

TOGETHER IN SUSSEX



The Matthew 25 Mission and Christ Church: Serving the Community in Covid

The Matthew 25 Mission is a local charity which helps meet the physical, emotional, social, and pastoral needs of disadvantaged and marginalised people in Eastbourne. The name comes from the biblical passage that is the charity's mission statement (S. Matthew 25. 34-40), and this undergirds its distinguishing Christian ethos. The charity has an inclusive culture, and welcomes anyone regardless of faith, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation.

Having operated from Christ Church for 15 years, there has been a long-established meal service and other material support offered to those in need. Individuals in crisis are supported by keyworkers and volunteers to address a wide range of challenges and issues.

During the Covid19 pandemic, the Mission has needed to expand its provision in response to a sharp spike in need of support. We have gone from a drop-in centre to a takeaway service – with socially distanced key-working done in the gardens at Brodie hall. The number of meals served has gone from 400 to 1200 (representing over 300 different individual guests) per week; moreover, the Mission has moved from being open 5 to 7 days a week, serving both morning and afternoon meals. We have also employed an additional keyworker, and our team of four employees and forty volunteers have heroically worked flat-out.

We have been blessed to receive substantial donations of food, both from individuals and businesses (such as supermarkets and closed restaurants), and since March the entire north aisle and west end of the church has been used for its storage. The Mission has been donated industrial freezers and microwaves to help meet the huge surge in demand, the meals being prepared in the hall itself. It is both a huge achievement that we have been able to rise to the challenge and help meet this demand, whilst simultaneously tragic that such level of need now exists.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a perceived stigma attached to those who need to use the services of such charities, and this is where our community food parcels have really come into their own – so that no one slips through the net. Last week, 200 pre-prepared frozen meals were delivered to families with children in our local area. The wage earners from 6 local families all recently lost their jobs, and people need tiding over for the (several) weeks until Universal Credit kicks in. We see corresponding problems with delays to other benefits payments, not least with securing successful outcomes with PIP applications.

Situated in the Devonshire West Ward of Eastbourne, 78% of our guests are resident in the area. The ward has some of the highest levels of deprivation in the town, and for those furloughed, and maybe then made redundant, even if they have savings, the little they have can so quickly go. Even while it appears that there is now light at the end of the tunnel in terms of resolving the pandemic, demand at the Mission will be more tied to the increasing levels of unemployment – which we anticipate will continue to exponentially rise.

The recent lockdown(s) and tiering have had similar mental health implications for the homeless and marginalised as for the otherwise vulnerable in wider society. The most frequent issues we are seeing are those of loneliness and depression – maybe about three times more people are now presenting with these issues. For some, these problems were already acute, but the level and intensity are now greatly exacerbated. The effects of redundancy for those in their 40s/50s can be especially devastating; some will have been with the same company their entire working life and can now see little or no prospect of fresh employment.

The Brodie Hall at Christ Church would normally be open throughout the day for guests to find friendship and fellowship within a warm and safe environment. Social distancing and the ban on mixing in indoor settings now make this impossible. Other outreach agencies and charities have had to suspend operations during the last ninth months – many with vulnerable volunteers, or without the premises and resources to safely continue under the restrictions. The lack of face-to-face contact and meaningful human interaction is clearly taking its toll. Some of our guests do not own a phone; some are housed in single room apartments with no TV.

At the moment, the Council is obliged to provide housing to those who need it during lockdown – as was the case earlier in the year. However, this provision – by definition – does not continue indefinitely. For several years now, Christ Church has been working in partnership with the Kingdom Way Trust to run the interviews to the Night Shelter for the forthcoming winter months – clearly with the current restrictions such as they are, this project will be unable to run this current year. The Council has instead provided a couple of their own houses to accommodate those who need it, though the process to get a place is inevitably longer and much more involved. Despite theoretical guarantees to the contrary, we also still see evictions being pursued by private landlords.

We have seen a number of very positive projects and relationships grow out of the pandemic. The Sussex Homeless Service, operated by the St John's Ambulance, offer First Aid and Podiatry services to the vulnerable that come to the Mission once a week. This is just one way by which someone who is homeless or vulnerable can gain a greater sense of well-being and dignity. In addition, as well as meeting immediate physical needs, one of our goals is to help guests make a start in rebuilding their lives. There are often lengthy forms to fill in, or detailed online applications to make, and the keyworkers provide invaluable support to help our people in this regard. To enhance this further, it is wonderful that the Citizens Advice Bureau are now with us virtually – via Zoom – twice a week to provide more specialist assistance. Spiritually, at the beginning of the year, we introduced a new weekly Fresh Expression Sunday Service for the Mission's guests and volunteers – with an attendance of around 30; while this physical gathering has been necessarily suspended through Covid, the service still continues, is recorded, and sent out through our WhatsApp Group – which seems to be appreciated by many.

The Matthew 25 Mission and Christ Church will continue to do our utmost as this crisis continues, to meet our community's complex needs – which are likely to continue to increase as much as Covid may decrease. *Fr David Charles, 30/XI/20*

You can find out more here: <https://www.matthew25mission.org>