



## GROUP ACTIVITIES HANDOUT



# THE DOOR IS OPEN IN MONTREAL



**Zack is a busy guy.** He works at the Open Door Shelter in Montreal. When he found out the National Youth Project is on the theme of Housing and Homelessness, he wanted to be a part of it somehow. We set a time to talk. When I called him, he was dealing with an issue at the shelter. He promised to call me back. Twenty minutes later, we were able to have our conversation.

The Open Door has been serving the Montreal community for thirty years. It started as a knock on a door at a church. Someone was looking for some clothes and food. The knocks kept coming. Individual requests led to the opening of a soup kitchen. It has slowly evolved to what it has become today.

The shelter is open from 7:30am to 5pm every day. They serve breakfast and lunch. Clients can access clothing or do their laundry. They can use the shower facilities, access a mat to sleep on the floor, or see an addiction counsellor. They serve an average of 100-150 people daily and employ only 6 staff members - 4 staff members at the drop in centre and 2 staff members at the housing first program. The amount of support they are able to provide with very few staff is incredible. It is almost like a modern day loaves and fishes situation. Other shelters that serve this many clients would probably have 15 people on staff.

The Open Door is a unique place. This is only one of the things that makes them unique. They are also the only Damp Shelter in Montreal. What does that mean? Many shelters will turn people away if they are drunk or high. The Open Door gives clients shelter if they have been using drugs or alcohol. This may seem counter-intuitive or something that doesn't make sense. Wouldn't violence or destruction of property increase if people are using? Maybe. At one point in our conversation, Zack had to excuse himself to deal with an issue that came up. I could hear him say to the client "You need to treat people with respect if you are going to be here". I couldn't hear the clients response, but Zack very calmly repeated himself, "You need to treat people with respect if you are going to be here". And with that firm, yet compassionate interaction the issue was resolved.

The Open Door sees the many factors that lead to people living on the streets. Poverty, mental illness, trauma, addiction... these are some of the many issues that plague homeless people. If someone grew up in a violent home, escaped into a world of drugs or alcohol, they easily could end up living in poverty. When drug or alcohol use becomes an addiction, it isn't as simple as just stopping. So these people are in a situation where they can't stop using and they are living on the street. In Montreal the winters are cold.

Turning away homeless people who are drunk or high in extreme cold, leaves them at greater risk. Many people die because they are homeless. Often this is because they didn't have access to basic care. The Open Door sees the complication of all the variables leading to someone becoming homeless and tries to respond in the most Christian way possible – accepting people for where they are. If they are drunk, they are drunk... if they are high, they are high. They still need a warm place to be and food in their stomach.

The philosophy at the Open Door is that of inclusion. Many other shelters are rigid with their rules. If there are instances of violence, clients will be banned for a long period. At the Open Door, they will meet with the person, figure out what is going on with them, try to determine why the violent act happened. Their approach is very personal. They aim to see the dignity in each person.

In 2018, the Open Door supported 41 clients through detox and rehab. They have helped 47 people get off the street and into housing. These are very impressive numbers given the amount of clients they serve. They have one intervention worker on-site at the centre that help with this process. They also do follow up with clients. They continue to care and support people to ensure they don't end up back in a situation that could force them back on the streets.

Zack talks about the staff at the Open Door using Jean Vanier's book *Becoming Human* first chapter as their manifesto. They see that living a Christian Identity means being in service and caring for the poor. How we are with each other in this world is essential. We need to act with compassion and forgiveness. Zack told me a story of one client that threw coffee at him.

The two of them sat outside together. Zack didn't get mad or ban him from the shelter. They talked. Zack had a better understanding of the client after their interaction. Before the client left he asked for another cup of coffee. The little actions show the love and concern. These actions also build trust.



Former clients or the homeless themselves run the front line of the shelter. They want to be present because this is a place where they can help their friends. This culture changes the way that the people who come to the shelter interact with one another.

Zack often hosts youth groups and school groups at the Open Door. He loves talking to young people about the work they do. He talks about their approach to being with the clients that come to the Open Door and challenge the youth group to connect that with how they live their lives. Instead of having a volunteer-based experience, he encourages them to have a relational-based one. Instead of just serving a sandwich, why don't you have a conversation as well? These principles can be applied to all of our lives. What does it mean to live with compassion? When a friend hurts or betrays you, what does forgiveness look like?

Zack says, "it is always an adventure at the Open Door".

## POSSIBLE GROUP ACTIVITIES

- Read Matthew 14:13-21 – How do you see this story connecting to the work of the Open Door?
- The Open Door is a Damp Shelter (clients are allowed to be high or drunk, but not allowed to use on site). Most Shelters are Dry Shelters (not allowed in if you are drunk or high). This video discusses Montreal's need for a Wet Shelters. <https://www.facebook.com/OpenDoorMTL/videos/745488542469860/>

Did members of your group know the difference between a Wet Shelter, Damp Shelter and Dry Shelter before reading this article? What does your group think about the reasoning behind the Open Door being a Damp shelter?

- Read excerpts of the first chapter of Jean Vanier's *Becoming Human* to your youth group. How do they see these concepts connecting to their day-to-day life? What is the most challenging thing for them? What seems most logical or easy to do?
- Find out where the closest shelter is to your church. If possible, arrange for your group to visit. Prepare some questions to ask them beforehand given what you have learned about the Open Door. Can the group make the commitment to have a relational-based experience at the shelter (connecting with clients, having conversations, not just giving out food or clothing).