



Broken Healers: Boise Rescue Mission



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Introduction

As I walked through the double-door entrance, a repugnant stench invaded my nostrils – what must have been a mixture of body odor and dried urine. Yet despite the offensive smell, the atmosphere was contradictorily friendly and inviting. There were two disheveled men in the commons area, both of whom greeted me with smiles, flashing what teeth were present. I asked the gentleman serving as attendant behind the front desk where the evening church gathering was to take place, and he simply told me to follow the sound of the hymnal singing. I tentatively made my way down a long corridor, lined on either side by doors with safety glass, through which I could see bunk-beds – some occupied, others empty. At the end of the hallway was an equally sturdy door which bore a sign reading: “If you are intoxicated, you cannot attend the worship service.”

Thus began my experience at River of Life Rescue Mission in Boise, Idaho. This is the newest of the branch campuses of Boise Rescue Mission Ministries.¹ I chose to do my case study on this particular organization because I believe that such endeavors most closely resemble the ministry of Jesus Christ when he dwelled among humankind, incarnated in bodily form. While the primary purpose of the Messiah’s visitation was obviously not to solve temporal problems, we know from verses such as Matthew 15:32 that he was often “moved with compassion” to help those who suffered deeply. It is this dual facilitation of preaching the gospel message of salvation, while at the same time addressing pragmatic needs, for which the Rescue Mission is best known.

Boise Rescue Mission Ministries was founded in 1958, but back then was known as the Christ Gospel Mission. It has certainly had its ups and downs throughout the

¹ www.boiserescuemission.org

decades, with some people denouncing those who passed through its doors as dangerous or degenerates. Despite being seen as a blight on an otherwise pristine downtown, the Rescue Mission has continued to survive in various forms, gradually changing locations to accommodate social pressures over the course of the last 50 years. Since 1972 the main ministry has been located at 520 Front Street, with additional branch campus openings to serve the growing needs of homelessness throughout the greater metropolitan area.

The residents and graduates of the program are fond of saying – “It is not a hand-out. It is a hand-up!” The vision of the Rescue Mission is to go “beyond soup and soap, and on to salvation” meaning that they are not simply aiming to address social justice for the sake of fixing the fleeting problems of this life. They preach and teach the Word of God, with the Bible as their “core curriculum.” This is done not to the exclusion of ministering to basic human needs, but feeding the body is pointless if the soul is not also nourished. As such, there are Bible classes available as well as free clothing, a laundry facility, donated furniture, a food pantry and kitchen. They also offer GED classes, and help graduates gain placement in the local workforce.

The current executive director is Rev. Bill Roscoe, a self-proclaimed recovered “dope addict” whose life was radically transformed by coming to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. He oversees the four ministry branches – River of Life Men’s Mission, City Light Home for Women and Children, Lighthouse Rescue Mission (located in Nampa, Idaho) – and of course the ministry at Front Street. My wife is familiar with the women’s home, having dealt with cases as a professional counselor in which she referred clients there for help. For the purposes of this research paper though, I visited the two local men’s shelters – River of Life and Front Street.

Location: River of Life

The River of Life building is located within walking distance of the Boise State University campus, in an area considered to be a residential zone, illustrated in Figure 1. As such, individuals who have been convicted sex offenders must make their presence known if they are living on-site. This was the case in the past, but due to violence amongst residents directed towards these registered sex-offenders, this model of habitation has been done away with. Those that live at the River of Life facility now are typically recovering from drug or alcohol addiction, while those who have a more criminal history currently find solace at the mission located on Front Street.



Figure 1. River of Life Mission – 13th Street

The actual facility is owned by the city but is being leased by the Rescue Mission. Since it belongs to the government, there can be no official policy forcing anyone to attend Bible classes or the worship services which are held each night. This was evident when the Christian gathering concluded and a larger number of men entered afterwards for their late-evening meal time. There are eventual plans for the Rescue Mission to purchase the building from the city of Boise, at which point attendance and involvement in spiritually oriented events will become mandatory. For now though, the recovery program straddles the fine line along the division between church and state.

