

# *The Manna Society Newsletter*

## *Christmas 2022*

*Working with homeless people & those in need*



### **The Christmas Spirit**

**By**

**Bandi Mbubi**

**Manna Centre Director**



This Christmas is special to us not just because it is Christmas, but also because it coincides with the year of our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. 40 years have passed since Nannette Ffrench, our founder, set up the Manna Centre to work with people affected by homelessness and poverty.

We came together on Wednesday, 26<sup>th</sup> October, to celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. And although it was not Christmas, the Spirit of Christmas was clearly present through the stories and memories we shared together. Paddy Boyle, my predecessor, who is now our Administrator, spoke about Nannette's vision and reminded us of Nannette's favourite passage: "O that today you would listen to my voice, harden not your heart". Paddy recalled how Nannette used it as a motivator in her work with homeless people.

In many ways, our work is a response to this original call. The sixty people (or so) who came to the event, whether supporters, trustees, staff or service-users, are only a sample of the many people who have responded to this call of not hardening our heart. It is a call to respond with acts of love against the homelessness and poverty around us.

Special thanks to Peter Short, our service-user, who played background music, at the start of the event, and two songs, one of which was Amazing Grace. He also spoke about his journey out of homelessness and paid tribute to the Manna Centre and the work the advice team put in to resettle him, in particular Margaret Shapland, our Senior Advice Worker.

Christmas is a season of love, it epitomizes acts of love. From a Christian perspective, it is God who offers his one and only son Jesus to humanity – that is why his coming is so important. At Christmas, we imitate the Magi who visited a vulnerably housed baby Jesus and presented him with gifts. Through our own acts of love during Christmas, even if we do not always consciously make this connection, hide the meaning of Christmas, the Spirit behind Christmas.

The Spirit of Christmas, who is love, is not confined to Christmas celebrations, nor to a particular period of the year, but carries on throughout the year. To think of it, it is the Spirit of Christmas who has driven, and continues to drive, everyone who has supported, and continues to support, our work. And it is this spirit who has seen us through the 40 years of our existence and permeated everything we do.

At the event marking our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we were delighted to have Archbishop John Wilson who offered us words of encouragement for our work. He reiterated Nannette's call, rephrased it, saying that another way to look at her call to us is to think about its deeper implied meaning, which is to soften our heart so that we can be more receptive and accepting of other people, our brothers and sisters. He renewed the promise of the Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark to always support our work with homeless people, emphasizing that as long as he is Archbishop, he will ensure that this will always be the case.

We of course have a long history with the Archdiocese, who provided us with the first building we used for the first 33 years of our existence, at 6 Melior Street, without having to pay rent or a service charge. Although following the redevelopment of our local area, 7 years ago, a service charge was introduced when we had to move to our current building, at 12 Melior Street. But still, the Archdiocese generously took on a long-term lease on our current building so that we do not have to pay rent.

At the event, it was also important for us to acknowledge the significant contribution of the wider Christian Community who have supported our work. So, we were very pleased and honoured to have with us Bishop Christopher Chessun, the Anglican Bishop of Southwark, who is also one of our patrons. In his message to us, he spoke to us about love and compassion, and the importance of acting out our love in a way that is practical and relevant to those who need our help and support. He deplored the injustices of homelessness and poverty saying that it was a scandal for a country as wealthy

as the UK, the 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, to continue to have homelessness. “Thank God that there are places like the Manna Centre to work with homeless people, our brothers and sisters”. He assured us of his prayers and support now and for the future.

Undoubtedly, the Manna would not have survived the past 40 years, and look forward to the future, without all the people of faith, and no faith, people of goodwill who have responded in their different ways to Nannette’s call to act with and for homeless people. Not only the service-users themselves, the staff, the volunteers and the trustees, but also trusts and private companies of all sizes and shapes, have all contributed to what the Manna is today – an oasis in the middle of our modern-day desert, where bread rains down from heaven for our service-users to quench their hunger. Surely Manna from God.

# Merry Christmas

Three recent clients

By

Karolina Muszynska

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



Somehow, we are back again in the cold weather period, heading towards Christmas and New Year.

2022 has been a very busy year in the advice service so far, full of changes and challenges related to Covid19, Brexit, war in the Ukraine and now the rising cost of living. In these confusing times, it seems to be even more vital for places like the Manna Day Centre to continue supporting people with essentials like food, showers, clothing and accessible advice service.

