

HOMELESSNESS IN CAMBRIDGE: a report by NATHALIE BOYD

On Tuesday 9th May Jon Canessa, chaplain to the homeless in Cambridge, came to St John's church to speak about homelessness in Cambridge and the Cambridge Churches Homelessness Project. Here is a quick summary of what he said.

Jon is based at St Paul's church and has previously worked with young offenders and volunteered at Jimmy's Night Shelter. He is very familiar with all the issues surrounding homelessness and explained that homelessness is often linked to a number of interlinked and complicated issues such as family breakdown, job loss, drug and mental issues, cuts in benefits and provisions for the more vulnerable members of society.

In the city of Cambridge, provision for the homeless is a third less than a year ago. The rise in homelessness is not specific to Cambridge but is a national trend. Wintercomfort, the homelessness charity based in Victoria Street, is seeing twice as many people through its doors than two years ago. There is a street outreach team in Cambridge that goes around the city centre counting the number of people sleeping in the street early in the morning. The team advises them on services available, exercising what can be described as a "duty of care". Wintercomfort is open seven days a week from 8.30 am and offers hot showers, meals, access to the internet, and washing facilities. Jon works there on Wednesdays.

Jimmy's shelter is no longer a homeless centre but an assessment centre. They have 22 beds. They have key workers who assess the homeless to see whether they have an entitlement to be housed in Cambridge or elsewhere. When they have a housing entitlement somewhere else (because of where they might have lived or grown up before- family links) they are offered a free train ticket to go back and reintegrate into their zone of entitlement.

The government expects all local authorities to ensure that emergency accommodation is available to the homeless during periods of severe weather. Cambridge's policy can be found here:

<https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/sites/default/files/severe-weather-emergency-provision-guidance.pdf>

Local authorities are expected to foot the bill. The programme is called SWEP, Severe Weather Emergency Provision. SWEP was triggered thirteen times in Cambridge two years ago. The problem, explained Jon, is that severe weather is defined as a temperature of zero or below for three days in a row. A temperature of minus nine over one or two days only would not qualify for SWEP. Between ten and fifteen homeless people are found dead on the streets of Cambridge every year. Jon explained that a number of churches in Cambridge have come together to fight this unacceptable reality.

There are different ways of doing that. In Peterborough, churches have teamed up with Hope into Action, a Christian charity, to buy and run houses to provide accommodation and pastoral support for the homeless. This is possible because houses are relatively cheap in Peterborough. In Cambridge such a scheme is made very difficult by the high house prices. This is why churches have come together to create the Cambridge Churches Homelessness Project.

Churches take it in turn to provide overnight accommodation in their common rooms or in the main church building. Volunteers stay overnight to help and supervise; usually four at a time, two sleeping and two staying awake in turn. They also provide an evening meal and breakfast. This is more than a material service as a lot of time is also spent getting to know the homeless guests, listening to their stories, maybe helping them to regain confidence in life and in themselves, building trust if they come for several nights.

There are many ways for churches to engage with the project: volunteering to cook, clean, or provide accommodation in your own church if there is the space, or complement another church's contribution. At the moment 59 homeless people are accommodated by churches on a rota basis. No one gets paid.

Members of St John's thought the talk was very inspiring and we discussed briefly how we might be able to contribute to the scheme. Petra has already volunteered to help at St Paul's.

Jon also answered some questions from the audience including whether to give money or food to people begging on the street as money could be used to buy things like alcohol or drugs. Jon replied that this was a matter of personal choice and pointed out that, at the end, giving is giving.

An interesting video can be found here showing a Cambridge church in action, preparing to receive overnight guests:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=d3vyfAT4IGQ>