The nightly worship services are made possible by a regular rotation of local area pastors, whom share the responsibility of speaking occasionally at the River of Life. For the service I attended, there was a pastor preaching whom I will call Carl for the sake of anonymity. He was well dressed and had a certain degree of detachment about him. I would not describe it as pompousness, but there was an curious quality of obliviousness in the way that he addressed the room full of listeners. It was almost as if he did not regard the feelings of those two whom he preached. His sermon topic centered around untouchables, and the passages he preached from were Luke 10:25-37 and 17:11-19.

In no uncertain terms, he made it evident that he considered the men at the shelter to be equivalent to those lepers who were cleansed by Jesus. He also went into almost scientific detail about the varying types of leprosy, describing the duration and severity of the symptoms. At several points in the sermon, he shouted things like “What do you know? Are you the one living on the street with no friends?” in reference to his perception of the thoughts being directed towards him from the listeners. Despite the fact that his outcries disturbed one man with a nervous disorder the pastor carried on,

propelled by the momentum of satisfaction with his own eloquence and extensive learning. Somewhere during the time it took for him to explain the lineage of the Samaritans, I remember thinking that perhaps he had overshot his target audience. Spiritual guidance is of course extremely important, but I wonder how effective it is when provided with such a piecemeal approach to itinerancy.

Walter C. Wright describes the type of direction that these situations call for in his book Relational Leadership.² It is this steady consistency that is both spiritually and psychologically important for those recovering from addiction. The men in the program most respect those who are there for them on a regular basis, as well as those whom have come from the same type of background but have got back on their feet. The more traditional hierarchical style of leadership, in which a pastor dispenses sage wisdom into a top-down model, does not really work too well for those whom are simply struggling to survive. I cannot say for sure, since it is mere speculation on my part – but if I were in that situation, I would prefer the steady reassurance of a friend’s presence rather than the well-meaning words of a traveling scholar. I have heard it said, and firmly believe it – “People don’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care.”

² ISBN: 0853649960

Testimony: Mitch

After the service had concluded, I got a chance to talk to one of the men who helps facilitate the day to day activities in the recovery program. In my opinion, these types of ministries need the consistency of regular leadership. This man, whom I will refer to as Mitch, I would dare say has more of a significant impact on the lives of the other men than the myriad of preachers who make their way through each month. He filled me in on all the background information regarding River of Life, including the potential problems regarding sex-offenders once the Front Street location is vacated.

Mitch described to me his former life of habitual drug and alcohol abuse, and how this had cause a downward spiral that ruined his relationships with both friends and family. He said that he finally hit rock-bottom when he realized that he literally had nowhere else to go but a homeless shelter. At that lowest point in his life he came to a know true humility, and abandoned the brash arrogance and recklessness which had led him down a path of self-destruction. He went through the recovery program at the River of Life Rescue Mission, and now works alongside and encourages others who are struggling to overcome similar tribulations. He also holds a regular day job at a local manufacturing plant. As he told me this part of his story, I could see a slight glimmer of pride in his eyes – that of a man who was reduced to a completely empty shell, but now stands fulfilled as one who has been redeemed for the purposes of God.

Location: Front Street Mission

On Thanksgiving Day, I visited the Rescue Mission branch located on Front Street, in the heart of the more cosmopolitan area of downtown Boise. This district is often referred to as the “BoDo” by the more fashionable city residents – seen in Figure 2. Located only a few blocks from the state capitol building, the old mission edifice looks conspicuously out of place amongst high-rise condos and ritzy corporate skyscrapers. A would-be eyesore to passers by, it is a beacon of hope to those in need and lends a personal touch amidst an otherwise sophisticated setting. During my time living in Boise, I have driven by the building many times. It is hard to miss because of the large letters emblazoned on the building, which simply read: “Jesus Saves.”