What I like about the work of our advice team is that our work is not just limited to the specific area of housing and welfare advice. We are incredibly flexible and resourceful, and we always try to help with whatever problem is brought to us. Of course, that does not mean that we can help with every issue but even if it were beyond our knowledge, we would try to find the most appropriate source of help. We are also lucky to work for an organisation that puts the human being first and although we have rules in place we would always allow for some exceptions for exceptional circumstances.

Here are some examples of our recent work. The personal details of customers mentioned have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

## 1. We helped Barry, our long-term customer, to open a Barclays bank account

Barry is 73 years old and has had a very eventful life; street homelessness, over-drinking, petty crimes and prison stays – made up a large part of it for a few decades. Thanks to the support of various homelessness services, he stopped drinking and was housed in independent accommodation for over 7 years. He approach us a few months ago for help to open a bank account as he was unhappy with the limitation of the Payment Exception Service he was moved to, following a closure of his post office card account. The Payment Exception Service is a way for people who do not have a bank account to collect benefits or pension payments at the Post Office or a Pay Point outlet within 90 days from the date of the payment. It is just a payment scheme and it does not allow you to make savings so people are encouraged to open a regular bank accounts as soon as possible. Barry approached a few banks and was advised to start an application online. Unfortunately, due his stormy, in-care, childhood has never learnt to read or write let alone use the internet. He also did not have a photo ID or proof of address dated within the last three months which is necessary to start the process. Although we offer only an in-reach service we agreed that Barry needed someone to accompany him to the bank for his appointment to open a new account and made an exception for him. It took us two appointments in the office to gather the necessary documents and three visits to the bank to open a basic bank account for him. He has now received his bank card and is awaiting his first pension payment into his account.

2. We assisted Stefan to get to his mother funeral in Romania.

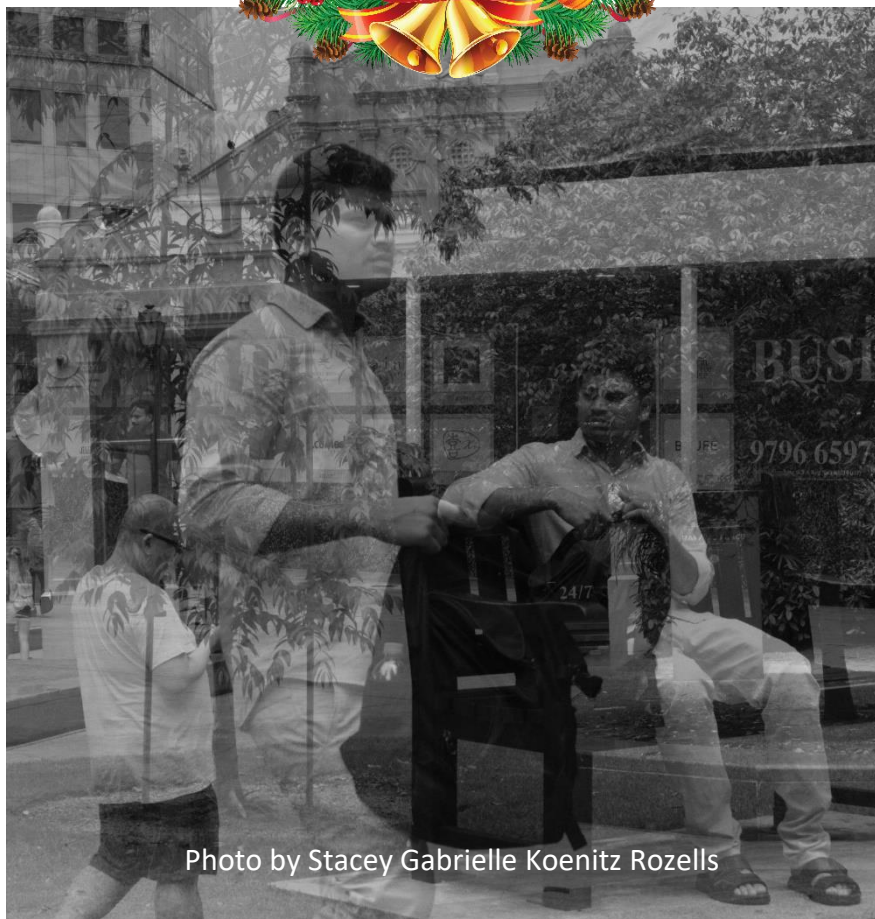
Stefan is in his fifties. He is known to us for years – he is quite a character, very proud and can be argumentative. He has long periods of prosperity, when he works, rents room and we do not see him at the Manna for long periods but every now and then he gets into conflict with his employer, loses his job and then he comes to us looking for support. He normally only needs our help for a short period and then he is back on his feet again. He does not claim benefits and as a skilled and experienced construction worker, he usually finds a new position quickly. I had not seen him for quite some time until a few weeks ago when he turned up at my office in a distressed state. He was in pieces as he had learned that day his mother had suddenly passed away. He told me that he did not know what to do as he is in a shelter now, jobless and awaiting his first payment of Universal Credit. He had some little money left from his savings but not enough to fly to Romania for his mother funeral. We agreed that we will make an exceptional grant and fund him a return ticket to Romania to help him out in these difficult circumstances.

