

Gazette

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St Stephen's Rochester Row

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**Westminster
Night Shelter**

Special Edition

June 2016

Westminster night shelter at St Stephen's 2016

St Stephen's church has just finished hosting the Westminster churches night shelter for nine Saturdays in April and May 2016. This hospitality was made possible thanks to the combined efforts of an extraordinary diversity of people and organisations within and outside the parish who worked together to serve and support our homeless guests.

Every day in our parish we walk past people experiencing homelessness. It is easy to feel helpless in the face of such overwhelming human need in Westminster. The night shelter, albeit small scale, has been one practical and positive response to this housing problem.



Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity

This Gazette is a collection of stories from volunteers, guests and other organisations who gave of their time, resources and personalities to make this project such a success. It is hoped that in these pages you might sense the spirit of goodness that emerges in people when faith, action and resources are coordinated in a creative way.

This opening article was first presented at a Bishop's Advisory Panel by our curate Catherine Duce before she trained for priesthood. Catherine first volunteered at a night shelter in the Borough of Islington. Now a venue coordinator in her diaconal year at St Stephen's night shelter, Catherine is struck by how much these words continue to ring true and bring alive her sense of urban ministry in the parish of St Stephen with St John.

Hospitality and the Churches Cold Weather Shelter

'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' (Hebrews 13: 2)

One of the most inspiring examples that I have come across in London of churches offering hospitality to strangers is the churches night shelter scheme. This is an ecumenical initiative in which seven churches in a local area offer accommodation to homeless people for one night a week throughout the winter months. Up to 15 homeless guests at a time are given a map indicating which night of the week they'll be with the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, or the local Synagogue. Local congregations commit to feeding, serving and befriending these strangers from their community - some, failed asylum seekers others artists and electricians; the vast majority ordinary men and women like you and I who have fallen into arrears with their rent payments. The shelter captures the imagination of local businesses and community residents, of all faiths and non, who regularly volunteer to help. It is truly a living expression of local Christian unity.

What I find particularly intriguing about this work - having been a volunteer and now a venue coordinator - is how differently each of the participating churches see their hospitality to be a form of mission. We are all familiar here with the five marks of mission in the Anglican Church - of proclaiming, teaching, transforming and serving - It became apparent through conversations with each of the church coordinators (whilst doing research back in 2011) that these marks of mission were prioritised differently by each of the participating churches.

Some were more forthright in their desire to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom to guests through spoken word and sought out opportunity to teach and nurture new believers. Others understood their volunteering to be more a response to human need and as part of a wider commitment to challenging unjust structures on behalf of and often alongside homeless people themselves through community organising. This variation made me realise how much our churches have to learn from one another to discover a truly integrated sense of mission.



But I invite you to reflect for moment on the place of the homeless person in these shelters. Just as, in my view, it is Jesus Christ incarnate who is the glue that holds together this rich diversity of church work, what I found as a volunteer was that, time and time again despite my best efforts at befriending, it was the homeless people themselves who left me feeling as if I'd encountered Christ. Many homeless people have an extraordinary ability 'to see' life as it really is, to know themselves to be blessed by the kindness of others, and to accept and even transform suffering, in ways that leave you truly humbled. As we sit together, face to face, around the dinner table - a moment of real equality when aprons are removed and conversation deepens - one can be made to feel like a guest in their company.

This blurring of the roles of guest and host is a central theme in the Bible. The great 14th century icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev portrays one such example from Genesis (see previous page). Here we see three strangers (or angels) visiting Abraham and Abraham offering them hospitality. These angels stand for the three persons of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - in other words, it is God who is being entertained unwittingly not just God's messengers.

