

How Betel brings radical healing to thousands of lives broken by addiction. By Kent Martin

# Breaking habits of a lifetime

**On a typical day nearly 100 Betel residences in 11 countries host 1,200 recovering men and women**

**I** imagine Paul arriving on your doorstep. After thirteen years injecting heroin, ten of those doubling up on methadone, he's been living in squats, prison or on the streets. Now he says he wants to change his life. At age 35, he's beginning a little late, according to his methadone-prescribing GP in Stoke-on-Trent. He told Paul that he'd never known anyone to come off hard drugs, not after ten years anyway. Studies showed that no one breaks the habit after that long.

That day in the surgery Paul not only accepted those fatalistic medical facts. He believed them and gradually the wish to die became his only hope. 'I'd never known anyone else to get off heroin or methadone – while alive,' Paul reflected later. He can name 29 dead mates to prove it.

Paul arrived on the doorstep of Betel of Britain in June 2001. Of the 1,550 men and women who have entered our doors free of charge since 1996 – like Paul – one-third have abused hard drugs or alcohol for more than ten years. 80% of the men and 62% percent of the women are ex-offenders. Today Paul beams when I remind him that it's been 18 months since he last touched heroin, methadone or any other mood-altering drug. He's 'clean', healthy, running a Betel business, and mentoring twelve recovering addicts as leader of a Betel residence.

As a hardcore addict Paul thought he had tried everything to change – cold-turkeying in prison, alternative drug therapies, professional counselling, lofexidine detoxes. Betel, however, was his first encounter with simple, radical Christian faith and the challenge of an abstinent lifestyle.

Betel (Spanish for Bethel) began in 1985 as a spontaneous street outreach to the large number of homeless and substance abusers living in northeast Madrid. When a young WEC International missionary dared to welcome one withdrawing addict into his flat, dozens of his junkie friends were soon begging to join them. Since then Betel has taken in nearly 60,000 recovering addicts free of charge in provinces across

Spain and a total of 50 cities in Portugal, Italy, France, Germany, England, USA, Mexico, Russia, India and Greece.

Remarkably, in 45 of those 50 cities, Betel centres are run by men and women who themselves once entered from the streets seeking freedom from substance abuse. On a typical day nearly 100 Betel residences in eleven countries host 1,200 recovering men and women.

## Betel of Britain

Betel launched in the UK in January 1996 following visits to Spain by several British rehabilitation specialists and church leaders. They invited Betel's directors to try establishing a successful alternative to conventional, government-funded rehab by adapting our income-generating model to the UK.

Seven and a half years later the charity runs nine houses: in Birmingham, Derby and Nottingham, offering 140 beds for men and women. The UK headquarters, located on a five-acre Bournville Village Trust property near Birmingham hosts 44 men.

Last year, 69% of the charity's income was generated via seven charity furniture shops, three gardening teams, a painting and decorating crew, two furniture restoration workshops, and a women's re-upholstery team. Senior Betel residents run all these business ventures. Remaining income is from housing benefit (18%) and donations (13%). A new programme to be launched this year will enable men and women to earn national vocational qualifications as they work, increasing their employability upon leaving Betel.

One of the benefits of generating most of our own income is that residents can stay beyond six or twelve months, the usual restraint on government funding. It means that people are freer to advance at their own pace. Those who feel the need to stay longer can. Another benefit is that people wishing to enter Betel don't have to wait three to six months to access Social Services funding. Betel can often accept people the

day they call but normally it's possible within seven days, depending on available bed space.

Turning chaotic addicts into people like Paul who's become a responsible businessman running a painting and decorating team, doesn't come without a price tag. Radical problems require radical solutions. Men sometimes return from court hearings to report that judges, well acquainted with their criminal record, prefer to send them this time to Betel because the rules look stricter – and infinitely more purposeful – than what awaits them again in prison.

