



P.O. Box 5021, 59403-5021

October 26, 2021

Pastor Rick Brown  
First Baptist Church  
525 2<sup>Nd</sup> Avenue North  
Great Falls, MT 59401

Re: Church Meeting and Homeless/Transient Concerns

Dear Pastor Rick and Church Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to visit with you, church and community members on Monday, October 11, 2021.

I heard your frustrations and safety concerns about homeless/transient behavior in the downtown. More specifically, participant concerns about church member/employee safety, vandalism, drug use, and squatting on church property.

When I left the meeting, I advised the group that I would do three things: 1) Respond to your concerns in writing 2) Meet with Pastor Wakeley 3) and potentially hold a follow-up meeting, with the appropriate people.

I'll broadly summarize the concerns I heard from meeting participants:

- Safety concerns – Access to/from and use of the church property for congregants and staff
- Vandalism – Damage to the building, grounds, windows, including spray painting
- Squatting – Homeless/transient sleeping, dumping trash, urinating or defecating on the property
- Drug use – Associated behaviors including leaving used needles on the property
- Behavior – Homeless/transient persons attempting to access the building or engage church members for panhandling purposes or services

After everyone had an opportunity to speak at the meeting, I asked for short/long term ideas and solutions to address concerns. I wanted to better understand what the attendees expected of the City.

Here's what I heard:

- Church members and staff want to access the church and feel safe entering/leaving and using the facility.
- The church wants to have better communication with City government to know what is going on with homeless/transient issues and criminal behavior in the downtown.
- The homeless/transients are punished for crimes.
- The homeless/transients are held accountable for their behavior and demonstrate personal responsibility.
- That city officials are held accountable for their response to the church's concerns.
- That homeless/transient people are removed from the church property and cited for trespass.
- Organizations and churches should stop "helping and enabling them".
- The church would like direction on what to do about the problem.
- The homeless/transients should be "put to work" on a downtown cleanup crew. Specifically, "the City" needs to put the homeless/transients to work.
- The homeless/transients need to be punished when they violate the law.
- "They need to be kept out of my back yard".
- Church members need to get more involved in city government.
- The City needs more police, more downtown police presence, and a foot beat officer.
- The City needs to create a local tax for a treatment facility or send them to treatment.
- When laws are violated, the homeless/transients should be incarcerated.
- Make them work to eat – hit the basics.
- "Place them on a bus and send them to Nancy Pelosi's house."
- Provide them a temporary address so they can secure jobs. Have a "three strike, you're out" policy for rehabilitation programs.

Participants also acknowledged the following challenges:

- It's hard to find balance with providing services and enabling homeless/transient population
- The county jail is full
- Homelessness, transiency and poverty are broader societal problems; but they are a community wide issue
- Keeping homeless/transient population "accountable" over a long period of time

I spoke with Reverend Wakeley on October 12, 2021 and visited with him in person on October 18, 2021. He shared in detail, his homeless/transient ministry vision. I also encouraged him to contact you directly. Personally, I think it's important that you and your members meet with him. I am surprised that a meeting had not yet occurred to share concerns.

I am not going to speak for Reverend Wakeley, but I will relay some of what he shared with me about his future plans. Reverend Wakeley believes he is following the beliefs/tenets of his faith by reaching out to the homeless/transient population. He desires to create a community for this group so that they may be in a better position to address mental health, addiction, employment

and housing challenges. Reverend Wakeley does not permit alcohol or drug use on the church property. When he observes inappropriate behavior or substance abuse, he asks them to leave. In some cases he has criminally trespassed violators.

Reverend Wakeley fully plans to continue welcoming the homeless/transient population to the church and expand services. The homeless/transients are encouraged and welcome to stay on the property, visit with each other, and take advantage of food offerings (via St. Vincent's) and other services as they become available. He believes that the City's efforts to address homelessness/transient issues has failed.

Before I address what the City of Great Falls can do, I want to make a few general observations. Great Falls has a homeless/transient population like many communities around the country. Homelessness/transiency is a complex societal problem that has persisted through ages. It is a difficult problem that will not be solved by government alone. In my opinion, the most effective way to manage homeless/transiency is through partnerships between nonprofits and governmental entities.