When we look carefully at this icon, at the direction of the angels' gaze, at the angle of their heads and bodies, we become aware of a living relationship at work, a reciprocal circle of giving and receiving, a divine dance of mutual love and equality, which beckons us forward to participate in the life of the Blessed Trinity. There is an opening at the table, which is an opening for us all; a sign of God's hospitality to all people and there is a sense in which the circle is incomplete without our participation. So as I served food to the homeless in the night shelter it was my longing that all of us - both volunteers and guests - might know ourselves to have a part to play in this divine circle of communion.

Thus, to conclude, I would like to suggest that our attentiveness to the stranger reflects our attentiveness to God. The openness of our churches is a sign of our embeddedness in the gospel. 'So let us not neglect to offer hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it' (NRSV Hebrews 13: 2).

St Stephen's is ideally situated to continue and deepen its ministry of hospitality - not just to vulnerably housed and homeless people, but to all people who pass through the open doors - tourists, local residents, local employees to name but a few; all of these people may be angels in disguise. Are we ready to receive them?

*Revd Catherine Duce
Assistant Curate at St Stephen's and Venue Coordinator*

The participating churches and synagogue who were core partners of the Westminster Winter Shelter from October 2015 to May 2016 included:

Farm Street (Roman Catholic); Hinde Street (Methodist); Fernhead (Methodist); St James, Piccadilly (Church of England); St Mary of the Angels (Roman Catholic); Notre Dame de France (Roman Catholic); Westminster Cathedral (Roman Catholic); Emmanuel Church (Church of England); Holy Apostles, Pimlico (Roman Catholic); St Paul's Rossmore Road (Church of England); St Patrick's Soho (Roman Catholic); West London Synagogue; St Stephen's Rochester Row (Church of England); All Soul's Club House (Church of England)

I was so thrilled that St. Stephen's agreed to host one night a week in April and May.

I am aware of the connection the Church has always had with Queen Mary's Hostel, and with Church Army. I felt myself thinking if Sister Capel was still with us how thrilled she would be that Napier Hall was opening its doors to 15 people in need of a bed.

After almost fifty years of working in the field of homelessness in many settings I had never worked in a night shelter. I proved to myself that I can still push a full trolley around Sainsbury's! However, these days I needed the help of both Mark and Andy to carry the bags etc. for me. We all worked hard to create a homely, welcoming atmosphere with bright napkins, and flowers to match on the table. Sausages were in high demand at breakfast, and allowing everyone choice about what cereal they liked from a variety pack is all part of creating that homely atmosphere, and respecting guests as individuals without a label.



The night shelter in Napier Hall; a temporary home for 15 guests

To me, touches such as the above enables guests to feel valued and respected. It helps them to have a better day. I am committed to enhancing quality of life to all irrespective of individual plight.

Lastly, without Mark and Andy's help (both of whom also volunteer at the Passage), I would have found certain tasks difficult due to reduced mobility as a 68-year-old, although the hair colour may tell a different story! A night shelter such as this goes far in making a difference to someone else's life. I hope this will continue, and I look forward to being part of this for years to come.

Irene Wood

Cook and member of St Stephen's congregation

My time helping at St Stephen's shelter has been undoubtedly the highlight of this year so far. All the volunteers have been truly generous people, and fortunately, unlike me, they have been fit and strong! I've been humbled by the experience. The homeless guests have been a very interesting group of people with their own experiences and problems.

One evening I was glad to bring along my grandchildren, my son and his partner. All of them were touched. Both kids said it was the best evening they'd ever had and changed their views on homelessness.

My son was very moved and said it put everything into perspective for him. He leads a high flying life and has never had time to think of others less fortunate. I shall definitely sign up again to help in whatever capacity I can next season. I urge anyone who can spare the time to do likewise. You won't regret it and will learn from it. A big well done to Cath who never failed to be cheerful!

