

# Serving people without homes: Interview with Rev. Violet Little, The Welcome Church

Rev. Violet Little is Pastor and Founder of [The Welcome Church](#), which serves impoverished people on the



streets of Philadelphia.

**Jathan Janove:** Describe your congregation.

**Violet Little:** My congregation is predominately made up of folks who are experiencing homelessness; this is not situational homelessness (losing a home in a fire or some other kind of natural disaster), but is better described as “chronic street homelessness.” We are multi-racial, multi-ethnic, coming from various (or no) religious backgrounds. Some folks have graduate degrees; others did not finish high school. There are also folks from the LGBTQI community. Most are adults with the younger end coming out of foster care, while there are some in their seventies.

**Jathan Janove:** How did your church come to be?

**Violet Little:** Our congregation started in a women’s bathroom in a train station. While traveling into town to study psychoanalysis (I am also a therapist), I would stop in the restroom after getting off the train. There I would see women changing their clothes, washing up, and using the weak hand dryers to dry their hair. One day, I was exceptionally tired. I went into the restroom and my own tired eyes connected with the exhausted eyes of one of the women. That connection left an imprint on my soul. I could not get that image out of my mind.

**Jathan Janove:** What happened next?



**Violet Little:** I started a practice of “unshopping” in the bathrooms. Instead of going into town to shop, I would bring things in a shopping bag. In the style of a personal shopper, I would help the women choose what they wanted. Soon I was learning the names of the women and men in the station and they grew to know me. Eventually, I left my “housed” congregation to offer a place in town where folks could rest, use the bathroom, and have a cup of tea with me. This “Welcome Center” eventually became the “Welcome Church” based on requests of people for worship, Bible Study, and pastoral visits under the bridges, in the parks, or wherever folks “camped.” Our Sunday worship is held outdoors. Inside activities (Teatime, Bible Study, women’s groups, and overnight shelter) are in spaces donated for our use.

**Jathan Janove:** What is your church’s mission?

**Violet Little:** The core mission of The Welcome Church is to proclaim the love and hope of a gracious God to all people, but especially to people experiencing homelessness.

We proclaim through relationship, and especially by offering hospitality. We learn one another’s names; we help name and recognize gifts and strengths in one another and we provide space for those gifts to be offered and received.

My favorite picture of this is our Tuesday table. In the beginning, I brought everything to fill the table — snacks, drinks, etc.; but one day I forgot the treats. All I had to put out was tea. Soon folks began to take things out of their backpacks and it wasn’t long before our table was filled with a divine potluck. I realized that we can’t just say we believe others have gifts to offer; we also need to make room for the gifts to be received. Folks joke about how “we are not a lunch program” — but somehow there is a feast at anything we do!

**Jathan Janove:** How are you supported?

**Violet Little:** We do everything in partnership with others — the City of Philadelphia, outreach workers, Bethesda Project, Project HOME, our many faith communities, and a wonderful unpaid clergy team representing five different denominations. We do not have “volunteers” but everyone is welcome to be part of the community and offer what they will.

**Jathan Janove:** What helps you decide services to provide?

**Violet Little:** In shaping what we do as a church, we ask folks a simple question: “What do you love?” Their responses give us next steps.

For example, a number of women expressed that they really missed cooking, so we began a women’s dinner where the women craft a menu and cook together.

A man expressed how much he loved nursing. We helped him get into a nursing program, which eventually gave him enough confidence to return home to his out-of-state family.

We are strong believers in developing leadership from within.

**Jathan Janove:** For other communities around the country, what lessons would you like them to draw?

**Violet Little:** Several years ago, I sued the City of Philadelphia and its Mayor for placing a ban on the public serving of food. My congregation often depended on outside groups bringing food to the parks. (We won the suit and set precedent.) One reporter referred to me as the “Voice for the Voiceless.” I hated this title. I want others to know that **everyone** has a voice; the key is to become better listeners. How do we become a society that truly listens to the voices of **all** people?

**Author’s Note:** For more information, please contact Rev. Little directly at [vclittle@verizon.net](mailto:vclittle@verizon.net).