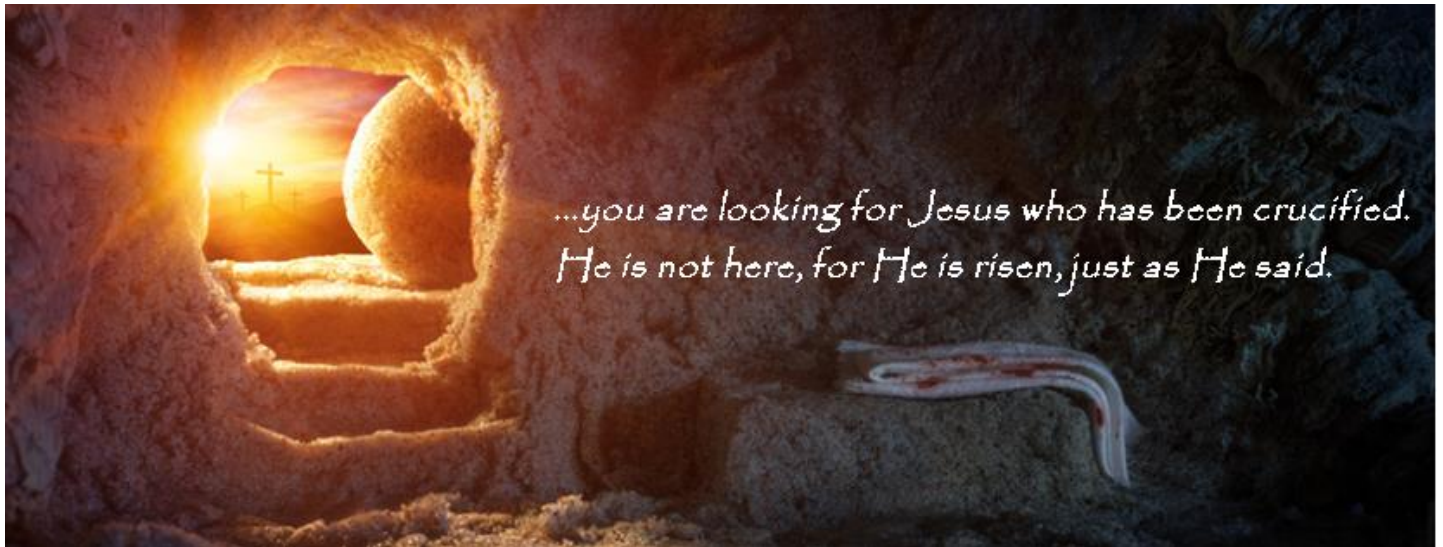


The Manna Society Newsletter

Spring 2020

Working with homeless people & those in need



*...you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.
He is not here, for He is risen, just as He said.*

Bring Cathy Back!

By
Bandi Mbubi
Manna Centre Director



Two episodes in Jesus's life on earth inspire our practice of Lent: his fast of forty days and nights, before he began his ministry, and the week leading up to his crucifixion and resurrection. This explains why we're encouraged, as Christians, to temporarily give up our comforts, during lent, in order to draw closer to God in our inner being. In doing so, we identify more closely with Jesus' earthly suffering and celebrate with him his triumphant victory on the cross at Easter.

There isn't anything inherently virtuous or saintly about giving up sugar for Lent. But such a sacrifice, by momentarily foregoing our physical comfort, with reverence for God, can be used as a tool to gain spiritual comfort, in our inner being. This inner comfort is what Christians traditionally call the Peace of God. It doesn't of course come through sacrifice alone, it can come through other practices like prayer and meditation.

Following this practice, I first gave up sugar in my tea and coffee when I first joined the Manna Society, almost twenty years ago. In those days, we used to have tea together as a team, in the afternoon, and we'd have a lot of banter and discussions about life in general. At times, those conversations veered towards Christian Ethics, what it is to be a Christian, and the meaning of our work. It was through one such discussion that I was challenged to give up sugar for Lent and I did; the result is that I can now drink tea and coffee without sugar and enjoy it; although occasionally I still take sugar in my tea. For those of you who naturally like tea or coffee without sugar, this might sound trivial, but for some of us who have a sweet tooth, believe me, it was a big sacrifice.

