



The Manna Society
Serving the poor for 30 years: 1982-2012



The Manna is 30!

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



This year, we are celebrating our 30th anniversary since Nannette Ffrench founded the Manna Society in 1982. The R.C. Archdiocese of Southwark generously offered the premises from which we have since operated from. We thank God for His providence and for inspiring Nannette ‘to not harden her heart’ when she heard His call to work with people who find themselves in unfortunate circumstances. To celebrate our 30th Anniversary we have reproduced two articles from previous Newsletters, Nannette on the Manna’s beginnings on page 3 and Fr Michael Cooley’s article on the history of 6 Melior Street (the Manna Centre’s address) on page 7.

Because of our Christian understanding, then as now, we have always believed in the power of love and acceptance. For us, providing to homeless people the necessities of life such as food, shower facilities, clothing, medical care, housing, furniture and recently adult education are not ends in themselves, but means of helping them restore their dignity, self-respect and self-esteem. We accompany people in their journeys towards more meaningful existence and more independent living.

I am encouraged by signs of positive change in society’s attitude towards homeless people during the time I have been involved with the Manna Society. Over the years, I have seen greater awareness of homelessness issues. Services tend nowadays to work closer together than I can remember when I first started working with homeless people over ten years ago. The struggle though is not yet over, but it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the progress that has been made, the distance we have travelled as a society. We have come a long way since the time of the film ‘Cathy come home’ that painted so well the trauma of homelessness in the early 1980s.

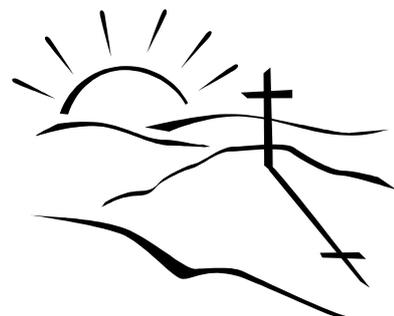
There has been too a strong political will on the part of successive governments to tackle rough sleeping through various policies and measures that have largely reduced the number of people on the streets. Local authorities and service providers have progressively come to cooperate

more with each other than in the past. This has not been the result of chance, but deliberate action on the part of all stakeholders to work together. For instance, in London, both the previous and current Mayors have shown a strong determination to help reduce homelessness in the capital. In order to achieve this goal, the Mayor of London, through his director of housing, coordinates operations by local authorities and major service providers. After many years of continued decrease in the number of people sleeping rough, recently however, the number of street homeless people has started to rise again. If this trend continues, it will be a complete reversal of the last 20 years of success in moving people off the streets and into a more settled lifestyle.

As we celebrate our 30th anniversary, it is important for us to thank all the many people, churches, trusts and organisations who have kept us afloat. One thing I have always heard Nannette say is that God always provides; He always speaks if we care to listen. And I have seen this happen whilst I have worked here at the Manna Centre, even when things get tough. Somehow, at the eleventh hour, we manage to have enough for those who turn to us for assistance. But one thing I have also been conscious of is that often God speaks and provides through the people He sends our way. In that sense, He has used you to be the channel through which He speaks and provides.

Our management committee too deserve a big thank you for the way in which they guide and support the work of the Manna Society, ensuring that we continue to reflect Christ’s message of love and acceptance. We are fortunate to have a very experienced and dedicated staff, paid and unpaid, who work with the 200 people or so who daily visit the Manna Centre. It is thanks to their hard work that we have such a friendly and orderly environment where people can begin to find peace with themselves and with those around them.

May the peace of Easter be with us all!



Manna's beginning.

By
Nannette Ffrench
Manna Society's Founder



I am privileged to have been around when God built what is now known as the Manna Centre. As is often the case, a new beginning can often be linked to a particular chapter in one person's life. We each have only our own story to tell – this is a chapter in mine. During the latter part of 1982 I was coming through a rather dark period in my life. I found it a frightening experience. Life had been fairly clear cut up till then. A passage from the Psalms, "O that today you would listen to my voice, harden not your heart," broke into the darkness. Somehow that glimmer of light let me see and, in a strange way, feel the pain and the injustice on the streets around me and I felt I was being called to do something about it.

