

CHAIRS REPORT ON THE 2024 SEASON

As delivered at Trinity Baptist Church, Bexleyheath to the Volunteer Thank You event, 20th June 2024

Welcome to this Thank You event. My name is Charlie & I am Chair of the BWS Trustees.

In the first verse of the first book of the bible, Genesis 1:1, we read: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Very familiar words opening God’s glorious truth to this world.

But what was this ‘earth’ like? We are told: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep..”. Well, that doesn’t sound very nice to me. But it got me reflecting upon the experience of people who are homeless. They can feel ‘formless’, having nowhere to put down roots, nowhere to call ‘home’. They can feel ‘empty’, having nothing to anchor their lives around, having no real purpose anymore in life, no self-esteem. ‘Darkness’, in one form or other, can be their only friend and the place to which they escape until they bury themselves in ‘the deep’ – depression, addiction, despair.

But then, we are told in verse 3 that “God said: ‘Let there be light’, and there was light”. Hallelujah, God didn’t leave the earth in darkness. And I like to think that in many ways Bexley Winter Shelter is a little chink of ‘light’ to the homeless in Bexley. And by Bexley Winter Shelter, I mean all of us and especially you, our glorious and marvellous volunteers. The Trustees, together with our Guest Case Worker, Geraldine, can do a lot – source accommodation, negotiate with the Council, put into place procedures and policies, stuff that achieves much but which can be very cold and non-personal. Our tag line is: “Warmth, nourishment and compassion in the coldest months”. The Trustees and Geraldine can provide the physical shelter and

nourishment but it is you, our volunteers, who provide the warmth, the spiritual and emotional nourishment and the compassion. Those of you who are here represent just under half of the 64 volunteers who gave time and energy to serve and bless our guests. In total, our volunteers gave 2,250 hours of volunteering time. You came from over 14 various churches across the Borough, and from none. Three of those Bexleyheath churches – this church, The Salvation Army, and St John Vianney - allowed Bexley Winter Shelter to use their building to provide an evening meal for our guests, which was your primary point of engagement with them. We thank those churches and all the volunteers represented here today.

With your significant & meaningful input Bexley Winter Shelter helped 22 guests during this last season.

For 2024, significant funding was again provided by the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities. With that grant we could employ Geraldine and continue to provide accommodation in a B&B. By using a B&B, we were therefore again able to help women who had been made homeless; there were nine in total (meaning 13 guests were men 😊).

The homeless population does not consist of any one age group, although this year it felt like the young were overrepresented: 45% of our guests were under the age of 25. 50% were aged between 25 and 65, and the remaining guest was one 68-year-old gentlemen.

We had a mix of nationalities – 16 guests were UK nationals, two European (including Irish) and six were from elsewhere. Half of our guests were black and the other half white.

The reason why our guests were homeless are varied – six had an end to their housing tenancy, three had been staying in temporary accommodation that had come to an end, one had immigration issues, 11 had family or friends who could no longer provide accommodation and one was as a consequence of domestic violence.

Geraldine, together with Ursula, Cath and others, did a marvellous job liaising with the council, Thames Reach and other organisations to find positive and stable accommodation for 12 guests. For those directly involved, like Geraldine, this was sometimes a stressful and time-consuming experience, especially when the only suitable accommodation for a guest is in Edmonton, North London! She also has the patience to make over 50 phone calls to assist our 68-year-old gentleman so that he didn't lose his new tenancy!

Of the other 10 guests, eight have positive but not stable accommodation, i.e. they are sofa surfing or in short-term housing. Regretfully, despite all the hard work, for different reasons, two are back on the streets.

Geraldine did a truly great job but the truth is some of what she achieved couldn't have been done if you, our volunteers, did not make our guests feel welcomed, relaxed and show them that God and people still care for them. Your actions helped guests build back self-esteem and self-respect, helped them engage with us and made the job of finding accommodation for them that little bit easier.

So, thank you again for your volunteering.

And thank you to Andy for taking this service, to Doug for the music and to Trinity Baptist Church for allowing us to hold this event in their building.