

# HOMELESSNESS: ARE WE REALLY HELPING?

**Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland**, a joint venture between Church Urban Fund and the Diocese of York, recently hosted an event on the theme of homelessness. Gathering together a large group of practitioners from local homelessness agencies, faith-based charities and the local authority, the day was a chance to reflect on how these agencies could work together to more effectively transform the lives of homeless people.

The event aimed to address two problems that are common in the homelessness sector.

First, the tension that can exist between professional agencies and church-based organisations. To some professional agencies, the activities of churches and smaller organisations can be unhelpful. Their work can sometimes be unfocussed and as such is believed to undermine the coordinated efforts of others and potentially encourage dependent behaviour. At the same time, smaller organisations can view statutory agencies with suspicion and so neglect to communicate with them before starting their activities, leading to a lack of coordination and a failure to learn from best practice. This gap is problematic as it prevents a more joined-up and therefore more effective response to homelessness.

Second, the fact that some efforts to help people facing homelessness can instead do harm.

The desperate situation of those who are rough sleeping often prompts a desire to 'just do something' – whether that be giving money to someone on the street or giving out food, sleeping bags or other resources. The difficulty is that the good intentions of generous people can be unhelpful: their provision of cash or other goods can enable and even encourage people to continue their destructive behaviour; it can also undermine the efforts of others to bring about a longer-term change.

Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland sought to address these problems firstly by bringing together a wide variety of organisations and agencies, enabling people to meet and share their work with others, thus helping to bridge the professional-faith gap. It also invited Jon Kuhrt, Executive Director of the West London Mission (a well-established homeless charity in London that has clear Christian roots but also provides commissioned services for the local authority) to share his expertise and experience in working with homeless people.

This paper is a brief summary of the talks and discussions that took place throughout the day.

We have written them up in order to share the learning from the event and hopefully, to encourage similar discussions around the country.

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### COMPLEX CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

People who are homeless are often caught in a web of poverty, said Jon Kuhrt. This web has three distinct elements.

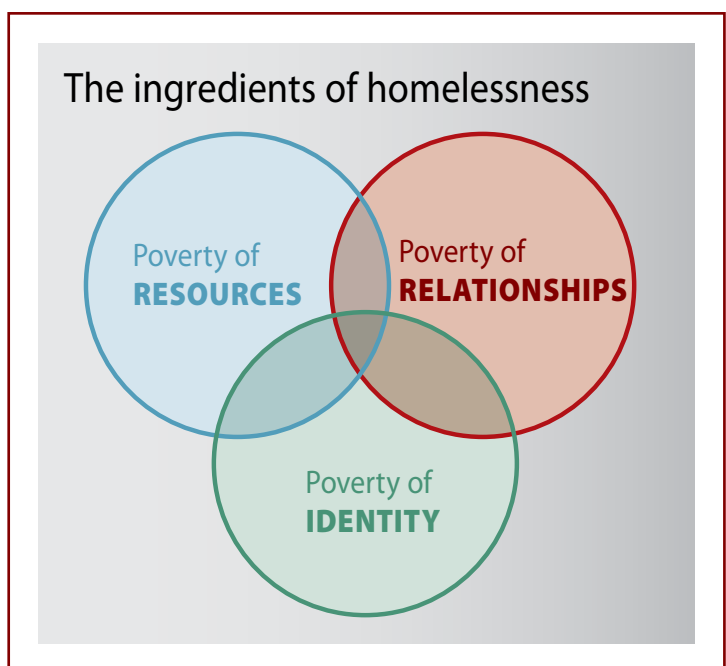
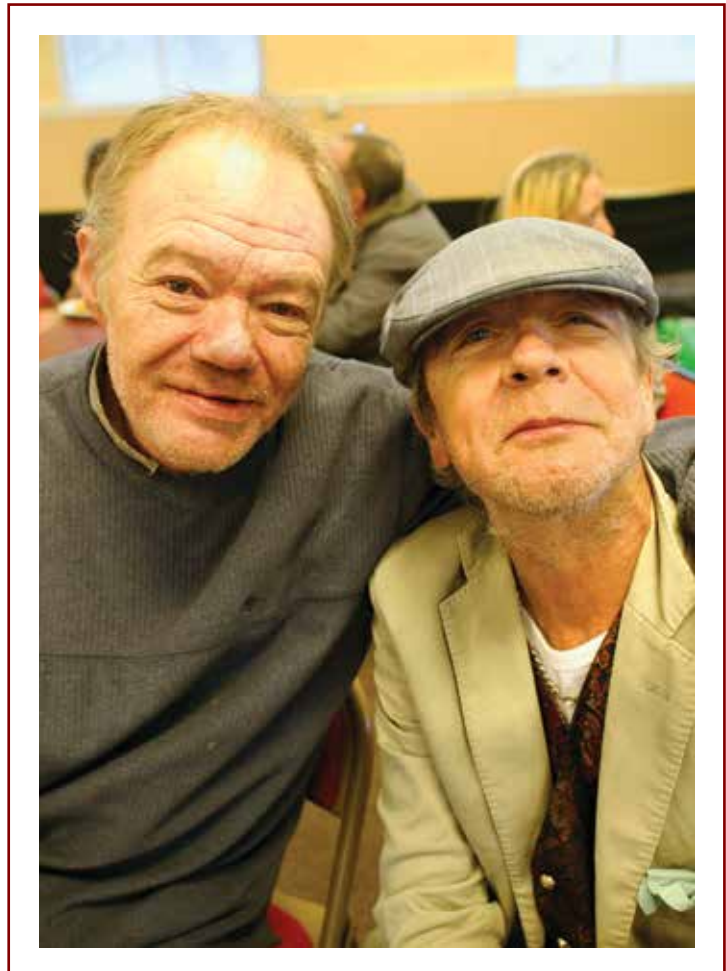
**Poverty of resources** – a lack of resources, such as income, housing, skills, qualifications or health, that is sufficient to meet their basic needs.