Jancy Robbins-Jones

Volunteer from the Almshouses



Andy and Mark in the kitchen, with help from Nora and Tricia from Queen Mary's Hostel

The first time I heard about the shelter was when I was having lunch with Irene. She dropped into the conversation that she'd volunteered me for the task of helping her in the kitchen! Having once been homeless myself I felt this was a good opportunity for me to give something back to the community. I felt I was someone who could relate and identify with the situation faced by many of the guests. I knew what they were going through. Over the nine weeks I helped Irene with the shopping, I picked up free sandwiches from Pret a Manger, I welcomed guests on the door as they arrived, I set up the internet, lent to us by the Home for Good group, and I washed up a lot of plates! It was great being part of a team.

In the kitchen I learned new skills such as how to peel potatoes and vegetables, under Irene's strict instructions! All the volunteers got on so well together - there was a great camaraderie. The big thing about it was that, in previous jobs, I'd always been told I had people skills.

This volunteering gave me the opportunity to build on that and welcome guests at the door. I could really identify with their situation. Over the nine weeks, I've felt really positive helping at St Stephen's. In fact, the one week I had off, I felt quite depressed. I appreciate the fact that St Stephen's parish has welcomed me so much. Since Christmas I've really valued feeling part of the community. I wish all the best for this year's guests. If the shelter happens next year I will definitely look forward to being part of it again.

*Andy Stewart
Volunteer from the Passage*

I am a Roman Catholic lady, and I became involved in the West London Churches Winter Night Shelter through volunteering in the one based at a St Patricks Soho, a Roman Catholic parish, for five months last year, which I very much enjoyed. This year, in the Catholic church, we are celebrating a "Jubilee Year of Mercy", inaugurated by Pope Francis, which invites us to contemplate the mercy of God revealed to us in the face of Jesus, his Son. It offers us the opportunity to reflect on how we might better radiate and reflect the tender love of God in our world and to seek to draw others into experiencing that love and mercy. There is a particular emphasis on the exercise of Christian mercy to evangelise and transform, both ourselves in our awareness for our need for the mercy of God, and wider society, as the light of Christ is reflected in the works of mercy it inspires. It was therefore particularly joyful for me to be able to participate in the night shelter project again this year, and I was very glad to be part of St Stephen's new night shelter, which started up for the first time this April.

One of the things I enjoy most about West London churches night shelter is that there is always a sense of equality between the guests and volunteers, and a very real sense of community and fraternity. Homeless or not, we all come together, share the same meals together, chat together and sleep on the same floor together. St Stephen's night shelter had a particularly nice atmosphere, with someone playing the piano in the background during dinner, fresh flowers on the tables, lace effect table cloths and food cooked from scratch. As the weeks passed, we all developed a real sense of friendship as we got to know all the guests and fellow volunteers.

I feel it is important to emphasise that the homeless are just like everyone else. Many wrongly assume that all homeless are uneducated, lazy, or criminal. Whereas in our shelter, one was a former investment banker who had become homeless after being hit badly by the financial crisis. Another was a highly skilled computer expert, but was struggled to find employment due to a language barrier. Yet another was highly articulate and always smartly dressed and told us how it was the first time he had been homeless and could not wait to get back to 'normal'. One of the young guests would spend most Saturday evenings playing Jenga with Nora the pastoral assistant of a similar age just like any other young person.

Working in the homeless shelter also made me realise the value of choice and freedoms that we take for granted. One of the guests loved fitness, and he would always bring a herbal tea bag to drink before bed. He said that what he missed most was the simple choice of what to eat and when to eat it, what to do and when to do it. The rigid timetable of the homeless shelters and the rich meals, and no knowledge of where the next meal would come from, meant he had actually put on weight since being homeless and his health had suffered. It also made me reflect on the precariousness of all of our lives.

The circumstances under which many of the guests became homeless could happen to any of us through no fault of one's own. One of the guests shared his gradual slide into homelessness after becoming unemployed. For a while, in between jobs, he stayed on friends' couches. He had good quality belongings, was educated, well-groomed and articulate, so it was only after a few months that he realised that he was actually homeless.

