

serving the homeless with Barnabus

Andy Meeson goes out with the medical van

Barnabus¹ is a Christian charity in Manchester that aims to share the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ with homeless people, prostitutes and prisoners. During the day, its headquarters, 'The Beacon', provides breakfast, washing facilities, Bible studies, friendship and advice. Evenings see volunteers descend on the streets from minibuses, offering companionship, food, drink, and medical advice or treatment.

Two years ago, I started volunteering once a week. I turned up on my first night expecting to be nice and chatty, and perhaps give out drinks. To my surprise I was asked, 'are you the doctor?' After explaining that I was only a student, I was reassured that was 'good enough' and I was shown to the medical van along with two nurses. After a time of prayer, God had provided them with people to run a medical van, and I turned out to be one of them!

medical needs abound

I have seen a multitude of medical needs in the people we serve. The usual complaints are



foot lesions, mainly from walking the streets all day in poorly fitting shoes, through Manchester's infamous wet weather. Other common presentations are injuries caused by drug or alcohol abuse, such as abscesses at injection sites, broken needles in veins, or head wounds from blackouts and seizures. We also see complaints ranging from chest pain to depressive symptoms - much like a GP surgery or hospital accident and emergency (A&E) department. Ultimately, the treatment we can offer is limited (we cannot prescribe, for example), so our role is mainly advisory.

Very few GPs in Manchester accept patients without an address (I currently know of

only one). The local A&E department, I am told, often treats the homeless with irritation and cynicism. So we are frequently their first port of call, along with NHS primary care drop-in centres.

Primary care access is not the only issue the homeless face; a big problem, in my opinion, is the homeless person with a chronic disease. They will often miss appointments because they have no fixed address to receive letters. A particular man with type one diabetes comes to mind; he presented with a large foot ulcer having not taken insulin for years.

One thing I am certain of is that the people I come into contact with at Barnabus do not receive the same level of healthcare as I would. Illness prevention is neglected in this group; instead crisis management and hospital admissions are all too often the mainstay of medical care.

see their spiritual need

The most important thing that I have learned is that these people need to be told about Jesus Christ. We can look after them;

we can feed and clothe them; we can offer friendship; and indeed we should. However, unless we tell them why we are doing this, unless we tell them about the hope we have in Jesus, then we do not love these people as we should. In fact, would we not just be providing momentary relief in a life headed towards an eternity in hell?

Manchester's streets, humanly speaking, are a pretty hopeless place. People are sleeping rough, trapped in vicious addictions to drugs and alcohol, while vulnerable women sell themselves for sex. Some experience this horror for a few weeks, others a few months and some for many years.

The only true hope for these marginalised people is our merciful God and Saviour. He enables us truthfully and wholeheartedly to encourage someone battling with alcohol addiction to have hope, that all is not lost. Because we know that God is powerful and good - he is sovereign over all and with him all things are possible.²

I see and hear of God saving prostitutes, pimps, addicts and the homeless; I am repeatedly reminded of God's amazing grace. He graciously humbles

take action!

Why not ask your local church about opportunities to serve the homeless? You could even encourage your CMF group to volunteer together! Here are a few websites to get you started:

■ **Crisis** - www.crisis.org.uk

Charity for homeless people; it delivers services and campaigns for change.

■ **Shelter** - www.shelter.org.uk

Charity providing advice and advocacy for homeless people.

■ **Centrepont** - www.centrepont.org.uk

Charity supporting homeless young people.

■ **Homeless UK** - www.homelessuk.org

Information on services, publications and training to deal with homelessness.

me and convicts me of my sin. For we are all sinners, rebels deserving an eternity in hell, who God graciously enables to turn and trust Jesus with empty hands, to be justified through him.^{3,4} Praise be to God!

In truth, the mission of Barnabus is hard work - not a long list of conversions. Many people are not interested in the gospel; it seems foolish, or they are more interested in the free food. They are often aggressive and intimidating; although we are looked after by our friends on the street, there have been hostile and even violent incidents. Evangelising often feels awkward or forced so it is easier just to patch them up and let them go. On some nights,

Barnabus seems so weak and its work like a drop in the ocean. But God continues to work through us to bring glory to his name, and so we echo Paul's words:

But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.⁵

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REFERENCES

1. www.barnabus-manchester.org.uk
2. Lk 1:37
3. Is 53:6
4. Rom 4:22-25
5. 2 Cor 12:9,10