

# The Manna Society

## Newsletter

### Christmas 2007



*Working with those in need*

#### The spirit of Christmas

By  
**Margaret Shapland**  
Welfare & Advice Worker



*"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year" - . A Christmas Carol - Charles Dickens*

Charles Dickens was 12 years old when he had to leave school and go to work in a boot-blackening factory as his father was confined to Marshalsea Prison ( the site of which is just around the corner from our centre) for debt.

In many ways it was the defining experience in his life and he later wrote "how so easily I could have been cast away at such an age" – from this experience stemmed his interest in social justice and the effects of poverty.

As another anniversary of Our Lord's birth beckons, I wanted to reflect on some of the things I have witnessed among our centre users and those who know them that keep alive the spirit that Dickens alluded to in his story.

Let me start by telling you something about one of our centre users called Saul. Saul had a significant alcohol abuse problems – I got to know him through him coming into the office to keep in touch with his sister, Enid.

Enid and I tried very hard to persuade Saul that for the sake of his health and being able to function he should consider going to a clinic for detoxification. We applied for a place but as is

the case with most such services, Saul had to wait until a place became available – it would take a little longer as he wanted to bring his dog, who was a really treasured companion, with him when he was admitted. Enid and I kept in touch just so she would know how he was doing as there was no other way for her to contact him apart from through the centre.

He regularly had to go into hospital as he suffered from fits and during that time the centre took care of his dog on occasion or made sure that someone could take care of her. In the

end, fate intervened and Saul had a

heart attack that he was lucky to survive. It

was clear that he could not manage

on his own anymore – I

kept in touch with Saul's

sister and she with me until a

more suitable form of accommodation

was found for Saul.



A couple of months ago, I received a letter from Enid and a picture of Saul – looking so happy and so improved from the

days I had known him. It made me think how lucky he was to have had such a dedicated sister who had maintained contact with him no matter what the circumstances – so many of our centre users have no-one they can call upon and so they form their own community at the centre and this leads me on to a further short anecdote.

*"The outdoor Christmas lights, green and red and gold and blue and twinkling, remind me that most people are that way all year round-- kind, generous, friendly and with an occasional moment of ecstasy." – Harlan Miller*

A short while ago, one of our female centre users who is disabled was robbed as she was going home from the centre - indeed she was not very far from the centre when this happened. She used to take a bus back to where she was living in a neighbouring borough. Since then, she has a taxi to take her home now and I see those colleagues with whom she shares a table at the centre make sure that she is assisted to the taxi so that she can go home safely. It is little gestures like that which show me how much fellowship there is in the centre.

*“The best of all gifts around any Christmas tree: the presence of a happy family all wrapped up in each other.” – Burton Hillis*

Finally, one more story about how one of our centre users was re-united with her family. Alexandra had been coming to the centre for some while; she had been volunteering but had become increasingly withdrawn and unwell - everyone had become increasingly anxious about the fact she was a vulnerable girl who was rough-sleeping – she was not entitled to receive benefits in the Untied Kingdom and eventually was admitted to hospital due to her mental health problems. We had tried to offer her temporary short-term accommodation as a respite but to no avail.

Despite the unhappy fact that she needed to go into hospital, it gave her a chance to rest and she recovered very well – she also received some help with a short-term memory loss that we thought might have been caused by some past

trauma and she was able to remember her name and her place of birth and from there it was possible to track her relatives in Lithuania, with whom she was able to get back in touch; travel documents were obtained and tickets for her return home. The last day we saw her, we provided some funds for fares to the airport and for food overnight as she was travelling very early in the morning. One of our centre users went with her and kept her company until she was ready to go through the security check to air-side. She looked as they said “As she should have looked – happy, with her hair done and looking her best”. The following day, her friend at the centre received a call from her family in Lithuania that she had returned home safe and sound to her family.

These are tales of our extended family at a time in the year when thoughts of family come very much to the fore and we remember those who are dear to us and those who are not lucky enough to have their own family about them, for whatever reason, Finally, I just wanted to end with a Christmas Blessing.