3. We assisted Ian and Svetlana to move into permanent accommodation.

These are two amazing pieces of work done by my colleagues Margaret and Eleanor. Two clients of ours, Richard and Jenny, both disabled and vulnerable, have received an offer of permanent accommodation from a local authority. Because of their conditions, neither of them was able to organise the move by themselves. My colleagues assisted them to organise the move, helped them to deal with the paperwork, transport and to furnish their property via either grants or second-hand donated goods. Again, it is not the type of work we would usually do in the advice service but it was much needed and once again we made an exception.

It is very rewarding experience to work for a small organisation, where rules are not set in stone and we can be flexible when we need to be. It is very fulfilling to work with clients in achieving a satisfactory resolution to their problems.

Thank you for your support! Happy Christmas!



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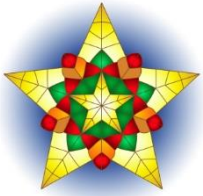
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## ***“What is Christmas?”***

**By**

**Margaret Shapland**

**Housing and Welfare Advice Worker**



*“What is Christmas? It is the tenderness of the past, courage for the present and hope for the future”*

**Agnes M Pahro**

Having just been present at the society’s celebration of its last 40 years, this seemed a fitting quote to re-visit what has been the past, what the present holds for us in the current state of flux that our nation finds itself in and the hope that we go forward with all the armoury of knowledge and power of advocacy that we can muster to allow us to be as effective as possible on behalf of our clients.

### **The tenderness of the past**

I have been a member of staff at the society for some 20 years when we moved from a 5 day operation to being able to open our doors for 7 days as many other organisations like ours were not in a position to offer weekend opening, which we have done ever since excluding the one week over the Christmas period when CRISIS at Christmas was operational and offered shelter to those who would otherwise would have none over that period. In fact, to keep our promise to our clients over the period when COVID prevented CRISIS from offering the same kind of service offer over the Xmas period, we adapted our working practice to make sure people who needed it had a safe, warm space to be and the opportunity to seek advice over that period.

At our celebration, others spoke of some of the service users who had passed through our doors and stirred my memories of them with affection, though now I am going to speak of more recent client who have passed through and happily are now in more secure circumstances.

You may know that we offer a mix of delivery modes for the Advice & Welfare service – face to face, telephone, email and even on some occasions - text and this story is a perfect illustration of the way in which that mix enabled us to better assist that person. Let’s call them Ashley. Ashley came from another part of the UK, having left due to the increasing pressures that their very significant mental health issues wrought, making it impossible to live there anymore.

We first met Ashley via the telephone when they called asking if we could help them. Alongside the mental health issue and due to it, they were also subject to a bail condition. To really get relevant documents together to help them, we had to initially book an appointment for them. From thereon in we worked with them over a combination of email and telephone as they were reluctant to come into the centre unless it was to collect things we had set aside for them. It became a process over a few months of keeping them in accommodation and relatively stable – a period over which we linked in with both the outreach team in the borough where they were currently rough sleeping to get them recognised as such, a mental health team that could both provide written support regarding their mental health condition and perhaps interventions to stabilise them and a solicitor to make sure the local authority where a homeless application had been made lived up to their responsibilities and could help in maintaining some form of accommodation so that a highly vulnerable person did not have to return to the streets.

It was by no means an easy task. The accommodation offered by the local authority did not largely meet the support needs of this very vulnerable person. On occasion, it became too much for them and as their mental health deteriorated further, the potential for observing what we might call “social norms” fell away resulting in two housing providers asking them to leave. Both the solicitor and ourselves were at times extremely worried that the borough concerned might withdraw their support which would have meant going forward with a judicial review regarding the quality of the temporary accommodation offered.

