

## The bitter winds of homelessness

NEW YORK -- The bitter winter cold has helped to focus attention on the homeless, but homelessness is a year-round problem in urgent need of a solution.

Homelessness confronts us with the basic question of whether the world's richest nation will continue to accept a situation in which homeless people and families must live in the streets.

Too often, the problems of the homeless are explained away with glib statements that don't make sense.

For example, some people seem to think that the homeless are so few in number that the problem is minor. But estimates of the homeless population run from more than half a million to 3 million.

New York City, for example, provided shelter for 8,300 individuals and 4,000 families on a single cold night last month.

Those numbers give the lie to another myth about the homeless

### TO BE EQUAL By JOHN JACOB

-- that they are all individuals. Just think of it -- 4,000 families in one night in one city.

Nationwide, homeless families make up a good part of the homeless population -- and that means little children growing up in the streets, learning that "home" is something other people have.

A related myth is that the homeless are incompetent persons released from mental institutions without adequate support services.

Some are, and our treatment of the mentally ill is scandalous. But the vast majority of the homeless are living in the streets because they are poor, jobless and unable to afford housing in a marketplace in which low-income

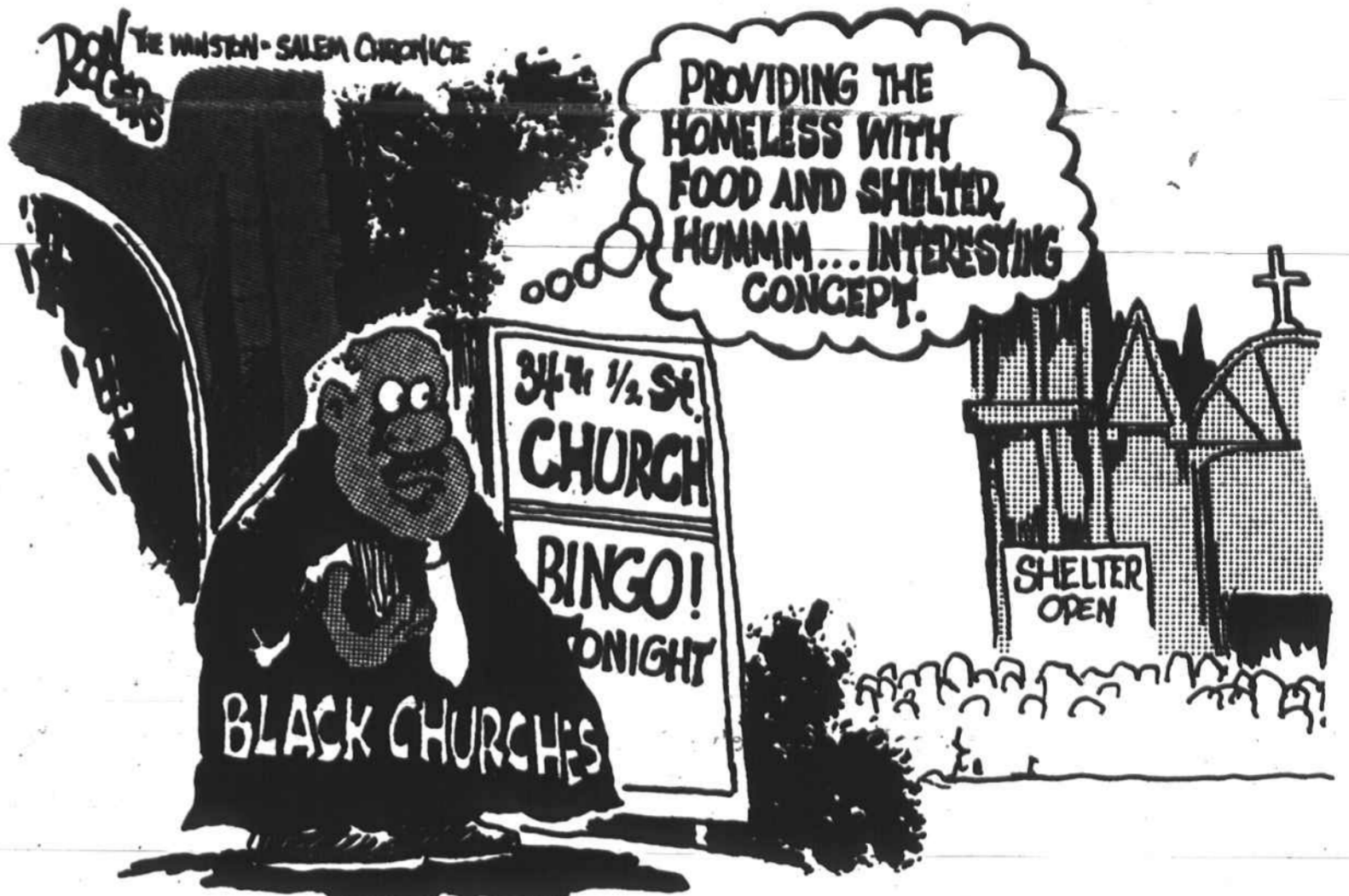
housing stock is being destroyed.

