



Train jumpers with ferret

Three train jumpers and a ferret joined me on a drive from Billings to Miles City, Montana recently. They had been kicked out of the train yard and were seeking other forms of transportation, especially because a cloud burst was just minutes away. One had been doing the professional hobo thing for eight years. Another had spent six. The female in the group had lived on the road for three. The ferret didn't talk much.

Along the way we held a most interesting conversation about churches and mercy ministry. My companions had vast experience of being refused aid from congregations of all denominational stripes and theological persuasions. From their perspective, they had been insulted. They pointed out their lifestyle is more effective at conserving money, and that they live far less ostentatiously than the congregations refusing aid on the pretense the two dollars for a sandwich or the twenty dollar contribution for a bus ticket might be wasted. More importantly, they observed it is easier to hear "no" from a congregation clear on how and when it provided assistance, than when refused assistance without explanation.

That is, instead of the message of "we find you offensive and you make us uncomfortable, so please leave," the better responses is "we contribute \$400 each month to people with the following needs:

1. Back payments on utilities
2. Medical prescriptions
3. Gasoline in order to commute to work.

Do any of these apply to you?"

Not only does a "no" become easier to bear, but it also is of benefit to the congregation. Why? Because congregations exist, in part, to care for the poor and unfortunate as Jesus did. It is good, then, for congregations to establish the terms under which they can do this work again and again, rather than hold their noses whenever a transient person requests a couple of bucks.

"It was easier to hear 'no' from a congregation clear on how and when it provided assistance."

-mark