

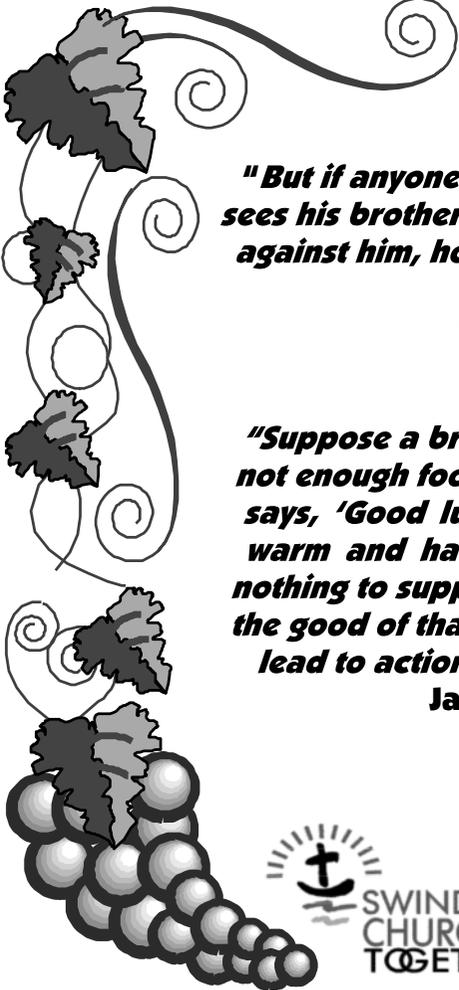
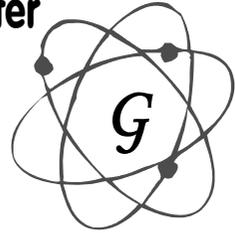
Promoting justice, peace & the integrity of creation

Grapevine

SC4J Newsletter

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"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"

(1 John 3:17)

"Suppose a brother or sister is in rags with not enough food for the day, but one of you says, 'Good luck to you, keep yourselves warm and have plenty to eat,' but does nothing to supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So with faith; if it does not lead to action, it is itself a lifeless thing."

James 2 vs.15 - 17



SWINDON
CHURCHES
TOGETHER



Letter from the Editor

Welcome to issue 63 of Grapevine, the occasional magazine of Swindon Churches Action for Justice.

In Advent, we reflect again on the story of Mary and Joseph travelling far from home and searching for a safe place where their baby could be born. It seems fitting, therefore, that all the articles in this edition of Grapevine are on the theme of housing and homelessness.

We begin with ‘any spare change please?’, which challenges us to think about our responses to rough sleepers asking for money. There follows a list of possible ways to help, reproduced with kind permission of Shelter from their supporters’ magazine.

Shelter’s Commission on Social Housing published its final report in January 2019. An informative article explains the scope of this Commission’s enquiry, its findings and its far-reaching recommendations.

I thank Swindon City of Sanctuary for an encouraging account of Room for All, their project supporting asylum seekers and refugees who face homelessness.

After a reminder of World Homeless Day, we end with an article on the Quakers’ Salter Lecture given this year. There are also some thought-provoking quotations scattered throughout the publication.

Elspeth Wollen

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Any spare change please?

Can we reasonably conclude that the quieter voice with which those soliciting for small change in our public spaces make their request, is due to them having been told, sort of officially, that begging is illegal? Last summer, circling the outside of the Albert Hall in London and subconsciously assured by the laws of geometry that we would arrive, eventually, at the right entrance, we passed a lone figure who seemed to be whispering to no one in particular the information that he possessed last minute tickets for sale (no doubt at vastly inflated prices which he failed to divulge). This was clearly unlawful activity and for that reason presumably, executed *sotto voce*. We reported him, believing we were rendering a service to concert goers in general. But would any of us complain to the authorities that a ‘beggar’ had asked us for money as we went about our lawful retail activity say, around our local shopping area? I hope not, but you may tell me otherwise.

