

## **AN EVENING CAFÉ IN HUDDERSFIELD**

Like many churches in town and city centres across the UK, a café has been part of Huddersfield Methodist Mission for many years. What seems to set our café apart from many other ones is the diversity of people who come in. The Mission Café is normally open from 9.30 am – 2 pm and offers affordable, nutritious food in a relaxed environment. Since the café is involved in supporting a significant number of people who find themselves in vulnerable situations we also offer advice on such matters as benefits and housing. The Mission Café is the only place in Huddersfield where anyone is able to simply turn up and receive advice face to face. In addition, the Welcome Centre – based at the Mission – offers food, clothing and household items to those in vulnerable situations.

In September 2011 a meeting convened by Jacqui Goff (the Mission Café Manager) took place at the Mission to explore issues relating to the homelessness in Huddersfield. Sixty five people from 19 churches gathered together to consider how we as a Christian community within Huddersfield might support those who are homeless during the winter of 2011/12. We received support from Community Mission (which is a partnership between Livability and Tearfund).

The meeting showed a real desire to find new ways of supporting the homeless, but with the realisation that with winter approaching the options were limited. We knew that offering overnight accommodation was not possible, but someone suggested that we might open the Mission Café on weekday evenings during the winter. This idea began to circulate and received a favourable response. The Mission Café Manager applied for a grant from the Seedbed Christian Community Trust and we were delighted to receive a cheque which covered all the anticipated costs.

In November 2011 we took the plunge and sent out publicity across churches in Huddersfield seeking volunteers. We were overwhelmed because within two weeks we had over 70 volunteers, sufficient to cover weekday evenings during January and February together with substitutes. Thankfully, a member of staff of a local business supporting the café offered to coordinate the volunteers, which was no mean feat.

From the second week in January 2012, the Mission Café opened from 6-10 pm offering free drinks and a free simple meal. We were grateful to the local Sikh community who supported us by offering a fiery curry each Friday evening. The evenings were covered by at least four volunteers: two in the kitchen and two circulating among the guests. This marked a

shift away from a purely service mentality to one of active engagement with guests. We didn't anticipate just how significant this would prove to be.

The word spread and numbers quickly rose from 9 on the opening night to over 30 on the first Friday; the highest number of guests was 78, with the average being 49 per evening. Evenings were characterised by a buzz of conversation and laughter, with a number of people playing games together. Guests were diverse, including the homeless and others in vulnerable situations, but also café regulars who were glad to have somewhere to go on an evening. I recall one person who came into the café one evening for the very first time, having heard about "the party at the Mission" from someone else on the streets. This affirmed that it was project that was owned by those coming as guests. The evenings were so successful that it was decided to continue the evening opening throughout March, supported by a generous grant from the local council.

When the evening opening finished, guests were asked what they had valued. Top of the list was the sense of sharing and community which had been experienced, with the provision of free food and drink also significant. A few people explained that they were drinking less than they

would otherwise have done and a number of street workers shared that they needed to work fewer nights because of the support they were receiving.

We were aware that volunteers might be meeting people from very different circumstances than they were used to and so we set up fortnightly opportunities for volunteers to gather to talk about their experiences. Initially, a number of volunteers found it daunting to be in the café for four hours without something to occupy them. However, this fear quickly vanished and after the first few weeks everyone looked forward to the evenings in the café. The times of reflection enabled fascinating conversations to take place, including comments about the way in which volunteers felt privileged to be allowed into the lives of members of the street community. The relations which volunteers had with guests caused them to bring in large birthday cakes, allowing for real celebration that could be shared by everyone.

Whilst the evening opening was taking place we were aware that God was doing something very special in our midst. It became evident that this was not 'service of the needy' but rather mutual engagement with other human beings. Stories were told, laughter was shared, games were played and all of us – guests and volunteers – found ourselves

enriched. The sheer diversity of the community felt like a sign of the Kingdom of God in our midst. The depth of sharing which took place made us reflect upon the superficiality of what we blithely term 'community' within Christian circles.

Whilst we rejoice at God's goodness to us through this initiative we have been keen to learn from this experience and hear God's invitation for us in the future. The café will be open on weekday evenings throughout January – March 2013. Many volunteers from last winter are wishing to continue their involvement, together with a number of new ones. Churches throughout Huddersfield have been invited to give £100 towards the cost of running the evening opening and the amazingly generous response has provided a core base of funding. This has been supplemented by other fundraising efforts, including a couple who recently got married, both of whom had volunteered last winter, and asked guests to make a donation towards the continuing evening opening; this raised £1,500! We are also exploring other means by which we can support people this winter.

Our experience through the evening opening of the Mission Café has led to the recognition that reconciliation could play a significant role in our continuing life. Reconciliation can take place in any number of ways as

people who would otherwise lead parallel lives are brought together in a safe environment in which true dialogue and engagement can take place, leading to enrichment and transformation.

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