Consequently, I approached Bishop Henderson, then area bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark, and I asked him for a property. When he asked me what I would do with it, I remember answering that I did not know, but I would open the doors and we would be shown. I was given the keys for the building at 6 Melior Street, SE1, around the Feast of St Francis of Assisi (4th October) 1982. The building was and continues to be given freely to the Manna Society by the RC Diocese of Southwark and for this we are truly grateful. It had been a nursery school in the past but was no longer being used and was badly in need of repairs. The roof leaked and there was no electricity, water or furniture. One of the first visitors was my brother, Barry, and we lit a candle and prayed together.

Once the doors were open people began coming in – calling for many different reasons. Some of the men who came had overnight accommodation at a men's hostel in Tooley Street nearby. It was winter and they had nowhere to go during the day. People, especially from the different churches in the area began to call and offer help and support and there was lots to do. A frequent visitor, James O'Hara (who spent his nights in the park as he was barred from the hostel), told me one morning that he

knew where we could get bread for nothing. James introduced me to Pino at the Bakery in Bermondsey Street. For years we collected all the bread we needed free of charge – surely manna from heaven!

The number of callers increased and a Drop In Centre seemed to be emerging. Three priests came to see me to find out what the building was being used for and as a result of that meeting I felt we needed to name the building. So, the Manna was named in March 1983 when I claimed the building for the poor and named it The Manna Centre. Manna, because the bread we were given was distributed freely every day; manna for me personally, and for many people visiting every day. A nearby garage wrote the name on a car number plate (paid for by instalments) and the "Manna Centre" was put up on the wall outside – where it still is today.

In 1985 Ray Towey, a consultant anaesthetist at Guy's Hospital, became interested in what was taking place. He was to play a significant role in the development of the Manna Centre. He, as a person and with his gifts, was just what the Manna needed. Ray set aside a lot of time for discussion and work to put together a Constitution. Having a Constitution was a step in the direction of applying for charitable status. The first Annual General Meeting of The Manna Society was held on 25 October 1985. The Chairperson was Ray Towey and a management committee was elected. In May 1986 the Constitution was well in place and an extraordinary general meeting of the Society was called on 30 May to accept it. This was required before it could be presented finally to the Charities Commission. The Constitution was unanimously accepted and in July 1986 the Society attained charitable status.

People, too many to mention, by their lives, gifts, and the contributions they have so generously given, have all brought The Manna Society to where and what it is today. To all of you who by your generosity have kept us in existence for the last 30 years I would like to say a genuine thank you and may God bless you for your kindness to the poor.

Winter blues

By

Karolina Muszynska

Welfare & Advice Worker



The winter is nearly over - what a relief! Personally I enjoy all of the seasons of the year but as a Manna Day Centre advice worker I do struggle during the winter time. Why? Before I explain that let me just tell you a bit more about our work in the advice office. What exactly do we do here?

Manna's advice office is open 7 days per week. It is a drop-in service, on first come first serve basis. We aim to see at least six people every day and although we prioritise people from Southwark, we are open to everyone, regardless of their local connection. As we are very busy day centre, the demand for advice exceeds the supply. In other words there are more people who need our help than we are able to assist. That means that anyone who wants to see an advisor has to come very early, sometimes as early as at 5 am to make sure they will be seen. Manna Centre opens its door to homeless people at 8:30am so often people have to queue for over 3 hours outside to receive assistance.



In general we try to deal with every issue that our clients bring. And although most of the problems are housing related we do not limit our advice to this one particular area. Homelessness involves all sorts of issues. Homeless people do not have addresses so we allow them to use our address for correspondence purposes. Homeless people often lose their documents so we assist them to get replacements. We support people who face deportation, we advise people about their welfare rights, we help to make benefits claims, social fund application, benefit appeals, we negotiate debt repayments, we allow our clients to use our office phone, we advocate on their behalf etc. Of course some of the problems presented to us require more specialised advice than we are capable of giving and in these cases

we refer or signpost our clients to more specialised advice services.

