of the street, you miss the systemic roots of poverty," he said, referring to the common approach to fighting homelessness by placing a bandage on a far too deep societal wound. Rather, in addition to serving homeless men and women on an individual level, Rising Hope believes that it is also crucial to attack the issue of homelessness from the

angle of policy change advocacy. “Policy is what affects people’s lives. If you can’t fix policy, you can’t fix homelessness,” Pastor Wilds said. He then gave an example of proposed additional lanes to a highway in Alexandria that would encroach upon a community of mobile homes. Expanding the highway would increase the likelihood that the people within that community of mobile homes would become homeless, if they were unable to have a place to fit their mobile homes in the area. Therefore, it was important to oppose the proposed expansion in light of this, Pastor Wilds said, and find another way to expand travel options for vehicles.

Rather than focusing on the needed transformation of individuals, Rising Hope emphasizes a much different, yet extremely needed, societal transformation on the level of policy that will allow for unhoused folks to gain and maintain access to the resources they need in order to be financially self-sufficient. This societal transformation is inherently religious and spiritual for Rising Hope, as it would place society in closer alignment to Christ’s articulated mission in the world. Yet, the nature of the transformation is drastically different from those individual transformations deemed necessary by certain other faith-based organizations, as well as where responsibility for the initiation of these transformations is placed. This serves to highlight the differences in understanding between Christian social-services organizations regarding the purpose and mission of Jesus in the world. Organizational beliefs and frameworks for Bryn Mawr Presbyterian and Rising Hope Mission Church reflect an understanding of Christ most similar to Jesus as His values and mission are articulated in the Book of Luke chapter four. The Jesus of Luke has come to earth to right societal inequalities and advocate for a world where those who are disadvantaged can be freed from their various socioeconomic bonds. The “liberationist” Jesus of Luke has come to earth to bring His Kingdom to earth, of which freedom and equality are at the forefront. However, organizations like God’s Mission and Welcome All

Mission express an understanding of a Christ who came to earth to express an opportunity for all people to obtain personal salvation, on an individual basis, through belief in Christ. At the forefront of this articulation of Christ is the importance of faith resulting in real and personal consequences for each individual. This is expressed perhaps no better than John 3:16, which articulates the mission of Jesus as providing this individualized opportunity in stating that, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” For organizations like God’s Mission and Welcome All Mission, this individualized framework for giving and receiving is understood to be the basis by which people also receive financial or material blessings on earth.

It is also interesting to note the ways in which understandings of the root causes and needed interventions regarding the issue of homelessness can possibly be drawn along denominational lines. God's Mission and Welcome All Mission, both of which identify as evangelical organizations, entertain the concept of individual responsibility as implicated in homelessness, and a needed spiritual transformation as a response to this, albeit to clear varying degrees. Bryn Mawr Presbyterian’s outreach initiatives, along with Rising Hope Mission Church, reject this notion and instead focus solely on bringing structural systems of oppression more into line with the vision and teachings of Jesus in order to achieve a more egalitarian society. Although this research points to this division, it surely is far from standing as broad enough in order to assert this denominational line of difference with a substantial level of confidence.

Understanding the various ways and degrees to which prosperity thought, or lack thereof, informs the operational frameworks of faith-based social services organizations is important because it allows us to evaluate the potential psychological and personal effects that differing frameworks may have on the individuals they serve, thus affecting, or even defining, the

relationship between organization and client. I turn to this discussion in the next and final section of this thesis.

Section 3: Personal and Psychological Implications for Homeless Individuals of Theological Frameworks Adopted by FBOs

Thus far, this thesis has sought to examine the ways in which Christian faith-based social services organizations in the United States understand the root causes of homelessness. To what extent has prosperity thought filtered into the operational frameworks of faith-based social services organizations, and in what ways? The responses to these inquiries that have been discussed are nuanced, and reflect the vast array of religious, cultural, and personal factors that contribute to an individual's outlook regarding their own situation, or an organization's outlook regarding the situations of others.

The short answer is: yes, to some extent, prosperity theology has filtered into the frameworks of faith-based social services organizations, particularly those that self-describe as “evangelical” Christian organizations. However, as is seen with God's Mission and Welcome All Mission, no two “evangelical” organizations incorporate prosperity thought into their frameworks to the same extent, or in the same ways. Additionally, the seeming lack of incorporated prosperity thought into other faith-based organizations points to the limitations of prosperity theology's influence within the current landscape of American Christian social services organizations.