It was sad to discover that some of the homeless became so accustomed to their life on the street, sometimes spanning over a decade, that street-life had become their 'home' and 'family', and they struggled to accept accommodation even when it was offered. It also made me realise that having a home is more than just a bed to rest in. Your home provides you with a place in society, a status, a local community, a certain stability to your whole life. All of these become assimilated into your sense of identity, so the loss experienced when one becomes homeless is more than just a material one.



One of the guests was truly inspiring. Despite his poverty, he had a strong belief in Jesus, the power of prayer and Divine Providence. He prayed to the Lord often, and many churches often would let him stay. On the outside, he appeared to own very little, his life seemed miserable and he had been homeless for over a decade. But he said he was happy and knew God had heard all his prayers and provided for him, because he was still alive and in good health.

This was also my first experience of involvement with an Anglican project, and it revealed to me that through collaboration, in love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, we can preserve and promote the shared spiritual and moral truths, as well as the socio-cultural values.

Together as Christians, there was a strong sense of the shared motivation under which we were undertaking these works. We were not just helping the poor as an act of social justice, community building, or social evolution. Rather, we were working out of shared compassion and for the sake of Christ, motivated by Christian mercy, a fruit of the virtue of charity which 'binds all things together in perfect harmony (Colossians 3: 14) in fulfilment of the twofold covenant given to us by our blessed Lord, of love of God and love of neighbour (Mark 12: 29 - 31).

*Kamala Singh
Volunteer from St Patrick's Soho, Roman Catholic Church*


— **PRET FOUNDATION TRUST** —
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With grateful thanks to Giovanna Pasini at the Pret Foundation Trust who supplied us with 16 camp beds, a large toaster and toastie machine for sandwiches, eight 'Hot Chef' aprons and very, very many free sandwiches from the Mortimer Street branch shop. Thanks also to David Coombe at Street Souls for the generous donation of 20 sleeping bags and a large box of toiletries. Thank you to the late Mary Causley and everyone at St Stephen's who donated so generously to the Candlemas Fayre last January.

The funds raised on that day covered most of the shelter costs. Thanks also to Westminster School for concert donations, and for volunteers who stepped forward from the school as well.

Thanks to Erica and Nora for sleeping rough in aid of the wider West London Day Centre's work. Peter Mwaniki from WLDC coordinated all the accommodation support and turnover of guests. Finally, thank you most importantly to many individuals who gave of their time, resources and prayers to sustain this project each week as an offering of compassion and care for our guests.

A FAVOURITE STICKY TOFFEE PUDDING...

75g butter, softened, plus extra for greasing
180g medjool dates, stones removed, finely chopped
1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
75g golden caster sugar
75g light muscovado sugar
2 medium free-range eggs, lightly beaten
180g self-raising flour
1 tsp baking powder
For the toffee sauce
125g unsalted butter
80g dark soft brown sugar
40g golden caster sugar
1 vanilla pod, split
200ml double cream



1. Preheat the oven to 180°C/fan160°C/gas 4. Grease a 2.5 litre ovenproof dish and set aside. Put the dates in a bowl and cover with 275ml hot water. Sprinkle in the bicarbonate of soda and set aside for 10 minutes.
2. Beat the butter and sugars together with an electric hand mixer until light and fluffy. Gradually whisk in the eggs, beating well between each addition.
3. Sift over the flour and baking powder and fold in, then mix in the date mixture with its water. The mixture will be very wet but don't worry. Pour into the greased dish and bake for 30-35 minutes until the sponge is just coming away from the sides of the dish.
4. Meanwhile make the sauce. Melt the butter in a heavy-based saucepan. Add the sugars and vanilla pod, then stir well until the sugar has dissolved. Add the cream and bring up to a vigorous simmer, then bubble for 5 minutes.
5. Once the pudding is done, pour over the hot toffee sauce and serve in generous portions.