Thankfully, we did not have to resort to this as the person concerned was referred to and offered and accepted a placement in a very good supported housing project in the borough concerned, where we know they will

receive the support they deserve and will form part of a pathway towards established secure accommodation. Over the months that we have worked to date with this person, emails were received from this client that illustrated extreme distress- both the law centre and ourselves worked together to ensure that this person felt that there was hope in their future and that tomorrow could be a better day alongside providing a modicum of financial support and links to other supportive organisations that could help bolster spirits.

### **Courage for the present**

We all know that we face a difficult period ahead across the board but we also know that those who are most vulnerable among us and the most hard pressed financially will be most exposed to the vagaries of the economic decisions and policies which emerge from the ruminations of those in power and the geo-political conditions which have in part led us to this place.

We also know that properly affordable housing is a key issue. Over the year 2020-21 (which was disrupted by COVID) just 4,240 homes destined for social rent provision were completed according to the National Housing Federation. In contrast, recent research from Home Connections brought to our attention that for every home offered for social rent in London, there were 277 applicants.

Meanwhile in the private rental market, we are both seeing rents being driven up by the actions precipitated by the previous administration in the so-called mini-budget resulted in landlords also choosing to leave the sector – something that had been happening over a longer period with movement to what might be considered more profitable options including moving to offering Airbnb or equivalent – in Southwark alone, there are around 2,000 properties listed on short-term rental websites of which 60% were entire properties as opposed to rooms being let by a resident of the borough.

Many clients who are housed in private rented properties are coming to us with not inconsiderable rent increases. There are no restrictions regarding rent increases for private landlords – quite recently, someone came to us where the rent increase was of the order of 17% - albeit the rent had not been increased for a considerable period. We checked the average rent for private rented accommodation in the particular borough in which this client lived and found that even with the rent increase, it was still 12% below the market rent for an equivalent property.

This client is a hardworking person with a family, they just also happen to be someone who escaped from a war-torn country and persecution to come to a safe place. In the borough in which they live, there is no opportunity for us to register them on the housing register as the only condition which the local authority is prepared to accept is that they would be severely overcrowded unless there were significant health issues which made their current accommodation unreasonable for them to continue to inhabit and even then, it would be a lengthy and much litigated process. It is estimated that in London, even as a single person, you need to earn in the area of £40,000 to live a reasonable life. We know that of the working persons we meet, I cannot think of a single one who is able to earn that amount.

### **Hope for the future**

Back in 2020, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has found that a target of 90,000 homes for social rent will need to be built annually. That Committee urged the Government to reconsider how it disposes of public land, viewing it as something that can be used for the public good rather than simply a source of revenue. The current way 'Right to Buy' receipts are distributed makes it difficult for social housing providers to fund replacements from the small share of the property's value they receive. That committee believes that with the correct policy initiatives, it can become achievable. We certainly hope so otherwise our community in particular will face a future that inexorably squeezes their income resulting in a significantly impoverished life and the greater potential for homelessness to flourish. It is everyone's responsibility to make sure that this is at the forefront of any administration's agenda and to lobby vigorously for it.

**What we need (and we need it now) is an effective housebuilding strategy.**

Among our clients are a considerable number of client who are trying to navigate the immigration system. We have just come across a young person who the Red Cross would like to refer to us. Their situation is parlous – a young 24 year old refused asylum seeker who has been trying to work their way through system. As with many refugees, this person suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder combined with associated depression and anxiety and for many years has been rough sleeping. It also seems likely that they may have been a victim of modern slavery in the UK due to the difficulties they have experienced in regularising status in the UK.

Thankfully, they now have a solicitor to deal with the immigration issues and a housing solicitor looking at the possibility of more secure housing for them. Our job in the interim is to help secure temporary housing so that the client can have some respite and for the various parties to move the case forward. The latest statistics we have to hand is that some 117,000 first asylum applications have yet to processed – those who are appealing or awaiting tribunal hearings will have a much longer wait.