The overarching reason for taking an interest in the differences in theological frameworks for faith-based social services organizations is to better understand the potential personal, psychological, and social effects on homeless persons when they seek assistance from an FBO that does or does not incorporate prosperity thought into its framework. How are these effects exacerbated or mitigated depending upon the attitudes and understandings that are already

currently held by the unhoused person; and finally, what are the implications of this discussion for FBOs and their potential donors and supporters?

I argue that incorporating prosperity thought into an organization's framework, as well as refraining from doing so, have differing implications for the individual well-being of homeless persons utilizing services from the organization. FBOs that do not incorporate prosperity thought into their frameworks are likely not to, at least through a religious lens, further any senses of guilt or shame that homeless people might experience on account of their homelessness. FBOs that do have prosperity thought somewhat incorporated into their frameworks of operation are more likely to add to these potentially present senses of guilt or shame; however, the frameworks of faith offered by prosperity rhetoric, if accepted and adopted by an individual, may lead to a greater sense of comfort and peace within a person, as well as a greater sense of control regarding their prospects for the future. Some individuals who have received services from these organizations have reported highly positive experiences, and an overall sense of having their life path altered for the better because of the frameworks of faith they have accepted from the teachings of these organizations. Therefore, although it can be fairly argued that the roots, and some of the current practices, of prosperity thought-incorporative FBOs are problematic, before rendering these organizations as having an entirely negative societal presence, I argue that it is also important not to dismiss the narratives of lived experiences from people who have found religious and spiritual resources from these organizations. Essentially, rather than deeming prosperity-based FBOs as having a wholly positive or negative societal effect, I offer an alternative view situated in the nuance of what it means to positively or negatively affect individuals, and what it means to positively or negatively affect society at large.

One implication of the operation of faith-based organizations such as God's Mission and Welcome All Mission that incorporate prosperity theology into their frameworks, at least to some extent, is that they are more likely to further a potential sense of internalized guilt or shame that a homeless person might experience on account of being homeless. Christian narratives surrounding the relationship between the devil and human capacity for sin that are adopted and furthered by these kinds of organizations implicate individuals in their own homelessness. Although these narratives do not point to individuals as being fully responsible for their committing of sin, they do not excuse individuals from responsibility for it. The devil is understood to act on humanity as a powerful external force, leading individuals to be tempted by sin. However, it is the sinful nature of individual persons that enables the devil to have power over them, and prevents a person from being able to adequately resist its influence. Christian organizational rhetoric surrounding the vulnerability of human beings to the workings of the devil due to their sinful nature implies the responsibility a person must therefore ultimately assume for their situation. It is important to recognize that not all homeless individuals entering into a working relationship with an FBO of this variety will have a high level of internalized shame or guilt regarding their circumstances. Some unhoused people point to external circumstances as the root causes of their poverty without leaving as much room for individual implication. However, some people might place a higher level of blame on their own actions, and reference systemic problems mapped onto their lives to a lesser extent. All of this emphasizes that unhoused persons enter into a relationship with FBOs with a wide spectrum of attitudes regarding how they came to be in their current circumstances.

For persons that enter into these relationships with an outlook that focuses on their own responsibility for their circumstances, a likely effect is that the Christian narratives of Satanic

influence and sin touted by the organization will further affirm internalized feelings of guilt and shame. These narratives work to take often nearly inarticulate, deeply embedded feelings of guilt and shame and package them into a worldview that allows these feelings to be validated and make sense to their holders in a religious context. It provides people with an opportunity to discuss these feelings openly in relation to the forms of sin and Satanic influence that have, according to this viewpoint, brought them to be where they currently are. Fundamentally, adoption of this brand of Christian narrative by a person experiencing poverty and homelessness provides an opportunity for very real and potentially deeply embedded sentiments to be put in the context of a religious worldview that seeks to provide people with the spiritual resources needed to attain a dignified and positive existence, most notably in the form of earned eternal life through salvation. Rather than working to deconstruct these feelings, the recognition of one's own human fragility, as exemplified by sin, is a necessary component in a coherent belief system: a belief system that prosperity thought-inclusive FBOs hope and believe will be the vehicle that will bring individuals spiritual, and thereby material, prosperity.