*A Christmas Blessing  
During this Christmas season,  
May you be blessed  
With the spirit of the season,  
which is peace,  
The gladness of the season,  
which is hope,  
And the heart of the season,  
which is love*

**A very happy, peaceful and joyous Christmas to you all!**



Manna Society Committee Members, Left to Right: Marc Thurgood, Lynda Smith, Bill Dodwell, Nannette Ffrench, Cha Power, Pauline Emmerson & Tony Charlton.  
Inset: Alex Hobbs

## Is this the End of Soup Runs?

By

**Bandi Mbubi**

Campaigns Worker



As I write, the London Borough Councils are preparing the 10<sup>th</sup> Private Bill, a draft London Local Authorities Bill, promoted with the assistance of Westminster City Council, to set up designated areas where the distribution of food and refreshments are banned, aimed at preventing soup runs. This proposal is included with a number of less controversial measures. Though consultations to the London Borough Councils officially closed on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, comments received after this first consultation deadline will still be taken into consideration once the Bill is in Parliament and affected bodied will be able to petition against the Bill.

Westminster City Council, the main promoter of this bill, perceives soup runs as essentially “public order issues” regularly requiring police assistance and fostering the dependency of vulnerable people. It claims that many people who use soup runs are actually housed or are former rough sleepers saving money. It argues that soup runs do not do enough to engage people with services that could help (BBC News, 11/09/2007 & 26/10/2007). This is very much contested by a great number of people involved with helping homeless and vulnerable people.

As recently highlighted by Jad Adams, the Chair of Nightwatch, a Croydon-based soup run, in his response to this proposal, soup runs are often part of a programme which includes aspects of resettlement and support to homeless, formerly homeless, and vulnerable people, to start work or education.

Critics of soup runs fail to recognise the role they play in supporting vulnerable people to lead productive lives. It is not a question of thrusting a bowl of soup into people’s hands. It is instead a first point of contact and as a symbol of society’s concern for homeless and other vulnerable people. And I think that it is in recognition of this moral social responsibility that many councils, major funders, such as the National Lottery, and organisations, such as Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury, continue to lend their

support to soup runs by providing money and food.

Perhaps perversely, whilst charity food and refreshments would be banned, under this proposal, exemptions would be made, for instance, to people taking in sporting events or giving out free samples outside retail premises. Meaning that free taste offers to tempt shoppers into cafes and shops would be allowed, but would be illegal in the context of a soup run. I strongly believe that we should continue to make this point when this bill is finally deposited in Parliament on 27<sup>th</sup> November.

As Jad Adams has eloquently put it, sharing food is an essential part of the Christian message and is enshrined in scripture and recognised in ritual. This proposed ban tests the very foundation of our faith and may not stop many of us to continue the distribution of food and refreshments as before. What is a decent and peaceful activity may turn into a series of confrontations in which people would be hurt and councils and other authorities brought into disrepute. It is simply immoral and unworkable to enact such a law.

We would welcome your support in this effort and are interested to hear from you about this proposal. Would you please raise this issue with your local councillors and MPs so that together we can stop this ludicrous move from going ahead. Tomorrow may just be too late.

*Merry Christmas!*

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## Personal reflection of a mental health nurse

By  
Marc Thurgood



My first mental health advice session at the Manna; an apprehensive experience that began halfway up the street as I approached a group of men with beer cans and dogs, wearing many layers of soiled clothing and carrying large rucksacks and blankets – the familiar signs of the rough sleeper.

Inside, a busy hall full of at least one hundred more similar souls who all, it seemed, viewed me with at best curiosity, and at worst suspicion. As well they might, because, as I came to realise over what was to be the next seven years of my time working at the centre, this group of people have every reason to be wary of people like me. In order to understand this, two common misconceptions about mental illness and homelessness need to be highlighted.

1. *“Many homeless people have mental illness due to the traumatic experience of homelessness.”* Mental health problems are four times as common among homeless people as in the general population. However, studies of homeless people with mental illness show that, for the majority, their mental health problems began before their homelessness and often led directly to a loss of accommodation (e.g. an individual developing the frightening and disabling experience of hearing voices and being unable to think clearly and then being evicted due to rent arrears). This is often preventable and can reflect a failure of services to quickly identify when someone is in trouble. Once accommodation has been lost the hardship of being homeless can then worsen and add to an individual’s existing mental health problems (Dean & Craig 1999.)

