

Lent lecture no.5 – CIRDIC

The final in the group entitled 'LENT WELL SPENT – with the Homeless' - the context of last Tuesday's talk was the work of CIRDIC.



Rev John Edwards introduced Mrs Angela Wills, the speaker at the Lent lecture held on 8 April in St James' Church Centre, Finchampstead.

Set up in 1990 as the Churches In Reading Drop-In Centre to offer food and clothes to the homeless, CIRDIC is situated in the former church hall of St Saviour's Church in Berkeley Avenue.

Angela is the current Chair of the Trustees. She worships at a Reading Roman Catholic church, and has been a catering volunteer at CIRDIC for five years. Stepping in to give the lecture as the original speaker Mabel Boyd was unwell, Angela thanked the Parish for their invitation and also their support for CIRDIC. The organisation has just two paid part-time staff, Mabel Boyd, Centre Manager, and Andrea, Centre Administrator. Angela paid tribute to them and the hundred or so volunteers who provide all the services for the guests. These support services now include:

- Meals
- Clean clothing and toiletries
- Bath and shower facilities including provision for shaving and hairdressing
- Provision of a safe postal address
- Use of a telephone, computers and internet access
- Provision of confirmation of identity
- Listening time
- Regular access to and links with specialist services such as health care and housing
- Moving-on projects designed to help guests improve their lives and happiness such as helping on the Centre's allotment

Angela explained CIRDIC's Mission Statement which is

- to welcome, as Christ welcomed, those who are in need.
- to offer love, hope and compassion within a Christian ethos to help to restore human dignity, self respect and well being.
- to work together within our community to increase awareness of our mutual responsibility towards the disadvantaged and marginalised in our society

The guests include those who are

- Homeless
- Rootless
- Substance abusers and sufferers of addiction
- Afflicted with mental health problems
- Living in poor housing
- Unemployed

- In serious financial difficulty
- unable to speak English very well

After sharing the Mission Statement with us, Angela used some examples to explain, very movingly, how a sense of family and community experience is shared among the guests and volunteers at CIRDIC. A Memorial Service was held at CIRDIC about two years ago for one of the former guests. It was much appreciated by his family who had been able to hear about him and his life in Reading from other guests and to know he had not been alone. He had been a part of the community at CIRDIC. Some guests later become volunteers, for example, a Polish speaker now accompanies Polish guests with limited understanding of English to official appointments eg, at the Job Centre. Some volunteers have learning difficulties (like some of the guests) and really gain self-worth and skills through the work-experience at CIRDIC. Guests are encouraged to use their gifts to help others at the centre. Recent initiatives have included painting furniture and making mosaics, turning something broken into something beautiful.

The centre costs about £60,000 per year to run. This is raised through a grant of £10,000 from Reading Borough Council and financial donations from churches and individuals. Several individuals, organisations and businesses also give food, materials and time, sometimes through CONNECT READING. Connect Reading is a unique local partnership between the private, public, voluntary and community sectors that work together to address areas of need within Greater Reading. Through it, the centre was re-painted. A current project is changing the former food store into a quiet room for reflection, prayer or confidential discussion. When you are homeless, access to a quiet space away from noise and hubbub may be really welcome.

Help is given to any adult who arrives although people under 18 are not allowed for their own safety as they would be vulnerable. Sometimes it may be difficult for women in the centre but CIRDIC offers a truly open door and free service. Guests are asked to behave reasonably in the centre, which is an alcohol and drug free zone, but this is not always easy for them with their many difficulties. Volunteers receive appropriate training eg, on health and hygiene, and first aid. They talk to the guests and get to know their names. One of the ex-guests who is now employed and living independently said "I am grateful that our paths crossed as the Drop-In was my first step in the recovery I have been enabled to have, in being led to the life I have today. I have taken many steps that I could not have managed on my own, and the first one was accepting the food, warmth, shelter, and guidance that was offered to me at CIRDIC."

Angela explained that the volunteers share prayer together and with the guests if requested. The guests know that the Centre is run by churches and that most of the volunteers are Christians. There is a cross over the servery but there is no explicit proselytising. The Centre has a short service on Sunday mornings run by the volunteers and followed by breakfast. It is open on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays.

Towards the end of her lecture and looking forward, Angela explained how Christians are having prayer meetings and exploratory visits elsewhere to see if some overnight shelter could be offered in Reading especially during the winter months. In Ealing seven churches (each providing bedding) offer overnight accommodation on camp beds(which are moved between the churches) and oyster cards for guests to get to each church. Before the evening concluded with a reading by Angela of the hymn " A Touching Place" and the Lord's Prayer, there were questions from the floor and discussion of some issues raised by Angela.

To find out more about the work of CIRDIC and how you can help, visit their website at www.cirdic.org.uk