**Poverty of relationships** – a lack of strong and supportive relationships that results in loneliness and isolation. In 2007, a St Mungo's report found that relationship breakdown was the biggest single cause of homelessness.

**Poverty of identity** – when people lack a strong sense of self-worth and a belief in their own ability to respond to challenges, leading to low self-esteem, a lack of resilience and aspiration, poor mental health and even drug and alcohol misuse.<sup>1</sup>

Recognising these different aspects of poverty helps us to see why homelessness requires more than simply a material response. Giving money to someone who is begging does not help because the problems they face are far deeper than a lack of money; similarly, giving a flat to a homeless person does not always solve their problems. Their material problem may have been temporarily solved, but so often this falls apart because there are other issues that are not being addressed.

We need to remember that home-lessness is far more than simply house-lessness. Houses are a material need – we need somewhere warm, dry and safe to live – but homes are far more than that. Homes are places of relationship and identity. Helping people to develop a sense of self-worth and build strong, supportive relationships is a key part of effectively responding to homelessness.



<sup>1</sup> Church Urban Fund also talks about these three aspects of poverty in our Web of Poverty paper (2014)

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### THE CONTRIBUTION OF FAITH COMMUNITIES TO RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS

**The Rt. Reverent Mark Bryant, Bishop of Jarrow**

Our responses to homeless people, and to others in need, depends on how we see the world and one of the things that faith communities are about is helping us to see the world in a new way.

Faith communities say to us that nobody matters more or less than anybody else. Every member of the human race is somebody like me. There is nobody who is of less importance or less worth than I am.

Faith communities also teach us that when there is a problem it starts with me, I am the one who needs to change. It's easy to blame others, but faith says to us that the first bit of change I need to be concerned about is the change that takes place in me, and how I see the world.

Why do we find this so difficult? Some of us are brought up understanding that we are different from other people and that's probably code for being better than other people. This makes it difficult for us to put ourselves in other's shoes.

However, the more we can put our feet into the shoes of others, the more we discover our lives are enriched and the human family is a richer place.

St Vincent de Paul said 'The poor have much to teach us, as we have much to learn from them.' When we engage with people who are different from us we need to have a relationship of listening and learning. We need to get away from the idea that the poor are people to whom we do stuff. We have to become people who listen.

Faith communities are not necessarily doing work that is better than others' work. However, what they bring to the table is an ability and desire to look on each person as an individual with dignity. In a world which sometimes feels like it's all about tick boxes and targets, we're saying there is another way to engage with human beings, to build relationships with them. This is deeply valuable.



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## THE NEED FOR GRACE AND TRUTH<sup>2</sup>

**Jon Kuhrt, Executive Director of West London Mission**

In John's gospel we are told: *'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of **grace and truth**'* (John 1:14). These two words – grace and truth – can help us think about how to respond to homelessness, said Jon.

Grace – God's unearned love, forgiveness and acceptance – is at the very centre of the gospel. The belief that God loves all people equally and offers grace to all helps to instil compassion for those who are suffering. This has led countless Christians down the centuries to work with the most marginalised and destitute people in their societies.

However, Jesus' message also contained a sharp edge of truth about the need for radical change. A call for a truthful recognition of our self-centredness that brings about change and enables us to live in good and caring relationships with others.

In the person of Jesus, grace and truth cannot be separated. The same must be true of our work with homeless people. The list below shows the tension that can exist between the two approaches.

Some of the criticisms of Christian work with homeless people is that it focuses on giving free meals, free accommodation, unconditional love and acceptance. Although this embodies the 'grace' aspect of Christ's message, it can run counter to other agencies' emphasis on encouraging and empowering people to face the reality of their situation and to take responsibility for it. If there are multiple places where people can get 'a second chance' it can lead to people regularly being 'saved' without ever having to face a challenge about what they need to do about their situation. In this way grace, when it becomes too detached from truth, can actually be destructive and damaging, rather than liberating and healing.

There are some specific situations where a balance of grace and truth is particularly needed.