2. *The myth of the ‘gentleman tramp’; homelessness as a romantic lifestyle choice.* The majority of homeless people do not originally choose to be and have undergone a gradual process of social exclusion. A number of vulnerability factors for becoming homeless can often be identified in an individual’s history, and were commonly related to me by the people I met at the Manna (see below.)

## Factors that increase the risk of homelessness (www.crisis.org.uk):

- **Institutionalisation:** time in local authority care as a child, imprisonment, previous service in the Armed Forces.
- **Health:** alcohol & drug misuse, mental health problems including depression, schizophrenia, personality disorder & learning disability, experience of childhood abuse, a combination of these factors.
- **Relationship breakdown:** conflict with parents / step-parents, marital / relationship breakdown (including domestic violence), bereavement, lack of social support networks.
- **Education & work:** learning difficulties & literacy problems, exclusion from school, lack of qualifications, unemployment.
- **Housing:** housing shortage, previous experience of homelessness.
- **Financial:** debts, especially rent or mortgage arrears, benefit problems.

## The potential consequences of homelessness

People with severe and enduring mental health problems are at higher risk of losing accommodation and may present with any number of the above vulnerability factors and negative experiences of life. Once homeless a cycle of exclusion occurs that may involve the following:

- Onset or exacerbation of harmful drug & alcohol use.
- Contact with criminal justice system (e.g. begging, trespass, acquisitive crime to survive and / or to support an addiction.)
- Negative experience of discrimination & rejection by the public and service professionals (the stigma of homelessness, offending, mental illness & addiction.)
- Loss of consistent contact with health services (often characterised by repeated emergency compulsory admissions into hospital when things reach crisis point or ‘last resort’ presentations to A&E departments, with poor continuity of care following hospital discharge reinforced by the discriminatory label of being of ‘No Fixed Abode’)
- Increased risk of violence, persecution & exploitation by others.

- Increasing isolation, loss of self-esteem and confidence, alienation & defensive mistrust of others (the reduced ability to effectively seek & receive help.)
- Progressive deterioration in mental & physical health.

As a result of the above processes, many of the people I was to meet at the centre had had unhappy experiences of a range of services that were intended to help them. The Manna provides a different experience – an open door, few questions asked, flexible and practical help with compassion and tolerance. In this environment and with the right approach, the real person can emerge from beneath the ‘street-wise’ stereotype.

**Barry’s story** (name and some details are changed to maintain confidentiality). Barry arrived in London from his hometown after a childhood of abandonment by his parents and the experience of abuse in children’s homes. He didn’t learn to read and write very well and wasn’t able to hold down a job for long. In his late teens he began to develop schizophrenia – finding it hard to concentrate and organise his thoughts, hearing critical and derogatory voices and believing that he was under surveillance and being persecuted by others. In reality he also experienced much of the disadvantage described earlier, which only made things worse.

Drinking heavily, leaving hostel accommodation when his fear became unbearable and keeping others at arm’s length became his survival strategy and led to a life of street homelessness for twenty years.

Despite this, he retained a keen sense of humour and gradually, over four years of contact with my team at the Manna (a place that unconditionally accepted him and to which he kept returning), he finally took up the offer of supported accommodation and began to receive treatment for his mental health problems.

Please support the Manna Society – it regularly transforms the lives of people like Barry.

## References

[www.crisis.org.uk](http://www.crisis.org.uk)

Dean R Craig T (1999) *Pressure Points: Why People with Mental Health Problems Become Homeless* London: Crisis

## The Clothing Store

By

**Pauline Emmerson**

Committee Member



Where would the Manna be without the unsung heroes operating this service? It sounds so simple, a clothing store to distribute clothes and bedding for those in need. However, the clothing store can only operate because of the dedication of those involved, it requires much hard work, organisation and humour. Additionally the store is run with a true spirit of generosity and joy.

There are many stories I could tell you as an ex nurse at The Manna, of the occasions when the clothing store staff assisted in the health care of people who were in some distress, the simple provision of a shower and new clothes restored their dignity in a way that I could not. I might be able to clean and re dress a wound, but that is no consequence to the human spirit if I sent them on their way in filthy clothes, often stained with the exudates from a wound or injury.