In some cities low-income housing has been torn down for luxury apartments and hotels. Across the country, housing prices rose over the past decade, leading families to double up and others to find shelter wherever they could.

At the same time, federal aid for low-income housing is shrinking. Between 1981 and 1985 the Reagan administration cut low-income housing assistance funding by 60 percent and virtually ended construction of new housing for poor families.

When homelessness first emerged as a national phenomenon during the last recession, many Americans expressed shock. But now they're used to it.

Raise the idea of adding shelters or low-income housing, and the response invariably is:



"Not in my neighborhood."

Community and church groups that help the homeless are swamped -- unable to meet the demand for their services. In effect, they're forced to deal with problems beyond the scope of voluntary groups because government has abdicated its responsibility.

Political leaders claim they

don't have the resources to do something about poverty and homelessness, but they have somehow found the resources to provide massive assistance to middle-class housing: Middle- and upper-income families enjoy more than \$30 billion in housing subsidies, including tax breaks for second homes. But housing subsidies to the poor come to less

than \$6 billion a year.

The national disgrace of homelessness should be treated as the priority it is, beginning with temporary housing for the dispossessed and a massive new program to vastly increase the supply of low-income housing.

John Jacob is president of the National Urban League.

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## Letters

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aims would not have been met. Your support is crucial and we realize how generous and what a good friend the *Chronicle* is to us. We remain grateful.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend Ms. Robin Barksdale, Mr. Lut Williams, Mr. Art Blue and Mr. Allen Johnson for all of their time and work toward this needed cause. The compliments just keep coming on the articles in the paper!

Again, many thanks to you and your staff at the *Chronicle*. I look forward to working with

you again real soon. Best wishes for a prosperous New Year.

Marilyn Baldwin  
Winston-Salem

### King deserves better

To The Editor:

I never thought I would see the day I would be compelled to write my comments on the editorial page. I am one who usually does not get involved politically and

keeps my thoughts pretty much to family and a very few close friends.

But I was shocked at how Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday was treated by some of us, from the president of our country to the friends I talk to daily.

First of all, a lot of people have lost, or never had, sight of where we -- and I don't mean just we blacks -- as a people have come. We include poor whites, women and men, old and young who have better jobs, better housing and better pay because of him.

Because Dr. King was a black man doesn't mean that only blacks have profited from this man's dreams. His contributions even in 1986 are a part of any race, creed or color.

And they didn't come without a price. They were something Dr. King marched for, begged for and insisted on. Has America forgotten?

My mind quickly flashes back to when I was a child. It's as fresh as if it happened yesterday. I can remember going to shop in  
Please see page A10

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