Figure 2. Boise Rescue Mission – Front Street

It was announced recently that this building has just been sold to commercial developers who will be tearing it down, along with other adjacent lots, in order to build a combination of apartments, parking garages and trendy storefront shopping. The company that made the purchase is named C Squared, and is co-owned by businessmen Clay Carley and Gray Christensen. According to an article in the Idaho Statesman, a local newspaper and web-based authority, C Squared has had their eye on this area of land for quite some time. Carley was quoted as saying:

“We intend to begin construction on Phase 1 next year... I've been working four years to develop this mixed-use, mostly residential plan, and the Rescue Mission has been in my sights for four years.”³

While at first glance this acquisition might appear cold-hearted, these two entrepreneurs are not without compassion. Though they now officially own the building, they are leasing it to the Rescue Mission for only \$1.00 per year. This is the same arrangement that the city of Boise extended to the River of Life location as well. Though, this arrangement with the city has recently come under fire for being unconstitutional. Boise Rescue Mission Ministries is currently being sued by the secular organization Community House, which formerly operated a homeless shelter at the same location.⁴

Their objection is that the city is giving an unfair advantage to a faith-based group via the \$1.00 a year lease price, and they accused the city of offering the Rescue Mission a better deal on a potential selling price as well. According to the ruling by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, this charter violated the separation of church and state as

³ www.idahostatesman.com/101/story/60462.html

⁴ www.religionandsocialpolicy.org/news/article.cfm?id=5519

specified in the First Amendment of the constitution, because it freed up more resources to put towards evangelism that would have otherwise been used to pay for the lease.

Americans United, a Washington D.C. based civil liberties activist group, even went so far as to quote Thomas Jefferson in a recent article by saying that he would have disapproved of Boise offering a reduced lease rate to a ministry.⁵ However, it does not entirely apply because those at the mission do not pay to be there, which was what Jefferson was referring to – those who would charge people for access to a church’s services. The Rescue Mission does the exact opposite, providing shelter and food free of charge, with the option to attend regular worship services. They also do the city a civil service by helping to keep the homeless off the streets. The Americans United article conveniently omits the beginning of the quote, in which Jefferson acknowledges God:

“Well aware that Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion...

“To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical... even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern...”⁶

While specific details of the Front Street sale have not been disclosed, it has been confirmed that the proceeds will benefit a 2 million dollar, outright purchase of the River

⁵ blog.au.org/2006/11/setting_a_stron.html

⁶ religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/vaact.html

of Life facility. This will address the legalities of the Rescue Mission occupying the building, because the city will no longer be affiliated with it in any way. The only drawback is that the newer structure does not have the meal-serving capacity of the Front Street mission. Therefore, profits from the sale will also go towards extensive renovation of the River building and the addition of a sizable kitchen area. The bathroom will also be reworked and expanded to accommodate more occupants when the two mission locations combine. That is, assuming the court case around the acquisition allows for it.

Figure 3 depicts the floor plan for the new River of Life building, courtesy of Thomas R. Ensley and Associates – an architectural firm based in Caldwell, Idaho.⁷ Tom R. Ensley, owner of the architectural firm who drafted up these floor plans, was a member of the mission's executive board, but recently passed away on October 10th 2006 as a result of leukemia. During his time on the board he was responsible for overseeing many of the construction projects that made the Boise Rescue Mission Ministries what it is today. He is remembered by those at the mission as a man of God who had a love for others. He is survived by his wife, children and grandchildren.