There is, in any case, more than one way of making a person disappear.

Several years ago, and following a tiring day, I was strolling home from the Railway Station along a dark-late evening-not-quite-completely-deserted Regent Street in Swindon. The only human visible to me as I joined the thoroughfare was a man in my near distance sitting on the ground with what looked like a cardboard coffee mug tellingly placed before him. (*.....any spare change please?.....*)

Anxious to get on, I kept my eyes firmly focused ahead, appeasing my conscience with the relevant wisdom for these circumstances, *They only spend it on drink and drugs and you do more harm than good by giving them any money*, and with the soothing knowledge that I was a regular contributor to a couple of homelessness charities. Having passed him, I then heard a sardonic response to my studied progress. *Congratulations! Well done! You did a brilliant job there of not seeing me! Very impressive!*

There is indeed more than one way of making a person disappear.

The other words that always act as a compass for my conflicted attitude to homeless or other people begging for my cash, were spoken at a homelessness Sunday service at my then church, Bath Road Methodist, by the organiser of a Christian charity which helps to feed those living on the Swindon streets. We were told that the opposite example set by my nocturnal response to that person

on Regent Street helps reassure a marginalised person that they are, after all, human and of value. Whether or not money is offered, a friendly conversation makes the other visible.

Read the contribution in this issue of ‘Grapevine’ from Shelter about possible ways of helping rough sleepers. It applies in some measure to anyone begging from us, whether homeless or needy or simply living a messed-up life.

To try and judge whether anyone is worthy of my attention or beneficence I have found to be largely futile and perhaps a bit un-Biblical. Being consistent has also eluded me. Sometimes I stop, have a brief chat, give food or money and, then again, I may do none of this. Being the all wise one defeats me completely. This is a messy world and I’m no guru. I do know what it means to me to be known, recognised, valued by my loved ones and friends, that I am not invisible. No one is invisible to God. Intentionally not to see the other surely denies this fundamental tenet of faith. Yes, we must keep ourselves safe and certainly see the broader picture in our response to deprivation as we support appropriate agencies and charities according to our means. But let’s not deny our own worth by being blind to our fellow flesh and blood human beings, whatever their status in their own or the world’s eyes.

Tony Barnes

How to help

There’s been a 165% increase in rough sleeping since 2010... according to the Spring 2019 issue of ‘Home’, the frontline news magazine for supporters of Shelter, the Campaign for the Homeless.

Under the page headline and sub heading...*How to help – Practical advice for helping people who are living on our streets*, the following guidelines are offered.

If you’re worried about someone you see sleeping rough...

- Use the **streetlink.org.uk** website to send an alert to StreetLink, noting the person’s exact location and appearance. The details you provide are sent to the local authority or outreach service for the area, to help them find the individual and connect them to support
- Visit the Homeless Link website at **homeless.org.uk** to find practical support, hostels and day centres offering food, showers and respite from the weather using the homelessness services directory

· Visit [shelter.org.uk/get_help](https://www.shelter.org.uk/get_help) to see how homeless people can apply to the council for housing or get in touch with our expert advisers.

What else you can do...

Sleeping rough can be a lonely experience, so **just a quick chat and a hello can make a difference** to a homeless person, especially as most people will walk past and ignore them.

If it's particularly cold...

Offer a hot drink, food, warm clothing and blankets.

If it's particularly hot...

Offer food, water, hats, sunglasses and sun cream.

At all times... if someone needs urgent medical attention, call 999.

(Reproduced with permission from "home", Shelter supporters' magazine, Spring 2019)

Shelter's Commission on Social Housing

In January 2018, Shelter brought together 16 people from across the political spectrum, and with different backgrounds and perspectives, to head an independent commission on the future of social housing. This was part of a wider debate on housing policy following the Grenfell Tower fire.

Over several months, members travelled the country, listening to thousands of people living in council and housing association homes, to people struggling in the private rented sector and to the public at large. 31, 000 people took part in this Big Conversation.