However, Christian living isn't just about achieving personal salvation or enlightenment in our inner being. For ourselves, it's also about achieving social justice and harmony for all. And oftentimes we miss this

aspect. We're so focused on achieving our own inner peace and personal contentment that nothing else seems to matter. We must balance our quest for inner peace with a quest for outer peace and harmony, for other people, which comes through social justice. We can't be concerned solely for ourselves but also for others. We can't truly love ourselves without loving our neighbor; we can't have one without the other, they go hand in hand. St John goes even further by saying that we cannot love God without loving our brothers and sisters (1 John 4:21).

I'm encouraged to see that many churches adopt this approach, not just encouraging Christians to use Lent for personal physical sacrifice, as a tool to draw near to God, but also as a time for increased social action for our neighbours. Once we establish this balance, we can confidently pray the prayer that Jesus taught us: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!" and seek to live God's Kingdom in our inner being as well as in our community. This Kingdom is based on God's principles summed up in the command to love and care for each other.

The Manna Society presents an opportunity for Christians and churches to take action in response to the needs of our brothers and sisters who are affected by homelessness and poverty. To cater for the 150 people, or so, who come to us every day of the week, we've relied on the Archdiocese of Southwark (R.C.) who generously provide us with the building and the wider Christian Community chipping in with donations in money and in kind.

This support has kept us afloat for the 38 years we've been in existence. It's allowed us to feed and clothe people; give them a chance to have a shower; access valuable healthcare; entertain them with music and social media or look for a job in our computer room; and listen confidentially, one-to-one, to well over one thousand people, every year, in order to address their problems which caused them to become homeless. Through this work, we've been able to help about 300 get rehoused every year.

But a recent report by the BBC leads me to think that the problem isn't just practical but also structural. We need effective policy solutions to stem the flow of rising homelessness. Despite effort, by the Government, to reduce homelessness, recent research by the BBC puts the number of people sleeping rough, in the UK, at a much higher number than previously thought. It reports that more than 28,000 people in the UK slept rough in the past 12 months <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-51398425> This has been exacerbated by the fact that, in many parts of the UK, rent levels have been rising, making accommodation less affordable as a proportion of income, as the homelessness charity, Crisis, indicates in one of its reports.

The government recently allocated £112 million additional money to tackle rough sleeping, but this wouldn't be enough if nothing is done to address the shortage of truly affordable housing. The public is, however, instrumental in swaying the government to take more drastic action to address the problem, just like in the mid-1960s, when the UK experienced a similar crisis of homelessness and poor housing. The trigger for this policy change was the social realist drama, Cathy Come Home, which shocked the public to their core by showing them what was happening in towns and cities. It prompted a parliamentary debate which ultimately led to the development of more social housing.

This Easter, let's pray for another Cathy Come Home moment!



Change, movement and growth

By

Eleanor Smith

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



I love spring, watching the plants and flowers and animals coming back to life, reappearing, new smells, and the greenness returning to grey London. In our clients lives too, many momentous changes are taking place. We have seen a great many people in the Manna Centre who have spent much of the past few years of their lives making dangerous journeys across the globe to be here, staying in refugee camps in the Sudan, and then in Greece and Italy. They will then have typically been sent to housing in small towns and cities across the UK while the Home Office processes their application for leave to remain. When we meet them, it is often because they have finally been awarded their leave to remain in the UK as refugees and have come to London, seeking their cultural and religious community, and work, as well as helping services, not knowing where to start.

There is a sense in working with these people that they are at the beginning of the rest of their lives, having spent so long waiting to get somewhere, waiting for something to happen. A lot of these people are very young, and have spent almost their entire adulthood on the move, in transition and uncertainty. Emotions are very mixed at this time – trepidation, fear, excitement, expectation, anxiety and impatience. After waiting for such a long time, people are anxious for the opportunity to finally get on with living – working, starting a family, realising all of the things that have been dreams for so long – and a home is the necessary foundation.

After crossing hostile deserts and oceans, and sleeping on the rainy streets of London, it can be very frustrating for clients to find their way blocked by being unable to have a bank account, because they do not have a fixed address, for example. Luckily, we can assist with these kinds of bureaucratic hurdles, and also with finding people homes. We are in the happy position of seeing many, many refugees into accommodation in the past few months, to start their lives afresh.