⁷ www.trensley.com

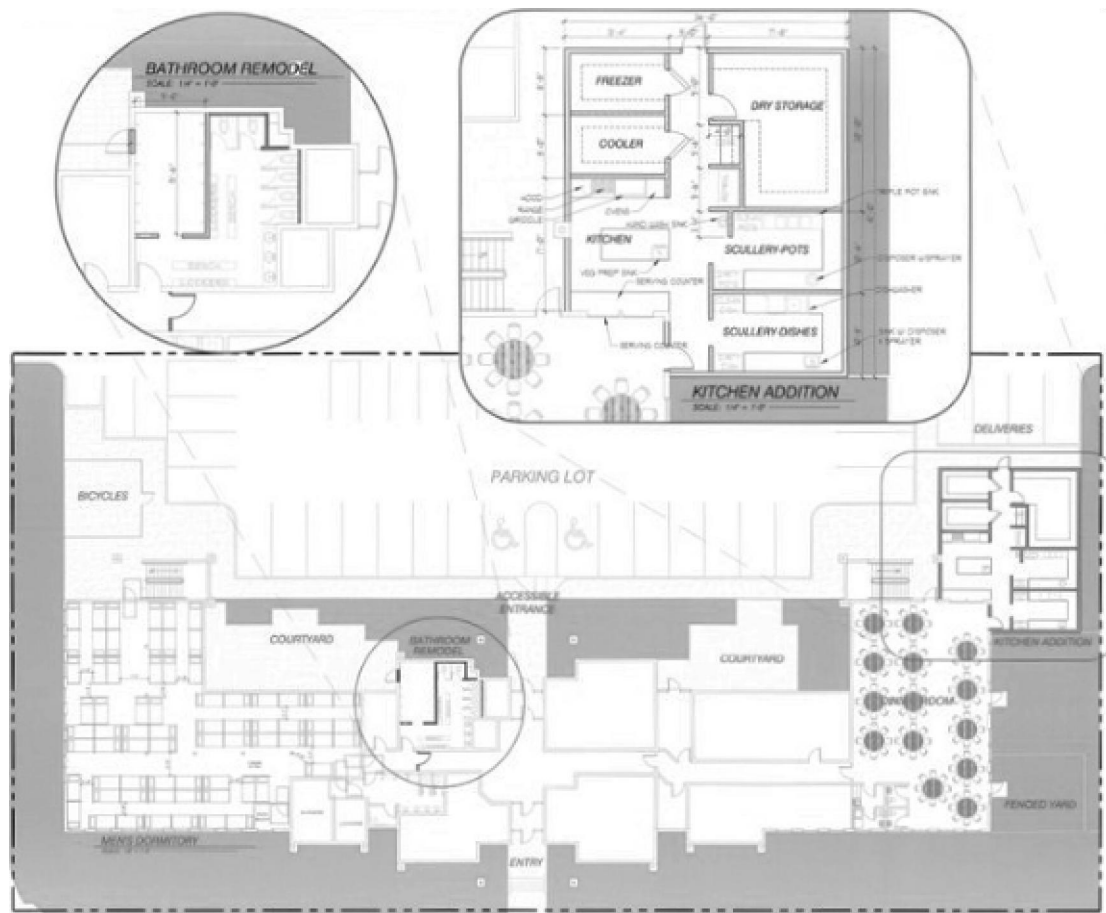


Figure 3. River of Life – renovation plans

While it will certainly be more convenient to consolidate the entirety of homeless outreach efforts in Boise at one location, it also creates a new concern. Since it is located in a residential area and registered sex-offenders are not currently allowed to reside there, closing the Front Street building will not leave any location for ex-criminals to live or eat. Some fear that this will put them back on the street and perhaps cause them to be more of a threat. This concern is not entirely unfounded, because it is commonly perceived that sex offenders will re-offend.⁸ One study showed that for incarcerated sex offenders with two known victims on record, the actual average was closer to 110 victims before the

⁸ incestabuse.about.com/od/inthenews/a/sexoffenders.htm

perpetrators were actually caught and sentenced.⁹ Yet, there is also research showing that reform is possible, and in fact sex offenders are less likely to repeat their crimes.¹⁰

Either way, it begs the question of what will become of those ex-cons who are evicted from the Rescue Mission when the Front Street facility changes hands – Will they stay on the path of righteousness or return to their former lives as predators? Granted, there is a men’s facility in Nampa, Idaho but that is a long walk from Boise. Needless to say, this issue is currently still under consideration, as is the outcome of the legal battle raging around the leasing and possible purchase of the River of Life property.

⁹ www.csom.org/pubs/recidsexof.html

¹⁰ www.kansascity.com/mld/kansascity/news/nation/16104626.htm

Testimony: Paul

During my time at the Front Street mission, I spoke with a member of the staff whom I will refer to as Paul. Despite his weathered appearance and balding head of gray hair, he seemed to be every bit as vivacious as most people half his age. The joy of the Lord was certainly evident in the way he talked and shuffled hurriedly in and out of the storeroom in which I was sorting non-perishable goods. Our conversation began slowly, as any two strangers would approach an initial meeting. However, once he learned that I was not only a Christian but also a seminary student, he began to share openly about the way that God has made a very tangible impact in his life.

Paul told me the story of when he was a scrawny young boy, continually bullied by a particular group of kids in his town. At the age of ten, these ruffians had cornered him at the neighborhood laundromat, then stuffed him in a coin-operated dryer and left him spinning around inside. Bear in mind that this was many decades ago, when such laundry machines had a hefty latch which would secure the door. He quickly realized that he was stuck inside, and kicked repeatedly at the door in an attempt to force it open. He did finally manage to break through the glass barrier and release the handle. However, in the process he had done irreparable damage to his leg, inflicting massive lacerations and causing extensive damage to the muscle and sinew. He passed out on the floor due to loss of blood. When he awoke he was in a hospital bed and his leg had been amputated.