The whole operate begins with donations from you, often Pat Flood collects items on his round, or kind people bring them into the centre. The workers then sort the clothes according to their suitability. Some items are excess to requirements for example, women’s or children’s clothes, and these are passed on to a ‘rag man’ for which we get paid.

The workers in the clothing store Rose, Jackie and Pascal (Melley) do all this; they then sort the bags out according to type of clothes (trouser, jumpers, shirts, socks etc) and size. The clothing store is then ready for action.

Finally, twice a week, our service users are invited to take what they need; usually there is a limit of three garments. Normally, around 30 people per session use the store. All items are free, and the clothing store staff enable this to happen with much care and consideration to the people concerned. There is also of course an amount of chit chatting and conversation involved all round, it is never quiet, but seldom rowdy.

Following the session, the workers tidy up and prepare for the next session and inevitable sort out more clothes.

We all take clothes so much for granted; we can choose what we wear and rarely are so limited by choice. The clothing store enables people to have choice and clean clothes or even warm bedding for the night. At this time of year we might dwell on the story of a child born in a stable, a refugee with very little, how much closer to God are those we help, please enable us to continue this valuable work.

Items badly needed at present are shoes (especially trainers), winter coats, jeans and men's underwear.



## Why so many needy people?

By  
**Nannette Ffrench**  
Committee Member



It is not unusual to see someone sitting at a table in the Centre - head in their hands and fast asleep. This is extremely poignant and deeply upsetting to those of us who look on. The lack of sleep for those without a home or for those 'bedding down' in uncomfortable and unsuitable places can be soul destroying. I was in the Centre a few days ago, it was closing time and people were moving out. I noticed that one man did not stir because he was still sleeping. I saw one of the staff rouse him and he too moved out - outside with nowhere to go! I shed tears as I made my own way to the bus stop and home! Scenes like this bring alive the tragedy that exists in the lives of so many.

We frequently talk and reminisce about the 'early days' in the Manna Centre. There have been incredible changes in the layout of the premises and changes for the better in the way the Centre is operated. This is wonderful, thank God it enables us to give a better service to the many who call in every day. We have however always asked ourselves the question, and still do, as to why so many needy people, twenty five years on, continue to call each day, those who truly require a Centre such as ours. Are we

failing, nothing has changed in this respect since the 'early days'? We are fully aware of the gap between the huge wealth of some people and the grinding poverty of others. To see a poor person - head in their hands and fast asleep in the warmth and security of a day centre makes us ask ourselves what part we all play in this injustice.

God willing, we will continue with our services to the homeless, the poor and the victims of an unjust world. The Manna Society exists to do that, and with the support of so many we will try to do it very well!

*"We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets for the future that is not our own"*

Archbishop Romero.

## Memories of my first Saturday morning at the Manna Centre ten years ago

By  
**Denise Lawson**  
Saturday Volunteer



I arrived at the Manna center very early as I was anxious to do my share of the work. There was a small line of men waiting at the door. They parted to let me through with many good mornings.

The potatoes had been peeled and were ready and my first job was to chop about ten pounds of the biggest onions I'd ever seen. I needed the fan on, the windows opened and my glasses on to stop me from crying uncontrollably. While this was going on, the main room was buzzing with first arrivals. Huge piles of filled buns and doughnuts had been put out and two urns filled with tea. The crowd inside was growing.

When the cook arrived, she set to, breaking up forty tins of corned beef and crumbling them into four enormous trays. The onions and potatoes were cooked, the potatoes mashed and the corned beef hash was set to cook.

After this, I stood about feeling like a spare part while the hall slowly filled with men – young and old and many looking as though they had spent the night in the cold. The mugs and plates started to come back – there must have been two hundred. First we washed them in soapy water, then in rinsing water then they were put into a huge sterilizer for two minutes –then back on the tea trolley.

Next meal was – cereal and more tea. The place was filling up. Some took their bowls of cornflakes into the open area and sat at picnic tables. There was an outer area for those who wanted to smoke. Cans of lager etc have to be handed over before anyone is allowed to come in. I saw that there was no judgment of anyone at the Manna Centre – only a welcome and free food and clothes. Many men asked for a Bic razor and towel and had a shower and shave. The water was hot and the bathrooms very clean. The standards are extremely high.