While public support for social housing is strong, reflecting the positive role it has played in our recent history, social homes are now scarce, leading to a reliance on the private rented sector. Prospects are bleak for those trapped in private rented accommodation, facing insecurity and rising costs and with no chance of a long-term social rented home. Moreover, the Commission heard that people who live in social housing are often stereotyped and stigmatised. Like those living in and around Grenfell Tower, renters across England feel that people in positions of power are indifferent to their concerns.

The Commission's final report, 'Building for our future: A vision for social housing', was published in January this year. This reflects a consensus view that, for generations, "social housing played a vital role in giving millions the quality and dignity of life that insecure and unaffordable private renting could not...Social Housing is a crucial public asset to be proud of, to invest in and to maintain, and not something to be neglected or devalued....A visionary, transformational change is required to create a bigger and better social housing sector and strong communities."

The Report sets out clear and ambitious recommendations to ensure this happens.

Shelter is campaigning to build 3.1 million more social homes over the next 20 years. An online petition is still open and can be found at: shelter.org.uk/buildmoresocialhousing

The full report can be read at: shelter.org.uk/socialhousing

Reverend Dr Mike Long, Chair of Shelter's Social Housing Commission and Minister of Notting Hill Methodist Church, has kindly given the editor of Grapevine permission to include in this issue his opening remarks at the launch of the Commission's report on 8th January.

"During 2018 I was invited to chair Shelter's Commission on Social Housing. The appalling Grenfell Tower fire, which claimed 72 lives and devastated our local community, shone a spotlight on social housing at its worst. In a year marking 100 years of council housing, there is much in the past to be celebrated, and yet sadly much of that legacy has now vanished.

I found it a huge privilege, and a steep learning curve, to hear from so many residents and housing associations across England about their experiences and hopes. We heard tales of overcrowding, vulnerability, fears about complaining, and stigmatisation. And of course we heard good stories, showing how social housing can be superb, where tenants feel safe and respected, and invest in their local community.

For me personally, the hidden suffering of so many, and hearing their despair, was deeply distressing. So many problems (in schooling, mental health, employment.....) are compounded when housing is poor or insecure. Yet there are things that can be done! There seems to be widespread consensus that we have a housing crisis, but the government does not seem to regard social housing as the key element in remedying this.

We need a huge investment in social housing, but also a change in attitude up and down the country to re-establish social housing as a public good, as something we can all be proud of. We also need to find ways of ensuring tenants feel safe and are listened to. Many tower blocks are still covered in the same cladding used at Grenfell Tower, and although there are examples of excellent tenant participation among some housing associations, too many tenants feel unwanted cogs in an impersonal and uncaring machine.

Jesus spoke about the Father's house containing 'many rooms'. He was not speaking of earthly accommodation but offering a vision of the enormity of God's salvation. However, that salvation contains the concept of a space to find oneself, to be, for self-expression, of belonging and security."

Room for all

Swindon City of Sanctuary seeks to build a culture of welcome, inclusion and support for **everyone** in Swindon, with a focus on those seeking sanctuary (refugees and asylum seekers) fleeing from war and persecution.

We manage different projects, one of these being a hosting scheme called '**Room for All**' which supports asylum seekers and refugees who face homelessness. The scheme is simply where a Swindon resident offers a spare room in their house for a short period of time to someone who would otherwise be destitute. As well as a room we also provide our guests with a bus pass, a designated volunteer support worker and personalised move-on plans, helping to reduce homelessness locally.

In 1999 a new law was passed across the United Kingdom designed to reduce the concentration of asylum seekers and refugees in London and the south east. In 2006 Swindon became one of the south west's 'dispersal towns'. Asylum Seekers have no choice over which town or city they are 'dispersed' to. Most asylum seekers are dispersed to Swindon from Cardiff. During this time The Harbour Project (local charity who run a daily drop in centre as well as other services) were the only support for asylum seekers arriving in Swindon.