As I mentioned before, housing issues are the biggest part of our work. Every day we are assisting our clients who do not have a place to sleep to find one, and believe me, this is not an easy task. Housing options in London are limited; homelessness services and housing providers are oversubscribed. The three housing options we can offer our clients are (1) a referral to a hostel, (2) a referral to a night shelter and (3) assistance to find private rented accommodation. It sounds good but in practice it is much more complicated than it sounds. Let's have a closer look at these three options.

Hostels - although there are plenty of them in London, all of them have their own requirements in respect to applicants. Some of them accept only people from particular London boroughs so

to apply for a place you need to prove that you have at least a six months local connection to a particular borough. Some of them serve only people with specific support needs, for example substance abuse or mental health problems. All have requirements in regards to the age and sex of applicants. Some hostels accept referrals only from specific, named services. Hostels normally have waiting lists and can seldom give an exact time as to how long it will be before a place becomes available.

Night shelters – the name says it all. Night shelters offer emergency accommodation overnight. They are usually run by charitable organisations and provide a bed for the night and are closed during the day. During the winter time, several winter shelters open their doors to help homeless people survive the cold weather. They usually open in December and close in March. As the demand for such accommodation is very high and as there are not enough winter shelters they are often full.

Finding private rented - this is a difficult and time consuming task. The majority of our customers are in receipt of benefits and have no

savings to cover deposits or rent in advance. The majority of landlords do not want to accept housing benefit and require a 4 weeks deposit plus 4 weeks rent in advance. Our first task is to find a landlord who will accept tenants who are in receipt of benefits and will be happy with just 4 weeks rent in advance - the amount a client can borrow from the Social Fund. That may take a lot of time and although it does happen that we can place someone within a week, normally it takes several weeks or months. Once the landlord is found and the property is seen and accepted, we immediately make an application for a Crisis Loan (to try and obtain the 4 weeks rent in advance). Landlords are reluctant to leave their properties empty for long and will not take on a new tenant until the 4 weeks rent in advance is obtained. Obtaining a loan from the Social Fund can be a difficult matter too, if you have ever applied for one you know exactly what I mean.

So yes, winter is nearly over and I am glad. During the winter time the availability of accommodation slows down and the demands get really high. No one wants to be outside when it is cold. Our customers have to queue in the dark and cold for hours to make sure they will be seen but we are rarely able to offer them a quick fix to their housing problems. Waiting time for a hostel is around 2 months, night shelters are often full. Our clients get desperate and hopeless. It is so frustrating to have to say to a homeless person: 'I'm sorry but we have nothing at the moment, please come and see me again in a couple of days' or 'We referred you, you are on the waiting list for this hostel but it may take up to 2 months to get a place'. Although I understand that we can do only what we can do, that makes me feel rather powerless.

A typical day at the centre

Survey results of who used the Manna Centre on Saturday 4th Feb. 2012

	Numbers	%
Male	166	93
Female	12	7
Sleeping Rough	80	45
Council/HA flat	46	26
Hostel	19	11
Squat	15	8
Friends	11	6
Other	7	4

Ethnic Origin	Numbers	%
Central & Eastern Europeans (CEE)	54	30
English	50	28
Black African	18	10
European	17	10
Scottish	10	6
Black British	8	4
Irish	7	4
Asian	5	3
Black Caribbean	5	3
Other	3	2
Welsh	1	1

NB: 6 people refused to take part in survey.
Therefore not recorded in stats.



Homelessness – a sham crisis?

By

Margaret Shapland

Welfare & Advice Worker



In a recent Mail Online article, one of their columnists stated that the number of people rough sleeping had been greatly exaggerated – at one point referring to homelessness as a “sham crisis”.

Part of the thesis was that there was a vested interest among organisations working in the homelessness sector reporting increased numbers as that insured the maintenance of grants etc.