Despite this, it is important to recognize that not all unhoused persons who receive services from these kinds of FBOs will necessarily adopt the organization's religious teachings. It would make sense that people who have a higher level of internalized shame or guilt would be more likely to gravitate to a theology that affirms these feelings and places them within a coherent system designed to bring a person happiness on earth and eternal life. Yet, for example, if a person for some reason has a disinclination to adoption of religious principles due to their view of religion or Christianity in general, even if that person also had internalized feelings of guilt and shame, they would probably be less likely to willingly place those feelings into a religious framework, even if that framework promised to work to their advantage.

Additionally, the brand of Christian narrative regarding experiences of poverty centered around sin and the influence of the devil has a likely second major implication for the lives of unhoused persons utilizing services provided by prosperity-inclusive FBOs: an increased sense of comfort and control regarding one's own future provided by the theology that these FBOs encourage people to accept, adopt, and apply to their own lives. As stated before, FBOs advance frameworks of belief to those they assist because it is the organizations' foundational belief that living by their system of faith will produce material and spiritual prosperity for its adherents; therefore, these faith frameworks are offered to the people FBOs assist because, to the FBOs, it is in the best interest of these individuals. The frameworks offer a transactional relationship with God through the acceptance of Jesus Christ as savior and protector. Faith in Christ acts as the key that will grant persons unending access to the grace of God on Earth. Someone obtains access to this grace through the affirmation of their own responsibility regarding their circumstances, as this is implicated in recognizing one's need to accept Christ as their savior from their own sin. Once someone declares this devotion to themselves and to God, they are brought into an ongoing working relationship with Him that is controlled solely by the faith of the individual. God promises to bless those that are faithful to Him with material stability and the absence of extreme suffering, according to the theology asserted by John Larson of God's Mission¹⁵, among others.

Therefore, through Christ, a person is placed right at the helm of the ship of their life, given the only substantial tool necessary to keep it on course and protect it from any dangers: faith. An individual cannot directly determine their circumstances through the world through their own will, but God can do so through His. Faith becomes an intermediary between the

¹⁵ "The beautiful thing is...God blesses His children. God gives favor to those that are in Christ...Be free today in Christ. Even if we go through trials that we have caused in our own lives, know that God causes everything to work out for good for those that have been called, justified, and redeemed by Christ Jesus."

desires of a human being and the fulfillment of promise by an omnipotent God. Persons who accept this theological framework can go on to lead their lives with the fundamental belief that they have the power, through the working of God to whom they are faithful, to shape their own presents and futures. Adherence to this framework renders any sense of helplessness illogical. If someone still finds themselves to be in a less than desirable position after accepting this framework, they know that there is a way to resolve their struggles, and there is a path towards fulfilling their desires. Looking inside oneself and correcting any perceived deficiencies in personal faith allows one to step back onto this path. In this way, people have a methodology to achieving happiness, a constant framework for understanding why their circumstances are bountiful, lacking, or somewhere between the two. A constant sense of helplessness or hopelessness that might accompany the outlook that the world operates through systems of oppression and chance, is no longer necessary, or even valid.

Along with this element of control comes a likely element of comfort in knowing that one has given in to the influence of the devil through sin because of one's human nature rather than one's individual nature. All human beings are susceptible to sin, and do sin, according to this theology. And all human beings can be redeemed through acceptance of, and faith in, Jesus Christ. One has fallen into less than desirable circumstances because of their imperfect nature and ability to sin, yet it is a universal nature that was pre-determined for them in the consequences of humanity's fall from grace in Eden, according to interpretations of Genesis 2-3. So even though one allows for sin to overtake them because of their nature, their nature is not entirely their fault; it is simply something that must be recognized and addressed through humbly coming to Christ.

FBOs that do not incorporate this same theological framework into their approaches towards service, I argue, do not create these same psychological and personal effects for those who receive services from them. These FBOs seek to empower those they serve by deconstructing potentially deeply embedded feelings of guilt and shame through mental health services and other offered services. They do not affirm personal feelings related to guilt and shame as essential, or even helpful, in the way that prosperity thought-inclusive FBOs do, in achieving happiness, peace, and prosperity on earth. I also argue that FBOs that do not incorporate prosperity thought into their organizational structures cannot offer the same kind of *absolute* comfort or sense of control that a prosperity thought-inclusive FBO may be able to offer; although, the former certainly work to provide comfort and peace to those they serve in the capacities that they feel they are ethically able to within their own structures of operation.

