

Homeless guests sleep in our churches

TEN homeless men were given food and a place to sleep inside Portsmouth churches for 28 consecutive nights.

Christians from across the city offered evening meals, bed and breakfast to those who may otherwise have slept on the streets. Their Open Church project aimed to do something about Portsmouth's growing homelessness problem and build relationships between churchgoers and the homeless.

Each of the seven churches involved hosted their guests on a particular day of the week. So St Simon's Church in Southsea was the venue each Friday night during February.

Guests were served a hot meal in the church hall. A team of volunteers chatted to guests, and played table-tennis, table football, board games and cards with them.

Later, they moved upstairs where camp beds were made up in another hall which was serving as a makeshift dormitory. In the morning, guests freshened up before enjoying the breakfast provided. One guest, called 'Mac', explained how he had ended up homeless after a relationship breakdown around Christmas.

"I slept like a baby in the church we were in last night," he said. "Some of us already knew each



One guest, Waldemar, tries out the beds at St Simon's Church, Southsea

other, but we're gradually getting to know each other better."

Volunteer Martin Cook, from St Simon's Church, said: "It's a brilliant idea and very rewarding. I'm glad I'm part of it."

The other churches hosting during February were St Jude's, Southsea; Kings Church, Southsea; Portsmouth Family Church; Immanuel Baptist, Southsea; Eastney Methodist Church; and St Swithun's RC Church. More than 150 churchgoers and non-churchgoers volunteered to help.

It was a pilot project, which ran for four weeks. The 10 guests were selected by the Society of St James, a homelessness charity which manages the Winter Beds Service for Portsmouth City Council. It provided training and practical support for the churches.

The Open Church project

complemented the work that churches already do in the city with those who are homeless. That includes Sunday Suppers at St Simon's, which has provided a hot meal for homeless people every Sunday for 27 years.

Lorna Sandland, community development worker at St Simon's, organised the project with the Rev Adam Denley from St Jude's. She said: "We wanted to find a practical way to help those who are on the streets and suggested this pilot scheme. We were amazed - and delighted - that more than 150 churchgoers wanted to help.

"The churches hosted the same 10 guests throughout, so the volunteers and guests should have got to know each other well. It is those friendships that will help us all to understand the issues better - and to decide how we can expand this project in the future."