For other clients, they are in the middle of changes which are not good, huge upheavals in their lives, the end of significant relationships, the end of perhaps a period of stability and the beginning of a period of chaos and uncertainty. For example, my client Abbey* who fled from an abusive partner, from an area outside of London. Because councils will only assist those who have been residing in their local area, it can be difficult for people whose local area is no longer safe to get assistance elsewhere, and people find themselves ping-ponged between different local authority areas, despite the fact that homelessness law makes allowances for survivors of domestic violence. We advocated for Abbey to be housed by the council, and gave her information about support services for survivors. Hopefully this spring will be a time of greater stability and healing for Abbey.

I have seen a few clients recently who are returning to the UK after long periods abroad. For example Stanley* who has always moved around due to working for international companies, and who became homeless after a relationship breakdown, has been recovering from depression with family abroad, and has returned to London, where he has spent much of his adult life. Or Irene*, who spent her formative years in her parents' native Caribbean, but who thinks of the UK as her true home. Or Lesley* who had also taken a break from the stresses of her London life to stay with family abroad. It has been difficult for all of these people to return to the UK, as they have found themselves locked out of social security systems, despite having every right to live and work in the UK.

We live in a globalised world, where people's lives span borders, both national and international. Movement and migration has always been a part of the human world. The way in which people are related to a specific geographical place, legally or emotionally, is complicated. Coming back is not always easy, neither is leaving. Psychologically, there is a period of re-adjustment and settling back in. And practically, UK systems are not designed to accommodate the mobility and flux of people's real lives. State support systems increasingly function by attempting to divide 'us' from 'not us'. In practice, people don't divide up so easily, and this often means, as we have seen, that people who have every legal right to live and work in the UK end up stuck and without being able to fall back on the social safety net, at a the very time when they need it the most.

The rhetoric coming from the current government frames the movement of people as a bad thing, and something we should limit. I cannot help but feel that attempts to control the movement of people will fail. Change, movement, transition and growth is natural, and often necessary and inevitable. In the spring, this is more apparent than ever as we observe the miraculous transformations of the natural world.

*All names are fictional.



Fit for human habitation?

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



I know we often talk about the dearth of private rented accommodation available to tenants that require support through the benefit system. Not so long ago, I looked at agencies that had properties that were available through their agencies. Out of about 1,000 listings, just 22% accepted tenants who needed housing cost met in whole or part by housing benefit or universal credit housing costs.

Within that, a significant percentage required tenants on benefit to have a guarantor (someone to pay the rent if they defaulted for whatever reason) thus reducing the numbers even more aside from finding deposits and rent in advance – very few of our clients could meet all three of these conditions.

That said, what's the quality of the accommodation you may be offered.

Let's start with having to live in a damp property

Rentokil Property Care recently brought out a survey where one of the findings was that about 4.8 million renters experience damp and condensation issues. Two million believe that they have contracted an illness as a result of their living conditions.

About one third of the tenants had contacted their landlord with a view to this issue being rectified and that in more than half the cases, no help was given. Where it was, it took an average of 84 days to rectify the problem.

The study also found that 44% of all rented properties had no extractor fan in the bathroom and a further 31% did not have a window.

Sewage sir – let me oblige

We have just come across one case where a client of ours took on a private rented property – it happened to be an extension. One day, they turned on the taps to find sewage coming out of the pipes. They contacted the landlord but nothing was properly done. In the end, a plumber arrived but could not complete the works as he did not have the relevant tools to complete the work. By this time, sewage was advancing to the steps of the

property. The plumber rang the following day to say he could not conduct the work as the landlord felt it was the water company's responsibility.

The client lives in a property where the extension has been built over the manhole. An article in *The Architects' Journal* (28 June 2018) states that buildings and extensions should not be built over a manhole or inspection point over a sewer. At this moment, Thames Water are tearing up the garden to repair the underlying cause of seepage, moving the manhole and due to the rising sewage level, and subsequent water infiltration into the wood, the floorboards have given way in a corner of the property exposing a significant drop below the floor boards. The client just cannot live there anymore.

We'll move on to the upshot of this predicament later on in the article.

Legislation to the rescue

Were you aware that prior to 20 March 2019 there wasn't an automatic legal right for tenants to live in a home fit for human habitation? That is no longer the case following the advent of the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018.

Now, residential rented accommodation must be provided and maintained in a state of fitness for human habitation. Until the new Act came into force an anomaly existed: a landlord was obliged to repair a property but not obliged to bring a property up to a standard fit for habitation unless it was let on a very low rent or the property was in disrepair. Disrepair was measured according to the standard of a property at the start of a tenancy. So, if a property was damp at the time of the letting, a landlord did not need to improve it even if it was so defective that it wasn't fit to live in – go figure.

