

Gosport Mayor Kathleen Jones, which enabled everyone to hear about the project more fully. But more volunteers are needed and everyone is welcome - those of any faith and of no faith. Anyone who is interested should email gospportopendoors@gmail.com or phone Kevin Gallagher on 07388-994057.

Meanwhile, in Portsmouth and elsewhere, Christians have joined forces to buy houses for those who otherwise have nowhere to live.

Across the UK, worshippers have been working with the charity **Hope Into Action** to provide proper homes for those who are homeless, refugees, addicts or suffering from domestic abuse. Their thinking is that if 50 worshippers invest £5,000 each, they can afford to buy a £250,000 house. Investors receive 2% on their share of the investment each year, and any profit from the eventual sale of the house.

In Portsmouth, one house is already being supported by members of St Jude's Church in Southsea via this scheme, and another was bought by members of North End Baptist Church. Each of these houses can accommodate two tenants, and their first tenants moved in last April. That's in addition to a house bought by members of St John's Church, Rowlands Castle, two years ago.

Tracey Ansell, minister of North End Baptist Church, said: "It's great that churches can provide a house for those who need it, but it's not just a physical thing, it's also relational. The idea is that churchgoers also build relationships with those who are living in these houses.

"These people are often ex-offenders, homeless people, addicts or those who have suffered domestic abuse, and they have no one around them to act as a genuine support group. Building relationships with Christians can



Top: Worshippers also build relationships with those they provide food and drink for; below: Open Church in Portsmouth last year gave churches the chance to open their buildings to those who were homeless;

help them to get onto the right path."

One group that is keen to keep such issues high on our priority list is **Churches Homeless Action**, an alliance of Christians and others working in this field.

Its annual Christmas voucher scheme is running again this year. Worshippers are invited to buy £5 vouchers for shops such as Argos, Tesco and Sainsbury's and place them inside Christmas cards. They can be sent to the deanery office,

St Faith's Church, Crasswell Street, Landport, and will be distributed to agencies that work with the homeless, asylum seekers and victims of domestic abuse. Ring 023-9282 2990 for details.

Local churchgoers are also involved with the **Rucksack Project** in Portsmouth, which invites people to fill rucksacks with clothes, sleeping bags, food and toiletries to give to those who are homeless.

For more details, see: www.portsmouth.anglican.org/homeless.

Guests greeted with hugs and smiles

AS the clock ticks around to 5.30pm, the guests burst through the door and are greeted with hugs and smiles by the volunteers.

Regulars start setting up tables and chairs, and get out tablecloths, plates and cutlery. Then they queue up for a cuppa and a pastry before settling down to chat. Soon they'll be tucking into soup and rolls, sandwiches and cake.

This has been the routine at Sunday Suppers for around 30 years. St Simon's Church in Southsea replaced its evening service with a simple meal every Sunday night for those who were homeless or in need. Up to 50 or so guests come each week, including those with addiction or mental health issues, or those who just need some company.

For Emily Orr, 23, it is literally a godsend. She and her fiancé, Nick Wakefield, 27, come most weeks to Sunday Suppers.

"I love being here," she said. "I can't get a job because my autism means I get anxious easily, and it also means my world becomes a little closed off. Here I can make new friends, be part of a community, have some delicious food and learn a bit more about God. The volunteers are amazing and I always like chatting to them. They always make it so welcoming, and you feel included. The food is always good."

The kitchen team will have arrived earlier to see what food has been donated by worshippers from St Simon's or neighbouring churches, or from local supermarkets and cafes. They'll chop fresh vegetables to



Guests enjoy food, drink and chat at Sunday Suppers

make into soup, spread butter onto bread rolls, and pile up plates of sandwiches and cake.

Around 25 volunteers from St Simon's take it in turns to run Sunday Suppers. And while guests and

volunteers are eating together, one worshipper will speak for a few moments about an aspect of the Christian faith. They also pray throughout the week for those they've met.

Congregation member John Bazley, who has been volunteering at Sunday Suppers for 20 years, said: "This is where Jesus would be. The fact that I'm allowed to share in this is a huge privilege and honour. It's probably the most worthwhile thing I do, and I'm convinced this is what the Church should be doing. For many of the people here, this is their community - this is their church. And I always get something out of being involved myself."

At the end of the evening,

volunteers will hand out what they call 'party bags', filled with food and other essential items for those in need. For those who are actually sleeping rough, they might include pot noodles and cup-a-soups, as local shops will provide them with hot water. Or there might be food that can be eaten straight from a tin, such as tuna. Duvets and sleeping bags may also be provided.

Once a month, Haircuts for the Homeless will come to cut guests' hair and trim beards. On another Sunday each month, pizzas will be delivered from Domino's Pizza, as their way of helping.

Anthony, 37, who walks down from his home in Fratton each week, said: "I've been coming for a couple of years, and the variety of food here is really good. I volunteer at a community centre, but I'm on Jobseekers Allowance, so I have quite a low income. So it's great that there is also some food that we can take away."

The credo at Sunday Suppers is that anyone is welcome, whatever their circumstances. If you'd like to help, please contact St Simon's on admin@stsimons-southsea.org.uk or 023-9282 9440.