

Meet some of the homes as Andrew Hyde reflects having assisted at the Night Shelter:-

*Matthew 25:35, 40*

*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in...*

*The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

I have never spent a night without a roof over my head or food to eat. As such my understanding of homelessness is limited. But after spending a night helping others from Highlands to give some of Southend's homeless a meal and a night's shelter, at Chalkwell Methodist Church, my ignorance is a little less.

My first insight was not profound. I think I already knew that solving the problem was not my mission. But I could make a small difference, just for one night, for the 25 or so men and women who came to the shelter.

You might like to meet some of those people. I have changed their names, and I can only sketch them in a rough outline:

Ken is a musician. Until recently he busked, but his guitar got broken. Later in the evening goes by he sings unaccompanied, mimicking Elvis and Buddy Holly with impressive accuracy. He is 52 but looks older and seems frail. Being homeless is not good for health. I ask him to call me by my name – rather than 'sir'. He is soft-spoken, but briefly his frustration shows in an outburst of anger. In the morning, with unexpected fastidiousness, he tries to select extra clothes to combat the cold and wet.

Rob wants a job. He is clean, well-dressed and articulate. During the day he talks to others on the streets and in the warm but temporary respite of the library, trying to persuade them to seek help. In the past he had a job, a home and relationship, but exchanged them once for Chelmsford prison. He has three children, and longs to see them. He has faith that the training course he is doing will lead him back into a job.

Darren seems not quite with us. I judge he is in his 20s. Not talkative, he sits quietly staring ahead and avoiding eye contact. He may well have been taking

something stronger than tobacco. In the morning he strongly prefers his bedroll on the floor to the cold, wet Sunday that is starting to lighten the streets.

Jack is lively and gregarious. He eats heartily, and gladly joins in a game of cards. Later he produces a electric razor and spruces himself up. Another guest asks him for a haircut, and he administers an impromptu but skilful 'number one'. He immediately seeks a dustpan and brush to clear up the discarded hair.

Maria is Eastern European, about forty but perhaps younger. She hardly eats, and looks unwell. Complaining of cold in the now warm room, but communicating little else, she retires early to a nest in the corner, ignoring the group of Eastern Europeans who later take themselves off to an enclave in the church foyer.

These people have needs and fears just as I do. Like me they also have aspirations and a sense of something better in their future. We are all our Father's children.

I wonder, as you would, how they got here. But actually it doesn't matter. If they have made some poor choices in the past, God will forgive them. That's his job. In the present, these my brothers and sisters need food and shelter. That's my job, just for tonight, and I do my small part gladly. "