If this were fiction, it would be heartbreaking. The fact that it really happened makes it doubly so. Yet, the story does not end there. God met him in a spectacular way, through the laying on of hands and prayer of an evangelist. It was a few years later that he was attending a big-tent revival and it came time for healing prayers to be offered. The

local congregational pastor encouraged him to approach the altar for prayer. Paul remarked that as a child, his faith in the miraculous power of God had not yet been tainted by disappointing life experiences. He attributes this quite literal child-like faith as the catalyst for the astounding sequence of events that followed. After being prayed for he took his crutches and returned to his seat, feeling no different than before. However, the next morning when he awoke, the leg which had previously ended below his kneecap had grown several inches. He said that his parents were amazed at what had happened. Likewise, over the course of the next week this stump continued to develop into a fully formed foreleg. Before long, his foot had re-grown as well. He recounted how bizarre it felt, and how his sisters were fascinated with his temporary lack of toenails.

I must admit that when I heard this story, I was extremely skeptical. I debated including it in this paper, lest I be seen as trying to sensationalize events simply for the sake of enhancing the reading experience. Paul seemed to be so genuinely excited about sharing his testimony though, that it was hard not to be enthusiastic about God's limitless power to heal. As I took in this rather incredible story, I considered the fact that he had not asked anything of me, nor did he have anything to gain whether or not I believed him. We did not speak for too much longer, because it was then time to distribute lunches to the hungry visitors. After I had concluded my volunteer duties and was heading for the door, Paul indicated that he wanted to talk to me. I thought to myself that this would be the determining point at which I decide about his story – whether or not it had been a prelude to asking for money. To my surprise, he simply asked if he could pray for me, and assured the Lord's blessing upon me for taking time to serve. Needless to say, this was a Thanksgiving experience that I will not soon forget.

Testimony: Mark

Another Front Street staff worker that I was able to speak with was a man I will call Mark. He shared his testimony with me of how he had been a severe alcoholic and was living on the streets in San Diego, California. He said it was a man by the name of John Drzewiecki, along with his wife Lucille, who had helped him come to know Jesus as his Lord and Savior. This was in the early 1970's, when they were still running missions in San Diego and Modesto. Mark gradually worked his way back to sobriety, going through the recovery program, and eventually became the lead cook at that shelter.

Through this meandering experience, he discovered a latent talent and love for the culinary arts. He eventually got back on his feet and began a job as a chef at a local restaurant franchise. However, the less stringently supervised atmosphere and easy access to alcoholic beverages in the establishment did not bode well for an addiction which he had assumed he had mastered. What started as a few causal drinks after hours with coworkers re-ignited his cravings. This turned into a binge of drinking off the clock, and eventually landed Mark in the hospital with alcohol poisoning. This type of behavior kept up until he eventually lost the job which he had fought so hard to obtain.

At this point, he acknowledged the fact that any alcohol was too much for him to handle, and accepted his need for utter dependency on God help him break free. He called John Drzewiecki, who had since become the executive director of the Boise Rescue Mission. To Mark's surprise, when he confessed what had happened, he was met not with disappointment or pronouncements of judgment. John showed compassion, and invited Mark to join him in Boise, resuming duties as lead cook after undergoing detoxification. Today, he is sober and counsels others in conquering alcoholism.

Inclusion

I was not sure exactly what to label this section of the paper. I just titled it after Eric H. Law's book Inclusion: Making Room for Grace.¹¹ I think that the principles covered in this book directly correlate to the everyday life of the people living at and running the Boise Rescue Mission Ministries. In the first chapter, Law talks about the seemingly infinite methods we have of dividing ourselves, drawing up lines of distinction between *us* and *them*. The title of the chapter itself is "Resisting the Impulse to Exclude," which is exactly what must be done if the homeless are to be reached for Christ.

