



Crisis Open Christmas

Notes by Canon Bruce Saunders which could be used as a parish magazine article, as ideas for a sermon, meditation or for group discussion.

In response to the changing nature of homelessness., CRISIS adopted a new approach to their Open Christmas last year. For several years, CRISIS have observed fewer people literally sleeping on the streets, but a growing number of the 'hidden homeless', people who may have a roof but who still lack the other forms of personal support that make life sustainable. So last year, instead of drawing people from all over London to one central site, they opened seven centres in different parts of London. Their intention was to create networks of relationship between their guests and the support agencies in each area in the hope of initiating longer-term local contact and support.

Feedback shows this new approach has been a success, but the new approach offers churches a particular challenge. Formerly, it was good to know that hundreds of homeless people would be gathered up in some distant centre, fed, watered, entertained and that the Christmas celebration might even include a great act of worship.

The new strategy adopted by Crisis throws responsibility back onto local communities and local churches. What level of awareness or relationship exists between a local church and the 'hidden homeless' who live nearby in hostels and council bedsits? What kind of work would need to be done during the year to make it possible for such a person even to think about going to church at Christmas? And if at Christmas, why not at other times? Is my local church the kind of community in which a formerly homeless person could find themselves at home?

The family in Nazareth was no cosy nuclear unit. Both home and family were much wider terms in New Testament times. Before returning to their home, (Luke 2.25-40) the child Jesus was presented to God in the Temple, in the presence of a frail old man and a childless widow, the faith and hopes and living and dying of both of them deeply bound up with this child. Simeon warns Mary of parental anguish ahead. And within a few verses (Luke 2.41-52), Jesus' parents are desperately seeking their lost son among the relatives and friends who made up their extended family group. The Holy Family was neither insular nor safe.

Homes and families need to have perforated, permeable edges if they are to avoid becoming impossible to get into (or out of). It's true for church 'families' too. Openness makes them less comfortable but more authentic, embodying Gospel and Kingdom values more fully. And these accessible edges, these open doors, these risky attempts at invitation and engagement with others may provide points of contact with people in the local community who may have a roof, but have none of the other human relationships that create a home.

Questions for discussion

How easy would it be for someone living in a hostel or bedsit in our neighbourhood to walk into our church for a service at Christmas or any other time? What kind of reception would s/he receive?

What do we do as a church, or what could we do, to develop relationships with the neediest people in our community? What other groups or agencies are there locally who could help us with that?