You can make the sponge and sauce the day before (keeping them chilled and separate) to allow the flavours to mellow and mingle. Wrap the sponge in cling film and cover the cooled toffee sauce. Heat the sponge through in a preheated oven for 15 minutes. Warm through the toffee sauce, then pour over the hot sponge. The finished sponge can be frozen. Wrap well in cling film, then foil and store in the freezer for up to 2 months. Defrost at room temperature and heat through in an oven, then top with freshly made toffee sauce.

Alison Derham
Volunteer from Westminster School

Some Good News for One Guest!



One shelter guest was called Toma. He was a Bulgarian sculptor with an extraordinary portfolio. On a weekly basis he would perch on the end of his camp bed and proudly show new volunteers his leaflet of art work and sculptures. "This is me" he said. "Look, here is my picture". One week he humbly asked if we could photocopy his leaflet a few more times in colour because it was getting so frayed at the edges. "I had an exhibition in Oxford" he said. "But since I became homeless, I have no transport, I have no address, I have nowhere to exhibit and sell my work".

On Friday nights at St Stephen's David Coombe from Street Souls runs a soup kitchen. It was David who supplied us with 20 free sleeping bags for St Stephen's night shelter. David also runs a charity for artists who have experienced homelessness. Artful Pelican provides access to a gallery and work space. I recommend taking a look at their website and Facebook page: www.artfulpelican.org Thanks to the generosity of David Coombe, our Bulgarian guest now has means of fetching his sculptures from Oxford. He has been offered a temporary place to stay in the basement of David's office, and a place to exhibit and hopefully sell some of his unusual works of art. Whatever, comes of this connection, thank you to David Coombe for his example of stepping out in faith to help Toma.

Other guests were (thus far) less fortunate. Please remember them in your prayers as they return to the streets on 1st June 2016 at the end of the night shelter season. Insecure housing remains one of the most pertinent issues facing people living in London. We must keep it on our agenda here at St Stephen's, even though the night shelter season has ended.

Revd Catherine Duce
Assistant Curate

Six things One Church can do to support Housing and Homelessness

At a recent conference at St Paul's Cathedral Alison Gelder from Housing Justice recommended six things one church can do to support people in housing need and homelessness. Housing Justice is a non-denominational Christian organisation that covers England and Wales. It offers a Christian voice on housing and homelessness. It helps churches help homeless people and it encourages partnership & speaks up for church action.

1) Share stories in your parish about housing need & homelessness. People who are comfortably housed in a congregation are often, through no fault of their own, unaware of the housing issues faced by fellow parishioners in the pews. Housing Justice encourages people who are vulnerably housed to speak out and share their stories, and for fellow members of any congregation to listen and learn about the situation of others. Housing is a live issue for, on average, up to 40% of UK congregations.

2) Be informed about current government policy. It is important to keep abreast of policy changes in our local authority area. Keep informed. It will help us reach out to those in need and to exercise our Christian voice.

3) Ease the pain. There are a multitude of ways in which churches can help in a practical way the vulnerably housed and homeless. Through night shelters, a rent deposit scheme, being an advocate for someone in an organisation, through mentoring and befriending, or offering a room in our homes through the London hosting scheme. See Housing Justice website for more ideas.



4) Get involved in planning. It is now easier than ever for local community groups to get involved in local planning. As a member of the establishment, churches have a particular voice that can speak out for the most vulnerable in our society.

5) Increase housing supply. If you have a spare room, could you take in a lodger at below the market rate? Are members of our congregation landlords who can increase the supply of affordable housing in our area by letting to people who are claiming benefits or on low incomes? Do you know of any empty, unused houses that could be converted into social housing with the help of a Housing Association?

6) Pray. The Bible is rich with themes about finding a home, housing and homelessness. Pray for homeless people in your intercessions. Mark 'Homeless Sunday' on 22nd January 2017 as an opportunity for people to Connect with homeless people, Challenge local politicians and Commit to further action. Keep in touch!

www.housingjustice.org.uk

Alison Gelder
Chief Executive of Housing Justice