I remember as a kid falling down while trying to ride my bike. This garnered a one-word response from my father: "stupid!" This was his typical reaction to when either I or my siblings would injure ourselves. While I do not doubt that my father actually cared, I think the initial response was a knee-jerk reaction of self-defense. By criticizing rather than empathizing with people, we put a safe barrier between ourselves and having to deal with the problem. Likewise, many people in big cities tend to look the other way to avoid meeting the glance of a homeless person. We pretend to be unaware of the man holding a cardboard sign asking for money, and debate if he really is a war veteran.

The thing is, people that are homeless are already well aware of society's general perception and stereotypes of them, much like a child who crashes a bicycle already feels dumb enough without having someone point it out. If we are to affect change, we must do so by being counter-cultural just as Jesus was.

He kept company with the supposedly forbidden sector of society and thereby confounded his adversaries and the self-appreciative legalistic folk. Likewise, Boise

¹¹ ISBN: 0827216203

Rescue Mission Ministries is a point of contention to liberal organizations who cannot see the forest for the trees. They want social justice, but on their terms without any hint of theocratic overtones. I am going to speculate that for the amount of money it took Community House to hire lawyers and actively sue the city of Boise for their dealings with the Rescue Mission, far more homeless people could have actually been helped. I simply cannot understand how suing benefits those people who are truly in need.

The solution then, is not to fight over who maintains the lofty position of hierarchical leadership over the homeless in this city. Rather, what we need are leaders who will go out amongst the people and hear their stories, those with compassion enough to cry over the tragedies that have befallen them, whether self-inflicted or not. A strong sense of presence evangelism through relational leadership is what will truly make a difference. More people like Mitch and Mark are needed, those who were once broken themselves but are now mended enough in order to help others heal from their wounds.

The key to revival in any setting is not when Christians learn to move beyond their safe zone, as Law described it, but rather when the fear zone and the safe zone become one in the same. If there is still that division between the *us* and *them*, it will always be perceived by people on either side. We will feel uneasy about going beyond that which we are familiar with, and those on the outside will see that hesitancy and interpret it as coldness. This is why it was surprising to me that the visiting pastors at the River of Life scurried off after leading worship and preaching the message. There was no fellowship, no shared life stories over breaking of bread. It was simply a scheduled time for them to show up, dump spiritual wisdom on the masses, and make a hasty exit.

I believe that this is what Law was talking about when he said that we need to make room for grace. Jesus made time for those which others would just assume pass on by. Like the story of the Good Samaritan, those who would most affect outreach in an impoverished community must be willing to be inconvenienced. It is one thing to donate clothing and food during the winter months, but another thing entirely to show up and help cook it. I am not saying I am the model for this. I too felt convicted showing up on Thanksgiving, as if to make my token contribution to the greater good of the holiday. I could not help but think to myself – Why only today, what about next month? Are the homeless somehow magically provided for during every other time of year except for the holiday season? No, we just happen to remember them annually for at least two months.

Throughout my research for this paper, and the time I spent at each of the individual rescue mission facilities, I felt the Lord speaking to me that charity cannot be given with strings attached, or done for the sole purpose of filling up the pages in a seminary assignment. If Jesus indeed was able to give food from the Master's table to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28, and extended his grace beyond the chosen people to me as a Gentile, then perhaps I should be a bit more grateful and not operate with a mindset of limited-good. We are exhorted by the Apostle Paul in Acts 20:35 to remember the words of Christ: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

I am thankful that I had the both the opportunity and requirement to do this assignment, because it forced me to stretch my schedule and willingness to the point that I was able to grow as a result. I apologize for the brevity of this paper, but needed to get something ready to hand in ahead of deadline, before my wife and I move to Texas. Once we get there, I hope we find ministry opportunities similar to the Boise Rescue Mission.

Statistics

Boise Rescue Mission Ministries helps a multitude of people every year, and boasts some impressive numbers to back it up. According to their promotional DVD, here are some of the most recent annual figures available. Monthly summaries, including the number of people who were saved, are available from their website in PDF format.¹²

- 571 meals served daily
- 17,119 meals served monthly
- 160,000 meals served yearly
- 55,000 overnight stays
- 60 people placed in jobs
- 17 discipleship graduates
- 9 people earned a GED
- 9,000 volunteer hours
- 6 internships at local companies

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¹² www.boiserescuemission.org/pages/statistics.htm