



## **How do I find time to help and inspire hope in others, like the needy and homeless?**

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This was the central question as the 2021 theme for the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter at BELIEVES around “How do I use my time more purposefully?” continued on November 9<sup>th</sup> with a panel discussion featuring Sean Williams, a consultant for Slalom Consulting; and Bill Matson, the Executive Director of Pathways Community Networks (PCNI).



“Why is a corporate consultant talking about homelessness?” Williams asked rhetorically to begin the session when introducing himself.

After graduating from Georgia Tech in 2012, Williams started an organization focusing on helping those in need using data, and it was successful. The organization wound up being chosen to participate in a national accelerator, and then got acquired by TechBridge, a nonprofit that uses technology to expand the impact of other nonprofits serving those in need.

So why was Williams talking about homelessness?

“Two years ago, I was with TechBridge,” he said. “While there I was led to lead a Bible study. My life was a wreck at the time.”

He then added, “Jesus came into my life, and I became a believer, which I will carry in life.”

Matson, who co-founded PCNI 20+ years ago and is now the Executive Director, then introduced himself.

“Pathways works with small-to-medium-sized communities all across the nation from California to Virginia. We help them collect and use data,” Matson shared. “Prior to starting Pathways, I worked for the Salvation Army in Atlanta leading its homeless efforts.”

So, how does prayer exist for Williams and Matson during the workday?

“Prayer is a conversation,” answered Matson. “It’s one I don’t always remember to have, and one I don’t try to make about myself because God takes care of me already.”

Williams then answered, “Even before becoming a Christian, I tried to be about a conversation with God.”

He then chuckled when adding, “I actually invited God into conversations about databases. I would say, ‘God, You know everything, You created everything, You know the answer to this database already.’ It turns out, I became a great programmer. Frustrations are an opportunity to invite God in.”

Matson and Williams were then asked how they believed the last 12-18 months with the pandemic and all else going on in the world has affected how others have or have not used their time more purposefully.

Matson responded first, sharing, “It’s had a different impact on different people. It depends. It matters where you came into the pandemic.”

Williams followed Matson’s response, with a personal reflection from his own journey during the pandemic.

“Right before the pandemic began, I had started with a new consulting firm in Alpharetta. When the pandemic hit, I got dropped and put ‘on the beach.’ Then I got staffed on a call center project for Piedmont Atlanta Hospital. I was working around the clock. A few months into the project, I turned to my wife and said, ‘I am lonely. I miss this (breakfast with the family, etc.).’”

Shortly thereafter, Williams started to do Friday morning walks with a couple of his buddies – four-feet apart for safe distancing. Now, he says his focus is on making an early morning connection with another human.

“I found out I was not alone in being lonely. A friend said, ‘I didn’t realize how lonely I was until I started getting into community again.’”

Having reflected on all this, what is the help they see people needing most today, and more specifically, what is the help they see the needy and homeless needing most today?

“Most people in the world are damaged some way,” replied Matson. “I can address your question two ways. The first is with the needs of the communities we serve in mind. Those with livelihoods that have been impacted, or have had addictions, had it sneak up on them. Personally, for me it was very difficult due to adverse childhood experiences. I thought I was prepared but wasn’t.”

Matson said he really feels for people who did not have spiritual roots and struggled in all this.

With the awareness they have of those who are experiencing homelessness or who are in need, Williams and Matson each spoke of different ways to bring this awareness into their work.

“In COVID, I made a call to a local church and asked, ‘What do you need?’” Williams recalled. “Due to my wife’s great heart, I wound up giving camping equipment away that I’d had from youth as a Boy Scout.”

Williams mentioned the other thing that came to mind for him was that things were happening to folks by no fault of their own, so he bought grocery cards for several.

“It was an invitation to engage, and through an action, say, ‘In this difficult time, I see your situation and want to do something.’”

Matson spoke next and turned back to the work PCNI does collecting data.

“Let’s use the St. Vincent DePaul Society as an example,” he said. “We provide a data system for people to collect information on those they serve and provide support for agencies to engage with the data to serve those in need. What you need to be sure of is to ask the right questions so the people we serve will have the perspective needed.”

Then he added, “You have to be a bit of a contrarian and think outside-the-box.”

Following Matson’s remarks, Williams turned back to an anecdote from his early time at TechBridge.

“After the acquisition, I was thrust into Salesforce architecture,” said Williams. “All the work led to getting an award to benefit an agency in the community. This became a \$60,000 to \$70,000 solution for the Atlanta Mission to track the homeless and all their services.”

In short, Williams said this enabled the Atlanta Mission to shift from paper and pencil to be able to look at data.

“Once we had created our database, I had to stress test it at the Atlanta Mission’s men’s shelter,” Williams told everyone in attendance. “I had been so focused on the data, and God put me in a chair interacting with 400 homeless men in a few hours. The experience changed me.”

During those hours there was one thing that really stuck with Williams.

“When I engaged, every man made eye contact with me. In contrast, people in my office wouldn’t do this.”

This experience led Williams to do the Tuesday morning Bible studies each week at the Atlanta Mission.

The database project itself also had quite an impact.

“The efficiency improvements from the database reduced check-in time from 4-5 hours in the winter to less than an hour,” he said.

In addition, Williams told of how the project had another impact.

“The transiency of the population the Atlanta Mission serves is huge. Atlanta Mission President and CEO Jim Reese said he and his team had not been aware of this. By becoming aware, they added the ability to not only be able to serve the basic needs of the people they served who were experiencing homelessness, but also to help orient these same people to Atlanta.”

With so much involved in serving the needs of the needy and those experiencing homelessness, Matson and Williams were asked how they keep it personal.

Matson responded first stating, “An important part of our work is to work with people 1-on-1 – including time built in with service providers and their clients in their communities.”

And why does Matson believe we need more information from interactions like these?

“One story I recall happened when I was overseeing homelessness for the Salvation Army in Atlanta,” Matson stated. “There was a family with a tapestry of issues. We had invested \$3,000 on data efforts. Then a member of a family we encountered said, ‘The agency down the street tried this six months ago and it didn’t work.’ We hadn’t asked the right questions.”

Williams responded in a different way to the question of how he keeps it personal.

“I will take from Jim Reese because he was asked this question and he said for the homeless, the keys are sustainable housing, a sustainable job, and a sustainable community. ‘With these three things, people choose help, maintain progress, and sustain and grow,’ he said. That sustainable community piece is the most important, I believe (including for me personally).”

Reflecting further, Williams spoke of some of the conversations he has had with men at the Atlanta Mission.

“In talking with the men, they had had community form that wasn’t healthy,” stated Williams. “Especially in the Bible studies, men would share their issues from their experiences with their earthly fathers. Things start with healing and knowing relationship with God the Father.”

Matson spoke back up once more to emphasize the importance of data points and ears to hear in keeping it personal.

“I work with communities that have big plans, but all that’s within my area of control are those I encounter,” he said. “We have to be open to hear what God has for us to hear. These are big problems but can be addressed over time.”

Hearing the remark Matson made, CTK Parishioner Tim Doyle commented, “This reminds me of a comment made by a speaker in a previous BELIEVES session – ‘Many times large scale problems don’t have large scale solutions.’”

In response, Matson added, “I think incremental change and personal change is what makes things stick. We make small change, but small change is important.”

Williams then closed out the session by stating, “For me, it’s really about relationship and that boils down to trust. Trust is like a cup of water – it is one drop at a time but can be spilled out. We’re in a trust building exercise.”