Organizations like Bryn Mawr Presbyterian's outreach and Rising Hope Mission Church cannot, with a good conscience, affirm individual feelings of guilt and shame experienced by homeless folks. Doing so would essentially clash with their greater frameworks of understanding regarding larger social issues. For organizations such as these, people experiencing homelessness cannot be held responsible in any meaningful way for actions they have taken that may have contributed to their current state of homelessness. Although wider society may deem these actions to be personal choices that imply some degree of individual culpability, to organizations such as these, such actions can and should all be traced back to larger systemic issues that have rendered certain actions and patterns of behavior to be far less escapable routes for poor and underserved people. An acknowledgement of sin and the imperfect nature of the world still are relevant within their frameworks, but sin is understood to manifest meaningfully as structural inequality. According to this viewpoint, the vast majority of actions at the individual level are

byproducts of this larger expression of the world's corruption, and should be treated as such. Therefore, they are not the focus of intervention; rather, the larger corruption is. Even at the level of individual intervention, focus is placed on combating structural oppression through physical, psychological, and economic empowerment.

Due to this larger understanding of sin manifesting meaningfully in the structures of the world rather than in the actions of individuals trapped inside of them, FBOs that are non-inclusive of prosperity thinking cannot provide the same form of absolute comfort, or a sense of control over one's impending circumstances. There is simply not the same understanding present within these organizations of a person's ability to engineer their prosperous own fate through submission to God's will through the acceptance of Christ as savior. One cannot fix their world through personal faith. Rather, mending inequality and suffering begins with a different kind of faith, a faith that involves recognizing Christ's articulated mission in the world to be the catalyzation of an egalitarian society, and having the drive to aim to bring that articulated mission into reality. In this way, organizations that do operate with elements of prosperity thought can offer their clients something that non-prosperity FBOs cannot: a blueprint for success, a sense of absolute control over one's future. This is not to say that non-prosperity inclined FBOs cannot or do not offer comfort and peace to those who may seek it. However, it takes the form of overt efforts to recognize and affirm the dignity and humanity of those who are often dehumanized by society at large, through approaches to social interaction with marginalized groups and through the offering of services designed to restore dignity and agency to those struggling. Nonetheless, they cannot promise clients that the services that they provide will prevent them from ever finding themselves in a position of need again.

I consider the psychological and personal effects on clients of both kinds of organizations because they are relevant to a larger discussion surrounding the ethicality of the existence of organizations that operate within a prosperity thought-inclusive framework. First, it is important to acknowledge the fair argument that FBOs that operate within prosperity frameworks should be considered inherently problematic, or with troublesome roots. From a secular standpoint, which is the standpoint I have kept in undergoing this project, structural oppression, including structural racism, widespread homophobia and transphobia, and pronounced wealth inequality are elements of modern American society that can be traced back to the process of colonization of what is now known as North America: widespread genocide of Indigenous peoples, the implementation of a capitalist economic system and the institution of American slavery, and the erasure of queer and trans identities from understood societal norms. Stating what is the obvious to many, these developments surrounding the process of American colonization have left severe ongoing effects for twenty-first century American society in terms of disparities related to safety and access to resources and services such as housing, education, and healthcare for People of Color, queer and trans folks, and folks with lower socio-economic statuses, among others.

I discuss these somewhat obvious American histories only to argue that prosperity-inclusive FBOs largely ignore, circumvent, or undermine these American histories in their construction of narratives surrounding the existence of poverty and homelessness. Instead, people placed in marginalized positions due to the identities they hold are given a narrative of their own inadequacy that must be accepted in order to move forward into a more prosperous and dignified life. This seems somewhat akin to stripping a person naked, blaming them for their nakedness, and demanding them to repent before returning their clothes. The construction of narratives of personal sin and individual responsibility to explain a structural evil such as

widespread homelessness place these kinds of FBOs under the umbrella of manifestations of an American white savior complex. Largely, as seen with God's Mission and Welcome All Mission, these organizations are run predominantly by white men, and most staff members identify as white. Meanwhile, they predominantly serve folks of Color, and a major condition of that service is that those individuals accept, or at least engage with, a religious framework that fails to fully and properly acknowledge the histories whose trickle-down effects have strongly contributed to the positions people currently find themselves in. These characteristics belonging to many prosperity-inclusive FBOs would seem enough to write them off entirely as an acceptable form of societal intervention for structural issues such as homelessness.