The homelessness/transients of Great Falls are already served by a variety of churches, ministries, and non-governmental organizations. The homeless/transients use several different locations around the downtown area to create small (and sometimes large) encampments. Some encampments are found under bridge abutments, forested areas of city parks, and in the bushes along the Missouri river. Some groups have been removed from these areas only to relocate in another. During frigid seasons, the homeless/transient population declines, but many find a way to survive in Montana's winter.

You may be interested to know that there are also a significant number of homeless/transient students in Great Falls. Although less visible, the School District has been trying to address this so that homeless/transient kids can finish school. Unfortunately, some end up on the street and do not graduate from high school.

In order for the City of Great Falls to address the concerns of your church, residents, and businesses proximate to the downtown, and more specifically the United Methodist Church, I need to briefly explain the City's role in the process and more specifically, educate concerned parties about what the City can and cannot do within its jurisdictional authority.

To help with this discussion, I am going to attach initial responses to all the suggestions and comments I heard during the meeting (see Attachment #1). The responses are only from me, the city manager, and may not reflect positions of the City Commission or area Judicial Officers.

I visited with the Great Falls Police Department about your concerns. They have outlined for me several action steps they intend to pursue to address concerns in the downtown. These actions include:

1. Education and Outreach – GFPD will work with community members to identify downtown crime goals and determine needed resources to achieve those goals.

2. GFPD will implement a Trespass Enforcement Program in the downtown area with businesses and residences in order to effectively deal with the vagrancy issues.
3. GFD and community partners will work together to address addiction and mental health treatment options for repeat violators.
4. Great Falls Municipal Court will develop tracking program for repeated violators (and to the extent allowed) direct these individuals to appropriate addiction/mental health courts or appropriate criminal justice sanctions.
5. The City will explore with Cascade County Detention Center guaranteed bed space for sanctions for repeat utilizers.
6. City will expand mental health resources partnerships with Gateway Recovery, Rocky Mountain Treatment, Alluvion, The Center for Mental Health, Benefis and Great Falls Clinic.
7. City is seeking to provide an in house care coordinator, mental health specialist and mental health police officer. An occupational therapist intern will also be assisting in the winter and spring of 2022.

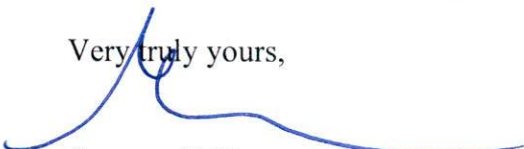
Some these efforts will take time to develop and implement. They may also be subject to funding availability. In the short term, the church may want to consider taking the following actions:

- Continue to report to GFPD all criminal incidents
- Ask a member of the GFPD to present safety information to church members
- Seek property security advice from GFPD or other professional security service providers
- Meet with other policy influencers like the local state delegation representatives to understand changes in the law and impact to the community
- Review the Crime task force report and provide the City Commission with comments

I am also willing to come to your church and provide a presentation on civic engagement. The presentation lasts about one hour. I could present on a Sunday, after a service.

Please let me know if you would like to hold a follow-up forum. I'll ask you to work out a date, time, and specifics with Krista Artis, Executive Secretary (455-8450).

Very truly yours,



Gregory T. Doyon  
City Manager

Cc: City Commission  
Jeff Newton, Police Chief  
Lanni Klasner, Communications Specialist

## **Attachment #1**

**Note:** The responses are only from the city manager and may not reflect positions of the City Commission or area Judicial Officers (Judges).

**Comment:** Church members and staff want to access the church and feel safe entering/leaving and using the facility.

**Response:** Agreed. The City wants to maintain a safe environment for citizens and has a responsibility to do this within its means.

**Comment:** The church wants to have better communication with City government to know what is going on with homeless/transient issues and criminal behavior in the downtown.

**Response:** Here are some resources to help members be more connected with local government:

- Connectivity options with the City are available online – <https://greatfallsmt.net/>
- Participate in Great Falls City Commission Meetings – Held on the first and third Tuesdays – <https://greatfallsmt.net/citycommission>
- Great Falls Neighborhood Councils – <https://greatfallsmt.net/neighborhoodcouncils>
- Elected City Commissioners and appointed staff are available to meet in person by request.

**Comment:** The homeless/transients are punished for crimes.

**Response:** The City's responsibility includes legislative (policy/ordinances) and executive (enforcement). The judicial branch (elected municipal court judge) is independent and is the responsible entity for sentencing convicted persons of crimes.