I am not really sure where this impression has come from but maybe he should spend a day in a centre working with homeless and vulnerable people to see whether that might change his opinion as I am sure that he would see that

- a) homelessness is manifested in many forms – rough sleeping being just one but many homeless fall into the hidden homeless category being in uncertain accommodation with friends or their extended family or at this time of the year in night shelters
- b) that the numbers of homeless clients is increasing and we know that this is true of those approaching us who have become homeless – in our last quarterly report, our statistics showed that there had been 9% more clients approaching the service, the majority concerned with finding housing. This increase is fairly consistent and the number of visits made by clients is also increasing – does this indicate a lessening in demand – I think not. The recent report on rough sleeping numbers in London indicates that this has risen by 25% and every sense you have as a worker tells you that the need is as great if not greater. When I last looked at our figures, the number of clients that we were working with in any one month looking for housing came to 107
- c) that the pressure on those organisations that are operating is increasing due to closure of services, increasing localism in services which though understandable leaves services such as ours which has always been traditionally open access carrying an even greater burden

- d) that more and more their homelessness is relating to changing economic circumstances and that the uncertainty in the economy is causing individuals who would have been long-term employees to either take employment at a much reduced salary or are in work that is materially less secure than their previous employment

As far as maintaining grants, like other small voluntary organisations working in the sector our funds are largely driven by the generosity of our donors and through approaching those funds and trusts whose criteria for funding includes the relief of homelessness (and not government money) – an area that has become increasingly competitive.

I would like to ask if the writer of that article would consider any of the following as “sham”

Samira – escaping from the threat of violence

A client who had previously been put into housing by the centre brought this young lady to us. She had been living in Manchester and a neighbour had been threatening her with a knife and the individual concerned had been charged but had been released on bail. He came back again to harass her and she phoned her friend in London in fear. He advised her to come down to London out of immediate danger – she left immediately and he introduced her to us the following day.

We wrote a homelessness application on the basis of her escaping violence, which local authorities have a duty to respond to and this resulted in her being placed in temporary accommodation in Southwark.

Abraham – picking himself up from redundancy

This was a really well-educated and industrious man in his thirties who had worked for the last four years for one company. He worked for an organisation that specialised in commercial lettings. Unfortunately the firm went bust and he was left without employment. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to find another job before his savings ran out and he was unable to pay rent on a privately rented property.

We placed him in a night shelter that is open throughout the year and it took him three months

to get back into work, though at a much lower salary than he had previously enjoyed. Whilst in the shelter, we did some further work to find some affordable private rented accommodation and because he was able to stay in the shelter until he had amassed enough for a deposit and rent in advance, he was able to seek accommodation on the open private rented market which tends to offer greater flexibility on rent than that governed by acceptance of housing benefit.

Darius – moving back into work following a period of sickness

We were approached by the local mental health team about a young Eastern European man who was getting over a bout of depression. He had been working in another European country for seven years and due to economic circumstances in that country the possibilities of work dried up. The unfortunate effect of not being able to support himself is that he sunk into depression.

He found a job working in the construction industry and we were able to find a landlord willing to offer a room at a very reasonable £60 a week. To cover his up-front costs, we obtained funding from two sources to cover a deposit and he moved in just about a month ago.

I have been re-reading “Death of a Salesman” by Arthur Miller recently and the main character Willy Loman, an elderly salesman who has lost his job and is experiencing those feelings of being used up and tossed aside. Willy Loman’s wife makes a comment in the play that

“He’s not the finest character that ever lived. But he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid.”

Arthur Miller in an interview given to Humanities magazine in 2001 interpreted that statement to be about the care and support that Loman might have expected from his family or from government or society. Well, we are all aware of how strained or non-existent that support can be in today’s world, so it falls to organisations like ours to step up to the plate. So, Mr Doughty of the Mail, we would argue that we are very far away from homelessness being a “sham crisis” and as a humane society it is very much our duty to ensure that attention is paid.

History of 6 Melior Street

by

Fr Michael Cooley

(La Salette Church, Melior Street)



“Hundreds of the poor, living in Pariatealia Place (where Snowsfield School now stands) and the courts, passages, squares and rents so thickly surrounding it, flock daily from eleven till one to the soup-kitchen.”

