

# FOUNDING LETTER

Dear Friends and Family,

November 17, 2003

I quit my job, sold my motorcycle, and poured my life savings into the founding of a small charity in Southeast Washington, DC. The charity is called "A Simple House of Sts. Francis and Alphonsus." It is an opportunity to more fully live my Christian faith and to minister to God's poor in a direct way.

God has been very generous. Besides startup money, He has provided an extra refrigerator, a used minivan, and a very supportive community of friends. The charity will run on a shoestring budget with hope, faith, and many prayers in the gas tank.

In the short term, we need money to buy our first location and home base. We have chosen a small home in Southeast DC. The price of the house is \$55,000 with a closing in mid-December. Every donation over a single digit is very significant.

The neighborhood to be served is South Congress Heights, also known as Chesapeake. It's a neighborhood most people are afraid to drive through. Buildings have been boarded up and burned out, the remains of cars line the sides of roads, and public areas are littered with garbage. Later in the day and throughout the night, prostitution, drug dealing, and gun shots are common. All of these factors coexist in the neighborhood that is raising more children than any other neighborhood in DC.

The school system serving the Chesapeake neighborhood has completely failed. Sixty-five percent of students at the local high school are illiterate. Many youth and adults are solely dependent upon a spoken witness to the Gospels.

Fortunately, it's not as bad as it seems from afar. God has abandoned no one in this life, and there are things to build on even in the worst situations. Many grandparents are lovingly providing for their grandchildren, mothers are trying to learn to be better parents, and there are even criers of the Gospel message. We hope to take this cry to the next level and make it an intimate cry to one person at a time.

The charity of A Simple House is focused on befriending the poor. Volunteers from the house will help clean homes, distribute groceries, and pray with the poor.

To set the tone of the ministry, a few hours of house cleaning will be offered as a gift. Cleaning homes is an important part of the ministry because it makes volunteers servants of the poor and it's a great way to find out the other interests and needs of the people being served. There are elderly and disabled individuals who really need help with cleaning, and some children are suffering in unsanitary conditions due to the neglect of their parents. In addition, it shows a sincerity which will hopefully remain in friendships and prayerful relationships. Needless to say, cleaning is an inexpensive ministry, and there may not be enough funds for anything else.

Other physical needs met by the House may include a basketball, a game for a child with a disability, a cake on a birthday, or food for a hungry family. We might

be able to provide more meals if we just dropped off bags of generic groceries, but we hope to touch more hearts by giving in a personal way. A friend of mine is an African American priest who has served in some of the rougher neighborhoods of DC. In one of his homilies he mentioned the good ol' days: "Remember when people used to bring you food when you were sick or grieving, and they brought it on their fine china!" The success of this charity will not be measured by the number of meals given or homes cleaned. It will be measured in the sharing of faith, hope, and love. We hope to treat people as individuals and serve them as neighbors and friends.

There is no desire to be a "total" ministry which would get someone off drugs, their kids to school, food in the cupboards, and a new job. We simply aim to rekindle hope through little stages of help and friendship. Chesapeake is an environment dominated by violence, sexual promiscuity, child abandonment, and many other sins. A few healthy prayerful moments can make a large difference when there is every temptation to despair.

Many people have looked perplexed when I've tried to explain the goal of A Simple House because the goal is not fully charitable or fully ministerial. The charity seems inefficient because it's ministerial, and the ministry seems inefficient because it is charitable. Yet charity and ministry have a natural marriage springing from love. In a wonderful way, St. Francis and Mother Teresa made this marriage work.

St. Francis of Assisi left his elevated state in society and went to personally clean the wounds of lepers. St. Francis could have raised money or worked to create benefits for the lepers. Instead he felt called to touch them, love them, and be their intimate neighbor

using his own finger to remove the decaying flesh from their wounds.

Mother Teresa had a similar mission. She would not use the donations she received to build sewer systems, dig wells, or otherwise address the structural problems that led to many of the diseases she was treating. Although she was in favor of public works, that was not her mission. Her mission was to bring to the dying the love of Jesus Christ, a love that is superior to any other love, in a personal way.

Although both of these saints may confuse the world with their inefficiency, they brought many thousands to love Christ in their own lifetimes and established more hospitals, orphanages, schools, and houses of charity than any purely charitable organization. In the case of St. Francis, the Franciscan brothers are still cleaning the wounds of lepers 800 years later.

A Simple House is to be a place where there is no real distinction between work and life. There is not a “going home” at the end of the day. No distinction will be made between food for the poor and food for volunteers. The house will be in a poor neighborhood and similar to the houses the poor live in. In a true sense, there will be a living with the poor.

The house is a special home base from which to distribute groceries to the poor, provide housing for volunteers, and reach out in a personal, Christian way as friends of the poor. In the future, it may also be an ideal place for a neighborhood Bible study.

In the last year, two experiences shifted my life away from my career in economics and towards a life with the poor of DC. For over a year, I’ve been volunteering at a Catholic Worker house in Northwest

DC, and for the last nine months, I've been living in the house. The homeless of DC have been dining, showering, doing laundry, and exchanging clothes in my home. During open house, I'm the dedicated table server and dishwasher. Afterwards, I wash the extremely dirty laundry. It's not unusual to wash a load three times with hot water and triple the recommended level of detergent. I've also been living with five gentlemen who are in transition from homelessness. For me, it's been a transition also, and I'm very thankful to John and Maria Owen for the opportunity to serve God through my neighbors. The Owens and the deceased Michael Kirwan are special inspirations of A Simple House.

Another instructor by witness and example is the long time DC missionary Mary Lyman Jackson. I've been working (and will continue working) with her group of missionaries going door to door and providing youth Bible study in a project neighborhood of Northeast DC. These ministries have given me many ideas about "what is possible" when working with the poor, and have shown me how many friendly friendship-starved people there actually are.

The motto of A Simple House is to promote a wonderful and radical falling on the cross of Jesus Christ for grace and support. A radical fall on the cross of Christ is an obvious fall. Thus, we strive to follow the instruction, "Freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support" (Mt 10:7-10). If this House succeeds, it will be the obvious work of God's providence. We do not receive support from the government, a church community, or private endowment.

If the House is doing the honest work of Christ, funds will be there to support it. If not, we are not honest, or Christ wants us to move on. Thus, all money donated will be spent in the following couple of months, and from our current financial outlook, it may be spent the day it arrives.

Our only source of financial support is individual donors. The cost of the home is \$55,000, and the entire amount must be paid on the settlement date. Bank financing is unavailable for a fixer-up house, and I'm appealing to you for short-term and long-term help.

In the short-term, money is needed to pay for the house and start up the ministry, and in the long-term (may God provide a long-term), funds are needed to support the evangelical and charitable work of the ministry. No money of the ministry is paid out in the form of salaries, no volunteer is financially profiting from the ministry, all donations are tax exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the I.R.C., and if the ministry is forced to fold, all property and funds go to a ministry with similar goals and purposes.

It's my hope that people with a similar vision and motivation may join the work of A Simple House of Sts. Francis and Alphonsus as live-in volunteers, but as for now, there is only one live-in volunteer and a wonderful community of supportive friends. Please pray for our success.

Sincerely,

Clark Massey