

A Public Fast

Introduction

A Public Fast is a silent witness that religious and moral values need to be upheld. Its action is quiet, personal, peaceful, dignified, and nonviolent. It doesn't argue with people. It is ongoing and unrelenting. A Public Fast needs only one person to make the witness.

Short History

One month in 2001, the executive director of Loaves & Fishes reported to the board about his efforts to secure a year-round shelter for homeless women and children. Every month thereafter, he faithfully reported the promises of the county staff to remedy the situation. He relayed to the board in great detail the results of his meetings with county officials, their plans, and their promised deadlines. Finally, in a stunning development, board members themselves heard county staff testify before the county board of supervisors that there was no need for such an emergency shelter; there was already enough shelter. In fact, they testified, no women or children were currently without shelter. A stunning development because it was not true!

One month in early 2002, the board of directors agreed that for the sake of homeless women and children, some direct and very public action needed to be taken to secure emergency overnight shelter. One of the senior members, schooled in advocacy during the 1960's, proposed a Public Fast, and so it was decided.

Swift feedback came back from county staff, the very same ones who testified that there was enough shelter: don't bother, it won't do any good, it's water off a duck's back, don't waste your time, county supervisors never respond to direct action from advocates.

No matter. Starting in Holy Week of 2002, Loaves & Fishes began a Public Fast in the posh waiting room of the Sacramento county board of supervisors. Taking turns, each board member faithfully fasted every day, and many others from the community at large joined in. In October of that same year, barely

five months after the start of the Public Fast, the supervisors voted to open an emergency shelter for homeless women and children.

What Changed?

The county government building in downtown Sacramento is six stories high and covers an entire city block; it has operated according to its own rhythm for more than 20 years. A county government building can operate only when it is business as usual. In truth, this is what government does: operate the usual business as usual.

But the Public Fast altered ever so slightly the rhythm of the county building. Every person at every desk on every floor was conscious of the alteration in the rhythm of the building, and so it was not business as usual. The Public Fast made it just a little more difficult than usual to do the usual business. Every county employee or member of the general public who walked into the supervisors' chambers was immediately aware that the county was not doing business as usual. But what could the supervisors do about it?

The supervisors are the people in charge; they have the final say; they have the power. And yet, in the face of the Public Fast, they were powerless. They could not arrest those fasting; they could not make the fasters go away; they could not afford even to be rude. They could only pretend to ignore the Public Fast, and that is what changed the rhythm and broke the status quo. It was no longer business as usual and doing the usual business. Their impotence reverberated throughout the entire county complex.

The Result

Water off a duck's back or not, the supervisors found a way to stop the Public Fast. They gave Loaves & Fishes what it wanted. Bittersweet, to be sure, but for the first time in Sacramento, homeless women and children were provided year-round emergency shelter.

A Scriptural Lesson

The Public Fast is the scriptural knock on the door in the middle of the night at the home of the judge. Everything is locked up and secure. He does not

have to answer the door. He says to himself, "I won't answer the door." The knocking persists. He shouts through the window, "Go away! I won't answer the door." Finally, because the knocking will not cease, he opens the door to deal with the supplicant.

Thanks to all who participated in the Public Fast, knocking on the door of the county supervisors.

Remember the lessons of the Public Fast; never forget its power.

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