What is considered unfit for habitation?

The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 states that if it is defective in one or more of the following categories, it cannot be considered fit for human habitation and therefore not fit for human habitation

- repair;
- stability;
- free from damp;
- internal arrangement;
- natural lighting;
- ventilation;
- water supply;
- drainage and sanitary conveniences;
- facilities for preparation and cooking of food and for the disposal of waste water;
- any prescribed hazard (meaning a hazard posing risk of harm to the health or safety of an occupier which arises from a deficiency in the property or prescribed in regulations).

The Act provides a real and achievable direct route of redress for tenants living in substandard conditions. A tenant will be able to seek specific performance or damages through a civil process if their living accommodation or the common parts are not fit for human habitation.

So where does it leave our poor tenant who has just about avoided doggy-paddling in untreated sewage by taking refuge with a friend. But that cannot go on forever.

Decent homes of all

Back in the days of the last Labour government, Tony Blair introduced what was called the Decent Homes standard, which was a technical standard for public housing – that is, council and housing association

properties. Local authorities were obliged to set a target to reach those standards by 2010. The key criteria were;

- it must meet the current statutory minimum standard for housing
- it must be in a reasonable state of repair
- it must have reasonably modern facilities and services
- it must provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort.

My question is, and this particularly relates to our current client, given the client accessed this accommodation through the local authority, should the private rented accommodation meet those standards that the local authority has had to achieve (as at 1st April 2018 just 4% of council properties were rated “non-decent”) and indeed meet both the Homes (Fitness for Human habitation Act) and Environmental Health Standards?

Suitability of accommodation

Under the Government’s Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities Chapter 17 which deals with suitability of accommodation – paragraph 17.6 states “the Secretary of State expects housing authorities to make reasonable efforts to ensure private rented accommodation secured for applicants who do not have priority need is safe, and in reasonable condition; and that all applicants looking for their own accommodation have sufficient guidance to enable them to consider standards”.

Currently, we are looking to the local authority to take responsibility for placing this client into temporary accommodation and consider another offer of accommodation to them. The Environmental Health Team for the borough in which this property is situated have already deemed it unfit not only due to the sewage issue but on other counts too.

We are very conscious of the scarcity of accommodation but there is no reason why tenants who obtain their private rented accommodation through the local authority should not believe that the standards that the councils have to apply to their own stock are also applied to property they accept onto their books for those to whom they offer private rented accommodation. A quarter of rented homes are in such disrepair they are classed as “non-decent”. Of course, this has all to do with the shortage of homes in general.

We know that the amount of truly affordable homes that we need to build as a nation is not yet on the horizon. In October last year, ministers were able to tell us that there were increases in overall house building to a rate of more than 200,000 a year, although that remains short of the 250,000-a-year target set in the governing party’s 2017 general election manifesto AND the large majority of the completions were homes for sale.

Here’s hoping for and working towards change



“Compassion without action is just an observation”

By
Karolina Muszynska
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



Official government data released on the 27th of February, shows that the number of people estimated to be rough sleeping on a single night in England has fallen by 9%. These statistics have been widely criticised by all the major homeless charities and some have called them “not fit for purpose” and “hiding the real scale of the crisis”. Critics have had a closer look at the methods applied in gathering the data and discovered that: “Out of 317 local authorities who revealed their method of counting, just 25% conducted a count-based estimate of visible rough sleeping. A further 104 (33%) made an evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count in specific areas and 43% conducted an evidence-based estimate meeting with local partners, without going outside to perform a count”(Guardian), The statistic did not include sofa surfers, people who were temporarily staying in cold weather shelters, those who sleep on buses etc. The numbers presented by the government contradicts the internal statistics of the big homeless charities that show a definite increase in homelessness in the past year. The Manna Society is a small charity compared to the big ones like Crisis, Shelter, Centrepoin, St Mungo’s to name a few but we do feel that the situation is getting worse and the number of people needing our assistance is growing. It is my intuitive judgment, not based on numbers but as a front line worker who sees the reality of homelessness on a day to day basis, I am convinced that government figures do not reflect the real scope of the problem. How do I know?