Upon entering Betel men and women must sign off primary or 'cashable' state benefits, which they readily admit serve little more than to help fuel the addiction treadmill. Drugs, alcohol and tobacco are off limits. Right from the start the goal is to break every chemical link in the chain to addictive behaviours.

As for withdrawal syndrome, most entrants don't manage to complete a medical detox before they arrive, which can take months to schedule. They undergo cold turkey. Unlike any previous cold turkey they've experienced, peers – people who've been through it – surround them in Betel. This helps strengthen their will for as many sleepless days and nights as necessary.

Many do leave in the face of this rigorous induction. No addiction is easily broken. But many return. In 2002, of the 409 men and women who entered our residences, 94 of them (or 23%) returned at least once. 'Easy entrance, easy exit' is our motto.

What of those who make it through six months, a year or more? Visitors often ask what motivates these hurting people to stay on, let alone work for the first time in years. Most are signed off the dole for the first time in adulthood.

The Earl of Shaftsbury wrote of the Salvation Army's early impact on a generation of East London alcoholics: 'The working classes will never be reached but by an agency provided from among themselves.' The reasons that helped quench the insatiable urge for alcohol and rebuild lives in the late 1800s are the same simple, if intangible, ones that motivate abstinence in the Betel men and women of today.

I've asked and listened to reasons for twelve years. They are not clinical, medical or professional. They cannot be crunched into statistics. In contrast to the cold isolation of prostituting themselves or thieving for drugs, wearied by guilt, bitterness and rejection, most say they stay in Betel simply because they feel loved. The obvious change in other tattooed recovering addicts around them inspires courage.

They stay, too, because of a deep gratitude and newly found purpose in their relationship with God. With passing time what keeps them persevering is the satisfaction of ownership – the role they play in building Betel. They're proud to feel part of something that is impacting society's most perplexing problem – the destructive power of which they know first hand – but which the government's deepest pockets and sharpest thinkers are still unable to solve.

A new database is helping us research the impact we've made since opening in 1996. In our first six



years we hosted 1,072 first-time entrants free of charge. (Another 278 returned more than once.) More than 70 percent of first-time entrants arrived homeless (defined as either sleeping rough or declaring no fixed abode). Some 481 or 45% made it through the first two weeks of detoxification and stayed beyond 15 days up to six months. And of the 481, 31% or 150 men and women stayed completely drug free for more than six months.

In 2002 it cost us £180 per week to host each resident – half what another centre I know charges the Social Services. Our businesses generated £120 of that – or two-thirds per person. So only £60 per week came from external sources.

As the nation's drugs problem continues to grow, Betel is committed to breaking into the middle ground between hostel dwelling and rehabilitation, city by city. We plan to rescue those on the slippery slope of homelessness and addiction who want to rebuild their lives in a 'clean' living environment but who can't get into overburdened, under funded rehabs.

Betel is a safe, structured environment to make a fresh start in life but no one would call it 'clinical'. Residents often compare it to extended family, a family that many never had. Our local GP sees residents almost daily in his surgery; in seven years the local police have never had to respond to a single incident. In short, it's where broken men and women can gradually rebuild trust, faith and self-dignity with life's two building blocks that elude them most: meaningful relationships and meaningful work.

Paul and his three-man painting and decorating team get paid tomorrow. They are on schedule to earn £6,000 this month. His customers are awestruck by his story. He had lost hope of being anything but an opiate-addict for life, always taking from others. Now he thanks God to be giving something back, paying his own way to recovery.

*Kent Martin is Director of Betel UK*

*To refer people to Betel, receive free videos and literature (including leaflets for use in doctors surgeries), or find out about visitors days, write, ring or e-mail*

*Betel of Britain, Windmill House, Weatheroak Hill  
Alvechurch, Birmingham B48 7EA  
Tel 01564 822 356 Email info@betel.charis.co.uk*

**In contrast to the cold isolation of prostituting themselves or thieving for drugs, wearied by guilt, bitterness and rejection, most say they stay in Betel simply because they feel loved**