That was in 1860. There was a Baptist Chapel then where the Manna Centre now stands. That must have been the Melior Street soup kitchen. The catholic church was only opened in May 1861.

*“In December 1860 the temperature in London dropped to below freezing, and remained so for an entire month: among the labouring poor, thousands of people were faced with deprivation and even death. In January 1861, the **Morning Post** reported that ‘The more the cold increased without, the greater were the squalor and misery within,’ and it commissioned John Hollingshead, a journalist, to discover the true extent of the distress that the weather had inflicted.*

He reported:

If anyone will muster up courage sufficient for the task, and visit the people of the district, he will find more misery, wretchedness, and almost starvation than he would care to see often.

I could point to Palmer’s Rents – I think the next turning to Pariatealia Place; in one house would be found a blind girl, who, in the summer time, works at fancy knitting, in the City, but who, from illness and other causes, is so reduced that she cannot pursue her usual avocations. She has had no relief but the bread and soup the Melior Street soup kitchen has supplied.

Three doors nearer Snow’s Fields may be found five or six families in a small house. On the ground floor is a labourer with a wife and four small children. Nearly all the furniture and clothing they had has been disposed of, in order that the children, one of whom is ill, might not absolutely starve.

At the top of the house may be found a self-reliant Irishwoman, who has struggled hard to keep herself, her brother and sister-in-law, and their children. But neighbours, as poor as herself, cannot find employment enough for her, and her brother has been several weeks out of employment, and unable to provide anything for

his own family; while, to make the case still worse, his wife was last week confined.

These cases are not isolated ones, but samples from the very many hundreds, which lie together sickeningly close in these densely crowded and ill-ventilated houses. It will be long ere affairs can improve much among these people. (John Hollingshead, Ragged London in 1861)

It is not clear when the Baptist chapel at Number 6 Melior Street was built, nor when it closed.

Melior Street was laid out in about 1780. Before that the area was part of the medieval manor of the Maze, and on Roque's map of 1746 is had a few dwellings and some market gardens. Around 1780 the owner of the Maze was one John Webbe Weston, and he built an estate which included Weston Street, Webbe Street (where the first Catholic Mission was – now swallowed up by the London Bridge Station) and Melior Street, named after his daughter.

At first, there were houses and small businesses on both sides of the street, with a public house at the end.

The London directory of 1844 gives the resident of Number 6 as John Ebdon, a coal dealer.

In 1851, there was a French widow with three children: she was sixty-two years old and taught the French language. Her name was Genevieve Doutrevious

By 1862 it is listed as a "Day and Sunday School" in the Rate Books.

Maps of 1872, 1894 and 1914 suggest that it continued as a Mission Hall for many years. But did they still run a soup kitchen?

However it is interesting to note that through many of those years the Post office Directory lists a "Young Men's Christian Association" building at that place. Presumably some sort of day-Centre.

The Catholic Parish Hall, backing on to Snowfields, was built in the 1930s – after the demolition of two rows of houses. By that time the Baptist hall had disappeared, and Mr Boyd appears in the electoral role of 1939 as the owner of number 6, although one Charles Cowley ran a business of making sausage skins on the site.

There was serious bomb-damage during the Second World War, and the map of 1950 marks the whole corner as a "ruin." Shortly afterwards, the present house and hall were built onto the

Parish Hall, and provided space for the Nursery Class of La Salette School, and a flat for Mr Croft, the school caretaker. He is remembered as a very kind man. One former pupil of the school remembers feeling jealous of the nursery children because they lay down on beds outside for a sleep during the afternoon. Two of the teachers who taught in the Nursery are still teaching at St Joseph's School in the Borough.

Eventually the school was closed in 1978, and the hall was empty and derelict when Nannette Ffrench arrived in 1982 to start the Manna Centre.

Invitation

30th Anniversary celebrations

*Please come and join us to
celebrate our 30 years*

1982 - 2012

*We will combine our
celebrations with our AGM*

on

Saturday 29th September

(Time to be arranged)

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