I have been cycling to work via the same route for over seven years. It goes from Victoria Park, along the Mile End canal towpath to Limehouse and then via Kings Edward Memorial Park to Shadwell Basin and finally along the Ornamental Canal to St Katherine Docks. Over the last year, on my cycling route alone, I have noticed several new spots where people are bedding down.

Our advice service operates on a first come first serve basis. This means that people who wants our assistance have to queue in the morning to put their names on a list in order to be seen by an advice worker. At present, our clients are reporting that to get on the list they have to arrive as early as 5am. Our project workers, who take the names for the list at 8am, confirm that there are more people than before seeking our help. There are more then we can see in any one day and many of them have to be turned down and asked to try again the following day.

A charitable organisation that support us with grants to fund essential items for our clients like travel expenses, fees for ID replacements, work clothes, etc. has had to limit the number of funding requests, each organisation can submit, to two per month. This is because they were overloaded with the amount of incoming applications. Most of our funding requests are for travel expenses and ID replacements. It is easy to lose ID when you are homeless; getting a new identity document may take anything from a few weeks to a few months, depending on the availability of funding and the speed of the application process. Without ID you cannot get a job, claim benefits, get housing or apply to the European Settlement Scheme.

Getting from A to B in London is a nightmare for those without any income whatsoever and you do need to travel to survive and to move things forward. You need money for transportation to access food and shower, to attend job interviews and medical appointments, to move in between shelters, friends and other support services. Universal Credit is paid 5 weeks in arrears. In addition, it is paid monthly which is difficult to manage for many. No wonder - the standard amount of Universal Credit is £251.77 for people under 25 years old, and £317.82 for those over 25. By the way I cannot really understand the idea of paying smaller allowance to under 25s. A Bus Pass in London costs £21.20 per week irrespective of age. Overall living costs are not lower for younger people.

Another big group of people who need help with transportation are those without immigration status. It can take The Home Office anytime from a few months to a few years to process an immigration application – during this time the applicants are destitute and have to rely on various charitable services to survive.

The standards of private rented accommodation offered to homeless customers is falling. A single homeless person, over 35 years old, without priority needs, will be offered a small studio flat, priced at the maximum Local Housing

Allowance (the maximum amount that the housing cost element of Universal Credit will cover in the particular area, for 1 bedroom flat). Most of these studio flats are tiny, comprising of a living space joined with a kitchen annexe and a separate toilet and bathroom. Landlords are abusing the legislation and the financial vulnerability of homeless customers (low income, no savings for rent in advance or deposit, desperation, lack of alternative options) by offering micro, cell-like-flats for a relatively high price, to extract the maximum amount of housing benefit or universal credit.

Samuel, who is currently living in temporary accommodation provided by the local council, has been invited for three viewings so far in the private rented sector. He showed us a video recorded in one of the viewed flat – the space was filthy and claustrophobically small. He would need to cook in his living space and the toilet and shower area were so small that it required a special technique to get in and out due to a very small size!

Another client of ours, placed into a similar type of flat by a local council, called out Environmental Health to inspect his property. Having done so they declared it unfit for human habitation.

In addition to the low standards, the accommodation offered will be usually be outside of the borough where the client has a connection, friends and support. Imagine yourself having to move into cell-like flat at least one hour away by bus from where most of your friends are, where you cannot have someone over as it is too small, when all you belongings smell of food you have cooked and condensations manifests itself as a mould. And remember that our clients often have very fragile mental health and miserable housing will not make it better.

The homelessness crisis is a fact that needs to be acknowledged. It cannot be resolved without a provision of decent and affordable housing in the first place. Housing vulnerable people in poor housing conditions for the rent at the maximum of Local Housing Allowance level, paid by Universal Credit (taxpayers) is a money-making business. It creates the opposite effect – private proprietors can invest an extra income into acquiring more properties, which creates increased demand and high rental prices. We have to break that cycle. If we wholeheartedly care about homeless people, we need to make sure that their journey from the streets into housing is dignified at every stage.

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Fancy raising money for us by running 10k through central London?

The British 10K London Run takes place on Sunday 5th July 2020.

Starting at Piccadilly & finishing on Whitehall
Passing St James Palace, Trafalgar Square,
Big Ben, Westminster Abbey & Parliament Square.

If you feel up to the challenge and can raise a minimum of £200 we would be delighted to hear from you.

Please contact Paddy at mail@mannasociety.org.uk