Since Swindon City of Sanctuary set up in 2016 we have continued to work closely with The Harbour Project, providing other support needed for those seeking sanctuary such as our hosting scheme, schools work, events and an

evening drop in every Thursday at Coffee open to all our community. We are also campaigning for political change in the system through our national networks.

Hosting is beneficial for both our guests and Hosts, long life friendships develop, exchanging cultures, cuisines, language and interests. As one of our Hosts families said of a guest:



“He stayed with us four weeks and is now part of our family.

He learnt a little more English, he laughed at the same things as us, he followed world news intently.

We learnt where to buy Halal meat, how alien a knife and fork can be, how rough life is for far too many, and that family can be made in just four weeks.

Opening our home has been the most insightful, emotive and inspiring experience.”

Life for asylum seekers can be extremely hard, with a great deal of uncertainty. The chance to give them a room in someone’s home, to offer friendship and support, can be crucial to their wellbeing and an invaluable support. It is so important to make those seeking sanctuary feel they belong to our community and have a safe place to live.

If you’re interested in supporting our scheme as a volunteer, a host or would like to donate to fund our work please email: info@swindon.cityofsanctuary.org or call Nicola - Executive Officer: **07903167142**

“Decent, secure housing must be accepted as a fundamental right for all. Decent housing means a place that is dry, warm, and in reasonable repair. It also means security, privacy, sufficient space, a place where people can grow, make choices, and become more whole people.”
Faith in the City, 1985

World Homelessness Day

Did you know that 10th October 2019 was World Homeless Day? People around the world marked this day in many varied ways and changed the lives of homeless people in their local communities.

World Homeless Day is an annual event that has been held on 10th October since 2010. Its purpose is to draw attention to homeless people's needs locally and to provide opportunities for the community to get involved in responding to homelessness.

For information go to www.worldhomelessday.org

Housing Justice, the national Christian charity advocating action on homelessness and housing need, urged churches to take part in *Homeless Sunday 2019*, designated as 13th October. Homeless Sunday has been part of the Christian calendar for more than a quarter of a century. It is an opportunity for churches of all denominations and people of all faiths to unite and show solidarity with those experiencing homelessness, and to reflect and plan practical action on homelessness. However, churches can, of course, choose to highlight issues of housing and homelessness on other days in the year.

The focus this year was 'The impact of volunteering on the volunteer', apt as Christians and church communities are at the forefront of the response to the rise in homelessness including the most visible aspect, rough sleeping. There were just 65 night shelters operating across the Housing Justice network in 2013; today there are 125 across England and Wales.

How could your church or faith community mark World Homeless Day in 2020?

For plenty of inspiration go to www.housingjustice.org.uk

Housing Justice is part of Churches Together in England.

"To have nowhere to go, perhaps for the rest of my life, to face every day the uncertainty of the night and the fear of the elements, is almost unimaginable."

John Pilger, 1991

Solutions for a divided society

‘Salter Lecture’ given by Catherine West, a Quaker and (then) Labour MP

I heard this thought-provoking lecture at Friends House (the London headquarters of Quakers in Britain) in May 2019. Catherine West has represented Hornsey & Wood Green since the 2015 election. Previously, she worked with asylum seekers and refugees, and was a councillor in Islington, a borough with extremes of rich and poor. In June 2010, Islington held the first Fairness Commission (IFC) to investigate how to make the borough a fairer place. This was widely praised for the pioneering way in which it went about seeking to address inequalities of wealth, health, housing, education and crime in Islington. Following publication of the IFC’s Final Report in June 2011, many other authorities have established their own fairness commissions to tackle levels of inequality and poverty around the country.

The book, *The Spirit Level*, (which has featured before in Grapevine) demonstrated that inequality is bad for everyone. Unequal societies tend to be less trusting, have higher incidents of violence and poorer mental health. “Division and inequality breed contempt and fear.” Catherine quoted Jo Cox: “We have far more in common than the things that divide us.” However, the reality is that inequality and disenchantment are increasing in our society. Catherine’s constituents bring many worries, mainly about money, housing and insecure employment. In her lecture, she explored some solutions to problems in the three areas of housing, wages and knife crime.