I saw only a few women but one made a deep impression on me. She had had her baby taken from her when it was born many years ago. She had never got over it. She carried a bag around, full of stuffed toys and baby dolls and talked to her self about being careful how you “hold him”. She had a boyfriend, who looked after her. Every now and then she hit him for no reason, but he didn't seem to mind.

The cereal bowls rolled in and more mugs. I began to feel I knew the mugs personally!

At 11.30 the corned beef hash was served, along with a vat of beans. Vegetarian hash had also been made, and soup for those who preferred. The hall was full and people were spilling out into the street. One hundred and eighty people were now eating at the Manna Centre – no one was turned away. All were served cheerfully by the men at the counter. Some of those who helped had once been clients themselves but had been offered flats and support and were living a more settled life.

I learned that at weekends food, showers and housing advice were available; weekdays medical care and clothes were also added to these services. Outside the window of the kitchen, I could see groups of men who were playing cards, doing crosswords and reading – it seemed like a little meeting place for some of them. They were laughing and joking and seemed very comfortable. I could not believe how tired I was feeling by this time. I had washed two hundred mugs five times over and the dirty plates kept on coming.

There were three young students doing a study on homelessness in the City. They were staying at a Jesuit house for the weekend and when they went back to school they were going to have to do an assembly on what they'd found. They moved around looking at different things and talking to some of the men and helping serve food. They seemed a bit stunned by the numbers. After eating, someone took out a pair of hair clippers and proceeded to cut hair in the yard. He gave one man after another a very short cut. After that he came and asked for a broom and swept the yard.

I learned that the charity Crisis was given food and shared it out to places like the Manna Centre. The standard of food is very high partly because big supermarkets and stores like Marks and Spencer's give food. The yogurts that were for pudding were accompanied by Belgian chocolates and lovely biscuits - washed down again with tea!!

At 1.30 the cry went up that the Centre was closing and we all set to washing floors and tables, kitchen walls and sinks and restacking the mugs ready for tomorrow. All I can say, it was the hardest morning's work I'd ever done. I have been coming quite regularly since that day. My daughter helps me and even my son and son-in-law have been known to come and do some washing up on a Saturday. The Manna Centre and our friends there are now very dear to us all.

*Merry*   
*Christmas* 

## Manna Centre – Christmas Appeal 2007

It costs **£29,000 a month** to run the Manna Centre. The work we do here is a compassionate Christian response to homelessness and poverty. We are dependent on the goodwill of our supporters for our continued existence.

Would you like to support the work of the Manna Centre by making a one-off donation



or

perhaps consider funding our work on a longer term basis by filling in a **Standing Order** form? If you are a taxpayer and would like to add another 28% to your donation, at no extra expense to yourself, you can do so by simply Gift-Aiding your donation.

Perhaps you would consider leaving us a **legacy** in your will?

However you choose to support our work we are indeed most grateful.

May God bless you in this holy season & throughout the coming year.

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I would like to donate £ \_\_\_\_\_ to the Manna Centre. (Cheques payable to “The Manna Society”)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here  and sign below.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Standing Order Form

Name and Address of your Bank/Building Society;

To the Manager of \_\_\_\_\_ Bank/Building Society

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Post Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Instruction to your Bank/Building Society Manager:

*Please pay into the account of the Manna Society – Co-operative Bank plc account No. 50109537, Sort Code 08-92-99,*

*The sum of £ \_\_\_\_\_ (amount in words: \_\_\_\_\_)*

*Commencing on (date) \_\_\_\_\_*

*And also the same amount in every succeeding MONTH / 3 MONTHS / YEAR (circle one as appropriate)*

*On \_\_\_\_\_ (date of month)*

*Until further notice, charging the same to my account:*

Name \_\_\_\_\_ (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Post Code \_\_\_\_\_

**Bank/Building Society Details:**

Account Name:.....

Account Number:.....Sort Code:.....

**\*\*\* Please return completed form to The Manna Society, 6 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP \*\*\***