We all know that we need a more robust immigration system but it opens up such enormous opportunities so given our need to meet the labour market needs and harness the skills which such migration can brings – for example, there are 1,200 doctors now working in the UK who have come through the asylum system who it has been calculated cost just about 10% of the cost of training a doctor from scratch in the UK

**What we need is a robust and fair immigration system that prevents people who are escaping truly horrendous situations having to live in destitution in the UK – people who we try to help every day.**

What does make me hopeful for those of us in the front line, we win the battle one person at a time. There is nothing as rewarding as seeing the light return to someone's eyes as they start the journey to live the best life they are able to, the day they get a just and fair decision on their right to live in the UK, the joy they show when they get a new job after a period of unemployment, the relief at finding that longer-term home that allows them to re-build. For those of our most vulnerable clients, not being so afraid of what life deals out to them, when they start to get the support they need to deal with those needs. And for us as workers, the knowledge that those who support us are so dedicated to the cause.

There are many more hopes for the future that I could voice but I will stop here and return to the rest of Agnes Pahro's inestimable wisdom and a very timely wish for this season - *"It is a wish that every cup may overflow with blessings rich and eternal, and that every path may lead to peace."* That is a very real hope for the future which we need to hold close. May I add my own wishes that you – our readers and supporters enjoy a very peaceful and joyous holiday season!





## **Some Christmas Carols**

**By**  
**Eleanor Smith**  
**Housing & Welfare Advice Worker**



I am wondering how to inject some Christmas cheer into this year's Christmas newsletter article, when things are so bleak, and frankly, in the world of politics, somewhat unhinged. We have a cost-of-living crisis, and looming cuts to a health and social care system which has already been pared back to beyond its capacity to function. Many people, even traditionally more well-off people, are wondering how they will manage this winter.

However, today has been a good day in the advice office. One of our clients, Sara\*, has been offered accommodation and will move in next week. Sara is a sweet natured and bright young woman who is a refugee from Eritrea. Sara initially became homeless after she had to leave her hostel in the North of England after she gained employment, as she then fell outside of the hostel's remit, and would not have been able to afford their rent with her wages alone. She moved into a friend's house for a short period, lost her job, and then moved to London in search of further work. She is still hoping to find this, but for the meantime is back on Universal Credit. She was delighted to be offered a room in a shared house, in a part of London where there are plenty of people from her own cultural background, after living in insecure and unstable situations for so long.

I also saw another young female client today, Lucia, who is doing so much better than when we first met her, more than two years ago. Lucia is originally from a European country and has had a difficult life, which she is trying to leave behind. She is a creative and thoughtful person. At that time she was homeless, her mental health was very bad, and she has since been moved between poor quality and inappropriate temporary accommodation. We were able to link her into mental health services, which have been a huge source of support for her and have also contributed to our advocacy in trying to get her placed in more appropriate accommodation which would better support her mental health. She is now in much better quality temporary accommodation, which is in the local area, meaning she can reach us more easily and is closer to her support network. We managed to get her disability benefits in payment, meaning that life is now just that little bit easier to manage. The temporary accommodation she is in now is unfurnished, and we were able to secure emergency grants so that she could buy a washing machine and a fridge. She is bidding for social housing now, and it is good to know that when she finally gets a settled home she will have these things to take with her.

Also this week, one of our clients, Ahmed, who has no recourse to public funds finally secured a space in a shelter. He was sleeping rough, and in poor health for many months, so was ecstatic to finally have somewhere safe and comfortable to sleep at night. He said 'it's much nicer than I had imagined it would be!'

Another client, John, last month secured council housing, a mere 18 months after I first helped him to make the application. John is an earnest and trusting man, who suffers from a degenerative neurological problem. He is perhaps the second of my clients in the last 9 years of working in homelessness services to have been offered a council house, so I was almost as excited as he was about this. There have been a few teething problems, but things are settling down for him now, and it is a lovely flat. He was particularly pleased to receive two sofas to furnish his home, which were kindly donated by one of our supporters. The flat is round the corner from the Manna Centre, which is hugely beneficial to him, being quite socially isolated and with progressively worsening mobility.

Of course, it is not all good times in the advice office. We are seeing a steadily increasing flow of people coming to us for the first time either homeless or with housing problems, stressed, frightened and depressed. But the above stories help us to keep going and trust that with mutual persistence, hard work and hope, things will work out eventually. The light and warmth inside will chase away the cold and dark outside.

Happy Christmas!



# Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2022

It costs approx. **£40,390 a month** to run the Manna Centre. The work we do here is a compassionate 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 (either by cheque or online via our website [HERE](#))**

**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 25% 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.

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

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

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

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

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

## 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:.....

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

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

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

\*\*\* Please return completed form to The Manna Society, 12 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP \*\*