Housing:

Catherine noted that homelessness had risen by 60% and rough sleeping by £134% since 2010. 1.2 million people are on social housing waiting lists, while the government has spent £12m on a luxury apartment in New York for a British diplomat to live in while negotiating trade deals with the USA! We see an overreliance on unregulated private rental homes from which families can be evicted at any time. Vulnerable people find themselves moved, at short notice, far away from children’s schools, friends, relatives and support networks.

Catherine explained the urgent need not only to be build more social housing and genuinely affordable homes, but also to regulate the privately rented sector. Tenants must be given more security and protected from unreasonable rent rises. Checks on housing must be increased and the currently very poor condition of some housing improved.

Wages:

A disturbing trend in the past decade has been the increase in ‘in-work’ poverty. Although more people have jobs, one third of the work force is in insecure employment e.g. zero-hour contracts where they do not know what money they will receive each week. One telling statistic was that, in 2014, taxpayers spent £11m topping up low wages paid by UK companies: 11 times the cost of benefit fraud for that year.

Catherine argued for proper enforcement of the national minimum wage, as a bare minimum. An even better solution to in-work poverty would be a commitment by both the private and public sector to pay a ‘real’ living wage to all workers. Research by The Living Wage Foundation has shown this to be good for business, as well as morally right.

All employers should be required, immediately, to publish their internal pay ratios between the highest and lowest paid, bringing much needed transparency to the low pay vs. high pay debate. When Catherine herself was a borough leader of an inner-city borough, with thousands of employees, they got their pay differential down to 11:1, showing it can be done.

Knife Crime:

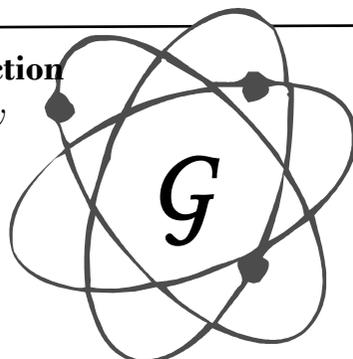
Homicides last year rose to their highest level for a decade and we are experiencing “an epidemic of knife crime”. Harsher sentences and criminalising measures have proved to be ineffective and unhelpful. Instead, Catherine maintained, we need a public health approach whereby the risk factors for becoming involved in knife crime (as perpetrator or victim) are identified and addressed. She described how this has worked in two settings: a city in Colombia and in Scotland. Setting up economic opportunities is vital, as is rebuilding trust within and between communities. Such an approach to violence reduction is “preventative rather than simply focusing on changing just individual behaviour”, she explained.

Analysis has shown that income inequality is a driver for knife carrying; precarious employment and low wages contribute to feelings of low self-worth and hopelessness; being unable to access a safe, secure and affordable home makes it harder to live with dignity and to contribute to society.

As the problems explored in the Salter Lecture are interlinked, the solutions must be too. Although Catherine West did not explicitly set out a theological context for the changes she advocated, she has previously stated: “For me, actively advancing the cause of equality is both a political imperative and a spiritual vocation.” (*Quakers in Britain website, 25 November 2016*)

Social Action

Published by Swindon Churches Action for Justice because ‘*Peace will follow when Justice prevails*’.



FUTURE PUBLICATIONS

At the time this edition of the Grapevine magazine is issued, it is unclear as to the future for Swindon Churches Action for Justice group. If you are keen for Grapevine to continue please do get in touch with the Editor to find out how you can contribute financially or otherwise. Elspeth Wollen, ewollen@waitrose.com

Grapevine currently has a widespread readership with over 1,000 copies being distributed across Swindon, Marlborough, Highworth, Wroughton and various places in between!

Views expressed in this magazine are not necessarily the views held by the majority of the members of SC4J or the Editor.

This is what the Lord requires of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

**"True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enable them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it: not hide their candle under a bushel but set it upon a table in candlestick."
*William Penn (Quaker), 1682***

