



By **BOB REEVES** / *Lincoln Journal Star*; Saturday, Jan 27, 2007

"The trip made me realize how lucky most of us are for having a roof over our heads, food to eat and we even take for granted the vast amount of clothes we have hanging in our closets," said Stephanie Ress, a sophomore from Lincoln.

Ress said she'd long felt that God "was calling me to do something, but I was never really sure what that was." She now feels she's being called to do mission work, perhaps overseas or in her own neighborhood. "This trip made me realize that I do want to do everything that I can to help those who are in need," she said.

**One of the biggest problems facing churches today is a lack of emphasis on helping the poor, said Tyler Artz of Hastings, a student intern with the campus ministry. "Almost every ministry we visited in Omaha is always in need of help, and I'm sure most programs for the at-risk and poor in Lincoln would love help as well," he said. The experience made him "more keenly aware of the problems that face the poor at every level."**

Besides helping in ministries to the homeless, the students visited Release Ministries, which works with inmates at the Douglas County Youth Detention Center, and met with other urban ministry leaders who live and work in Omaha's inner city. They prayed for every youth who was in the detention center awaiting trial and also did a "prayer walk" in a central Omaha neighborhood.

The prayer walk demonstrated a way to reach out to any community through prayer, said Michael Ross, the staff member of Christ for the City who coordinated the weekend. "The concept is reclaiming your neighborhood ... you walk through the neighborhood praying and asking God, 'Is there a part for me to play here?'" he said.

It's a method that has been used very effectively in Latin America, where Christ for the City has many missionaries helping start churches, schools, orphanages and other programs to help people in need. The goal of the Omaha Urban Plunge, he said, is to help people see the opportunities for ministering to people in their own communities.

Church and school groups from Lincoln and other places around the state are invited to participate, he said. Christ for the City hopes to start a similar "plunge" experience in Lincoln, coordinated through the recently established Lincoln office headed by Mark Pomeroy.

Christ for the City has about 180 missionaries in many countries, particularly throughout Latin America, and has recently begun focusing on doing similar work in American cities, Ross said.

Ross owned a political consulting firm and did grass-roots organizing for political campaigns before joining Christ for the City. "I realized I could use those same skills in grassroots organizing to help build Christ's kingdom," he said.

Many of the students who participated said they hope to go into missionary work of some form. Amanda Villegas, a freshman from Mansfield, Texas, said she would like to work with kids in an orphanage, and Jessica Szalawiga, a freshman from Olathe, Kan., majoring in international studies and pre-med, hopes to be a medical missionary.

Peterson has a dream of someday working for the United Nations, "to help governments work together," but the Omaha trip made her also want to get involved in local ministries.

Participation in an Urban Plunge costs \$75 each to cover food, housing and transportation in Omaha, Ross said. People of all ages are welcome. Members of churches, youth groups or others seeking more information may call him at (888) 526-7551, e-mail [mross@cfcj.org](mailto:mross@cfcj.org) or check the Web at [www.cfcj.org](http://www.cfcj.org).

Homeless people living on the streets have many material needs, but one of their greatest needs is contact with someone who cares.

That's one of the lessons a dozen students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln learned during a weekend that exposed them to the challenges and opportunities of urban ministries.

Omaha Urban Plunge, which gives groups a chance to visit and help with several inner-city ministries, is a project of Christ for the City, an international Christian organization based in Omaha.

The students, all members of Christian Student Fellowship at UNL, slept on a classroom floor in North Omaha and spent two and a half days meeting the homeless and hungry, young people behind bars and leaders who work with the city's most needy populations.

Several students said they were most impressed with Angels on Wheels, a ministry that takes food and hot beverages to homeless people in North Omaha. The students handed out coffee and hot chocolate and talked and prayed with people who are living on the streets.

Emily Anderson, a freshman from Tyler, Texas, said the experience gave her a chance to meet "the most hopeless in our society, the homeless men and women we often forget even exist."

She remembers shivering in the cold handing out hot drinks and warm clothing to people who were grateful for whatever they received. "I met a man who really just wanted to talk. I found that this is the story with most of these people; they, just as I do, want to be recognized, loved and respected. And for a couple of minutes, I could provide that to someone."

"To see how happy they were just to have human contact really touched me," said Nick Maestas, 25. He and his fiancée, Jenny Petersen, a campus minister with Christian Student Fellowship, participated as sponsors. "I've always had a heart for the homeless. This helped me realize that they're not bad people, but people who have made mistakes or had things happen to them that weren't their fault," he said.

**It was a little scary, Maestas said, because "I'd never walked the streets of North Omaha at night." He said the experience renewed his goal of a career in Christian service. "I slack off in my faith. I take my faith for granted. More than anything, it made me realize how much I have and the importance of helping others."**

The group also visited the Open Door Mission, where they helped sort clothing for low-income and homeless people, and Mission For All Nations, a small "mom-and-pop" agency in South Omaha that distributes, food, clothing and other necessities in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood.

The students helped load food boxes and watched a storeroom filled with food become empty after three hours of distribution to needy families. "Seeing people turned away from getting basic necessities like food and clothing broke my heart," Anderson said. She felt God was telling her "to be selfless with what I'm given, as it is merely a vessel of glorification to him."

Tia Peterson, a freshman from Stillwater, Minn., found herself outside her comfort zone. "Stillwater is a wealthy community," she said. I used to be scared of people like that. But after meeting them, I found out they're at peace within themselves and they're not just self-centered but really concerned about each other."

On Sunday morning the group visited Empty Tomb Ministries, where many street people go for worship and fellowship. The students were impressed with how the homeless people formed a close-knit congregation of Christians, praying for each other and seeking to help each other in any way they could.