**Comment:** The homeless/transients are held accountable for their behavior and demonstrate personal responsibility.

**Response:** The City has a responsibility for enforcement of laws. When the police are notified of a crime they are called to investigate and if appropriate, they will charge violators. The City cannot force anyone to "demonstrate personal responsibility".

**Comment:** That city officials are held accountable for their response to the church's concerns.

**Response:** The City Commissioners are responsible for setting policy. They are elected and serve four year terms. The Mayor serves a two year term and votes like a commissioner. The residents hold elected officials accountable by electing them (or not). The city manager is appointed by the City Commission and is the Commission's only employee. The city manager is responsible for enforcing policies set by the Commission. All city employees report to the city manager, not the City Commission. The city manager reports to and is accountable to the City Commission.

**Comment:** That homeless/transient people are removed from the church (First Baptist) property and cited for trespass.

**Response:** Pastor Brown mentioned this during the visit that the church requested that Great Falls Police Department cite trespassers. I would just encourage the church to visit and get that process in writing with GFPD.

**Comment:** Organizations and churches should stop “helping and enabling them”.

**Response:** The concern appears that the Methodist Church’s outreach ministry is attracting homeless/transients to their facility and as a result, the homeless/transients are not being helped but being enabled. There is nothing illegal about the church’s program and there will always be debate about the best way to serve the impoverished, mentally ill, drug addicts, and homeless/transients. The Methodist Church believes that are providing a service and building a community.

**Comment:** The church would like direction on what to do about the problem.

**Response:** Immediate actions may include: 1) Meeting with Reverend Wakeley to express concerns. 2) Reporting criminal behavior to GFPD. 3) Utilizing available resources to potentially identify crime deterrence features around the church. Long Term actions may include: 1) Working with other downtown organizations to address your concerns, including the Neighborhood Council 2) Following and potentially supporting City Commission policy changes that would help address the problem

**Comment:** The homeless/transients should be “put to work” on a downtown cleanup crew. Specifically, “the City” needs to put the homeless/transients to work.

**Response:** The City does not have a program to facilitate this nor does it have funds in this year’s budget to create a program. The City cannot force people to work.

**Comment:** The homeless/transients need to be punished when they violate the law.

**Response:** No disagreement, but they also need access to treatment (when appropriate) to break addiction or mental health cycles that lead to homelessness, transiency or criminal behavior.

**Comment:** “They need to be kept out of my back yard”.

**Response:** Please call GFPD when people trespass on your property.

**Comment:** Church members need to get more involved in city government.

**Response:** Agreed. Here are some ways for members to become more involved:

- Connectivity options with the City are available online – <https://greatfallsmt.net/>
- Participate in Great Falls City Commission Meetings – Held on the first and third Tuesdays – <https://greatfallsmt.net/citycommission>
- Great Falls Neighborhood Councils – <https://greatfallsmt.net/neighborhoodcouncils>
- Boards and Commissions: <https://greatfallsmt.net/boc/current-board-and-commission-openings>

**Comment:** The City needs more police, more downtown police presence, and a foot beat officer.

**Response:** Please review the recent recommendations of the Great Falls Crime Task Force which includes increased staffing recommendations. The Great Falls City Commission will be reviewing the recommendation at its November 2, 2021 Work Session at 5:30PM. Meetings are currently virtual so residents can watch on City 190 (cable channel) or online.

<https://greatfallsmt.net/citycommission/great-falls-crime-task-force>

**Comment:** The City needs to create a local tax for a treatment facility or send them to treatment.

**Response:** Under Montana state law, it is not permissible for the City to create a tax specifically for this purpose either to create/operate a treatment facility or to send people to treatment.

**Comment:** When laws are violated, the homeless/transients should be incarcerated.

**Response:** City prosecutors may recommend incarceration of an individual convicted of a crime, but incarceration is really determined by the nature of the crime, the courts, and jail capacity.

**Comment:** Make them work to eat – hit the basics.

**Response:** The City does not have a work program for the homeless/transients as previously stated and cannot force the homeless/transients to take a job.

**Comment:** “Place them on a bus to Nancy Pelosi’s house.”

**Response:** I believe this comment was made out of political frustration and does not need a response.

**Comment:** Provide them a temporary address so they can secure jobs. Have a “three strike, you’re out” policy for rehabilitation programs.

**Response:** Address programs are best administered by nonprofits, agencies and organizations that serve the homeless/transients. Municipal Court may have discretion over requirements of convicted offenders, but that is within the purview of the elected judge.