However, this solution is too easy, and could even be problematic in and of itself. Personal histories of individuals such as Mr. Goodville from God's Mission create counter arguments for the understandable temptation to deem prosperity-inclusive FBOs to be entirely problematic; on the contrary, lived experiences of individuals who have found refuge in these kinds of organizations critique this argument without fully contradicting it. These lived experiences instead highlight how positive tangible results can sit messily alongside troublesome roots within an organizational framework. They coexist without necessarily invalidating the other. Mr. Goodville's story is a prime example. He spoke to me at length regarding the daily struggles with addiction that he faced before eventually being referred to God's Mission by someone in his life who became worried about him. His struggles with alcohol addiction dictated the course of his daily life before that moment; his desire to drink was overwhelming, and prevented him from properly attending to the responsibilities in his life, as well as to his own well-being. After restoring his relationship with Christ and becoming a graduate of the New Life Program that God's Mission offers, he told me that he has absolutely no desire to drink. He is

able to properly care for himself and has restored meaningful relationships in his life because of what God has given him through the work of the people at God's Mission.

Despite what anyone might articulate regarding the harmful nature of the roots of organizations such as God's Mission, it is entirely clear that Mr. Goodville's experiences with the organization have produced tangible, positive results in his life. He is no longer an alcoholic. He is employed. He is able to care for himself, has become a man of deep faith, has meaningful relationships with others, and overall has a life he considers to be far more fulfilling than his previous state of being. Would invalidating his own personal truth by outright rejecting organizations like God's Mission accomplish anything positive in the way of affirming the dignity and agency of marginalized folks, particularly if conducted through a scholarly lens of privilege? This is why I believe it is essential to leave room for an understanding of the stark goodness that is produced by these organizations, even if they stem from problematic roots and contain elements that are harmful. Attitudes rendered messy towards these varieties of FBOs are therefore perhaps more ethical than a complete rejection of them. Otherwise, people like Mr. Goodville are at risk of being erased by others who have likely enjoyed privileges that he has been unable to.

Therefore, I want to make it abundantly clear that my aim is not to call out or undermine the work of any one particular organization. My objective is to bring to light two major operational frameworks, that which is inclusive of prosperity thought, and that which rejects it, to highlight the ways in which Christian FBOs are vastly different from one another in their approaches to serving those experiencing homelessness. This would serve to dispel the notion that FBOs operate as six of one, half a dozen the other. Of course, there are similarities between prosperity-inclusive and non prosperity-inclusive FBOs. Most prominently, each of the

organizations I spoke with emphasized their core mission to affirm the dignity and worth of those they serve. However, as I hope I have made clear throughout this discussion, approaches to doing this mission justice manifest differently according to the theological framework that an organization bases itself in.

Highlighting these differences is perhaps most relevant for supporters of various Christian FBOs, particularly for the individual and organizational monetary donors whose financial contributions keep FBOs in operation. Understanding the theological framework in which various organizations operate allows donors to have more information before choosing which FBOs to impart their resources on, and which to withhold resources from. My project aims to offer no concrete advice as to which organizations donors should or should not support. After all, these efforts would be futile, as donors, with proper information, will support organizations according to their own belief systems. For example, Evangelical Christian foundations or prominent Evangelical individuals would likely feel comfortable, or even enthusiastic, supporting prosperity-inclusive organizations. Highlighting the prosperity-inclusive nature of these organizations would do nothing to deter funds from individuals or foundations who articulate their beliefs within the same theological framework as these organizations. The purpose of the analysis I have done throughout this project, therefore, is to highlight major organizational differences to emphasize the untruth in the idea that Christian FBOs operate in a similar fashion, and to offer an alternative element of an organization, their theological framework, as important to research before contributing funds in addition to the scope and effectiveness of the services that an organization provides.

Lastly, I acknowledge the problematic nature of the current reality that wealthy individuals and foundations largely determine, through their funding choices, the nature and

variety of faith-based social services that are made available to individuals experiencing poverty and homelessness, but I recognize this as a current unfortunate reality, nonetheless. Hopefully, by having more information as to the differences in operational frameworks within the category of Christian FBOs, these donors will at least have more resources to make fully informed decisions as to where their monetary resources will go. This way, donors can aim to fund organizations that they truly believe are fully equipped to aid in restoring senses of dignity and belonging to underserved individuals.

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