**Begging** is a transaction that is often not based on truth. Often the person begging says that they need money to get into a hostel; however entry to most hostels is not dependent on paying cash. What is being presented is simply not true and because it is not true it can never be a step towards transformation.

**Soup runs** have been controversial for a number of years. The street-based nature of these services gives the clear impression that they are for rough sleepers, but of course the recipients are far more diverse than that. Soup runs perpetuate the impression that the street is where help, generosity and kindness can be accessed and this inevitably draws a wide range of people. It would be far more positive for soup runs to

be based within churches where social and recreational activities would be more effective.

**Night shelters** are further testimony to the impressive commitment that so many Christians and churches have towards evolving new services for homeless people. However, they can create problems if people who have been working intensively with the

### Emphasis on **grace**

- Unconditional acceptance
- Giving another chance
- Showing compassion
- Providing support and care
- Focus on rights
- Treated as a guest
- Hospitality

### Emphasis on **truth**

- Enforcement of rules
- Maintaining boundaries
- Administering justice
- Challenging and empowering
- Focus on personal responsibility
- Treated as a client
- Assessment

<sup>2</sup> This is taken from Homelessness: Grace, Truth and Transformation by Jon Kuhrt and Chris Ward (Grove, 2013)



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commissioned agencies then disappear for three months into a church night shelter. This can put back the long-term steps they were working towards and leaves the person back at square one at the end of the winter.

Grace and truth represent a 'dialectical tension' that needs to be continually grappled with – and will always be affected by the context and situations of individuals. It is not, and never can be, a split dichotomy because all sustainable and effective work will involve something from both sides.

### STORIES OF HOPE: GRACE

'I started heroin at 11 years old. I didn't know what it was at the time, but everyone was doing it. When my mum found out she brought me to Middlesbrough to try and get away from it, but the drugs here were cheaper and easier to get hold of.

'I went from homelessness to being in prison, to living on the streets and then back to prison. That's where I did my first bit of education and that sort of changed my mindset. I thought: I need to get out of here and change things. I was told about a support group for addicts. The support group helped a lot. I didn't need to hide myself, I could be truthful and honest, I could tell them how I was feeling and get the support I needed. Through the confidence I got from the group I managed to get my own home.

'I came to Terry after I'd been there a few weeks and I was buzzing, I was proper happy because I'd just paid my first bill. I think it was an electricity bill. For the first time in my life I'd not ripped anybody off and from then I've never missed a bill. Through that I started building my confidence up. I applied for jobs and volunteering. There is hope for anybody that's homeless, for anybody on addiction. There's help out there. If I can do it, anybody can do it. I thank everyone who helped me build my life back up. I'm thankful for that.'

### STORIES OF HOPE: SARAH

'I started using heroin and crack cocaine at 15 years old. My life was extremely chaotic. There was something in my childhood that triggered it all. I had no aspiration, I didn't want to be anything. I used drugs as my safe haven, heroin put me in a bubble.

'I met my husband and he was a drug user too. We had a child at 16, a little boy, and we got our own council house. I was clean right through my pregnancy but then when I had my baby I went back on drugs. The council evicted us and my mum had to take my baby off us because we had nowhere to live. We went round on people's sofas and slept rough a few nights.

'Then we had a meeting with one of my drug counsellors. She got us into a B&B and we got put on a methadone programme. We've now been clean for 16 years. We've never ever gone back.

'We got our son back and I'm now in my second year of a degree at Teesside University. I want to help people who are homeless and have drug addictions.

'People can't be hand fed, they have to help themselves. It's alright all these agencies giving people things all the time, but you have to want to help yourself. Until you get to that stage in your life, you can throw everything at them but it's not going to work. I think that needs to be addressed.'

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### CONCLUSION

*'We've got to believe in their dignity until they can believe in it themselves'*

Terry, Positive Pathways Worker

The event organised by Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland was very well received. It certainly achieved its first aim of narrowing the professional-faith divide, showcasing the great diversity of responses that exist to homelessness in the area. In doing that, it emphasised the need (and encouraged the desire) for the various agencies and organisations to stay in close contact and coordinate their work.

It also highlighted the contribution that faith communities can make to the homelessness sector. This contribution is seen not only in the number and range of support services offered, but also in the principles upon which those services are based. Faith communities enact the belief that each person is of infinite and equal worth and so remind us that it is our duty to care for the weakest and most vulnerable in our society.

The event also posed a challenge. It called upon people to reflect upon what they are doing to help homeless people and to honestly evaluate the effectiveness of that work. To what extent is it enabling people to continue in their destructive behaviour? To what extent is it meeting a material need but neglecting deeper relational needs?

There was a clear message throughout the day about the need to get the right balance of grace and truth. The need to balance the desire to act with compassion and love, with the need to also recognise that simply giving people things will not necessarily help their situation or encourage a more radical transformation. True transformation is likely to only occur when people are empowered to find the answers within themselves, when they feel able to take control of their lives, and are supported to make long-term, positive changes.

