



# Our faith prompts care for homeless

## The depth of our discipleship can be judged by how we treat the marginalised. And many of our churches do help the homeless

WALK down any high street and it seems that more people are living and sleeping rough than ever before. Homelessness seems to be a growing problem – but what can the Church do about it?

The statistics make grim reading: the number of people sleeping on the UK's streets doubled between 2010 and 2017, and a record number of homeless people died in the past year. And that's not counting those who end up sleeping in hostels, on friend's sofas, or in bed and breakfast accommodation – none of whom have somewhere they can actually call home.

Christians are rightly judged on how they treat the most marginalised in our society. So it's not surprising that our churches are at the forefront of caring for the homeless. Over the past two winters, worshippers across Southsea have welcomed

homeless people to sleep in their church buildings during the coldest months of the year.

This winter, they'll run their Open Church project again, with 12 people sleeping inside churches including St Swithun's RC Church, Kings Church and Eastney Methodist each night from February 3 until March 1.

**'We don't see rough sleepers as a problem, but as individuals.'**

Churches in Gosport will also open their doors each night for two months as part of a similar scheme. Their 'Open Doors' project will build on the existing food run that already offers food to the dozen or so rough sleepers in the centre of Gosport. Churches Together in

Gosport are working with Gosport Borough Council to offer them hot food, a safe place to sleep, and breakfast, from January 6 through to February 29.

The four churches involved are Christ Church, St Mary's RC Church in Gosport High Street, Waterside Church and Freedom Church – formerly Brockhurst Baptist.

Project leader Phil Rutt, from St Paul's Church, Sarisbury Green, said: "We hope that we can open our doors to those who are the most vulnerable – the core rough sleepers in the centre of Gosport. They'll come inside our churches for a meal, the chance to chat with our volunteers and each other, and a bed for the night.

"These projects also offer volunteers from the community an opportunity to seriously engage with the rough sleepers. From the shared meal and

## Fridge offers food and a spiritual chillout

IT'S late on a Friday night and the church's entrance is brightly lit. You can see people chatting happily inside – and you can smell the bacon being cooked.

Pop inside and you'll be welcomed with coffee, bacon sandwiches and cheese toasties. Join others playing dominoes or board games, or catching up. There's also a chance to spend a few minutes studying the Bible and talking about faith.

This is Friday Fridge, based at St Jude's Church, Southsea, which has just celebrated its 13th birthday.

It was originally set up to cater for those leaving pubs and clubs, offering a spiritual chillout to those unlikely to engage with church on a Sunday.

It opened from 10.30pm until 2.30am on Friday nights, with ambient music, thought-provoking projections and creative prayer stations.

But as local pubs and clubs began to close down, it started to cater for a different audience – often those on the margins of society, including those living

relationship building, rough sleepers can be encouraged to re-engage with services and make some life changing decisions."

And Kevin Gallagher, director of Caritas Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth, who will run the project, said: "We don't see those who sleep rough as an issue or as a problem that needs to be solved, but as individuals, each of whom comes from a different situation and has a story to tell.



Dave Davis (centre) and friends at Friday Fridge

with addictions, mental health issues, homelessness or loneliness.

Whereas before there might be an entirely different set of guests each week, now it caters for a fairly regular clientele. Its opening times also shifted to 9pm-11pm, on the first, second and third Fridays of each month.

Its leader, Jim Campbell, said: "We are open to absolutely anyone who is around late on a Friday night, so in practice that often means those who don't necessarily have anywhere else to be.

"We are very happy to offer food and drinks and to chat with no strings attached. But if someone wants to talk about faith or say a prayer, our volunteers can help them to do so.

"Recently we have had a few people who wanted to study the Bible, so we were happy to set

up a group doing that before we opened our doors to everyone else."

One regular, Dave Davis, was due to be confirmed in our cathedral by Bishop Christopher after attending both Friday Fridge and Sunday Suppers in nearby St Simon's Church.

He also met the vicar of St Simon's, the Rev Andy Finn, regularly to help him prepare him for confirmation.

"I used to go to church as a kid, and I was baptised," he said. "I stopped going when I was 10 or 11. I started going to Sunday Suppers about three years ago, and I was interested in getting confirmed. I study the Bible as an audio book."

If you'd like to volunteer to help at Friday Fridge, please contact St Jude's parish office on 023-9275 0442 or office@sjc.church.

"We want to create an environment where people feel a bit more human. Anyone who wants to volunteer will be given appropriate training, so they'll understand our procedures. This will be a pilot scheme, and will help us as we try to work out how to serve them better once this specific project has finished."

The project – like the one in Portsmouth – replicates similar schemes in Windsor and Horsham,

with each church offering a bed for the night on certain days of each week. Volunteers can cook with guests in the evening, sleep in the church overnight, or help with breakfast in the morning. Folding beds and bedding are then transported from one church to the next each day.

The project leaders have already held a recruitment evening, which was addressed by Gosport MP Caroline Dinenage and the