Food and shelter: Last winter, 1,200 guests were accommodated with the help of volunteers through Housing Justice's winter shelter scheme

Helping the homeless rebuild their sense of dignity and humanity

By Christopher Driscoll

WITHOUT dwelling on the difficulties of defining and measuring homelessness, the stark evidence of it is, of course, before us on the streets of our cities and towns.

In addition to those sleeping rough there are many more considered legally and technically homeless who live in temporary accommodation and who might be staying with friends or relatives or at hostels, B&B's, night shelters or refuges.

Many of these people who occupy temporary accommodation can experience levels of poor quality housing which can have damaging effects on individual health and well-being.

Poor quality housing is an affront to the human dignity of individuals who are the occupants of such accommodation.

Housing Justice is an organisation which acts as the national voice of Christian action in the field of housing and homelessness.

Cherishing and upholding human dignity in a system that is fraught with inconsistency and inequality is the organisation's *raison d' etre*.

Housing Justice is an ecumenical agency which works by enabling local groups and churches to provide practical help to people in housing need. In addition to organising national campaigns for justice in the housing system, it supports a network of night shelters, drop-in centres and hundreds of practical projects nationwide by providing advice and training for churches and other community groups who work with homeless people.

The organisation works closely with church winter shelter schemes by helping organisers to start new projects and additionally hosts a forum in which a network of 18 independent shelter projects can share information and best practice with one another.

Training is provided to over 6,000 volunteers and at least one Catholic parish in many of the projects will provide support by offering accommodation, food, volunteers and general goodwill.

It is estimated that around 1,200 homeless guests were accommodated last year during the coldest months of the year, a service that if commissioned by the government would have cost somewhere in the region of £2.2m.

The passage of homeless individuals moving back into housing and subsequently mainstream community can often be a difficult one.

A new initiative launched by Housing Justice earlier this year aims to ease the transition process by supporting individuals through the work of 90 trained volunteers who offer mentoring and befriending support to those faced with difficulties in their progression into housing and the wider community.

Another organisation with a Catholic ethos dedicated to the care of homeless individuals in a broad, holistic sense is Anchor House in Canning Town, East London.

Formerly the Apostleship of the Sea, Anchor House is a hostel and life skills centre which, while offering accommodation to homeless people, also emphasises the capacity of its residents to tackle and overcome various personal and structural obstacles they might face in order to break out of the spiral of negativity they find themselves in.

Canning Town is an area characterised in part by low scores in the league tables of health and socio-economic well-being.

To illustrate, as one travels east from Westminster past the seven stops on the Jubilee Line there is a reduction in life expectancy of one year per stop.

The structural issues faced by residents staying at Anchor House include high levels of unemployment, low levels of achievement and subsequently higher levels of offending.

The organisation's ethos, therefore, is one of valuing each individual for who they are and enabling them to aspire to something better.

The development of life skills is

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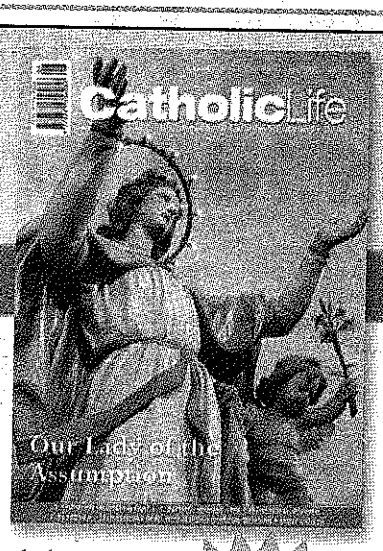

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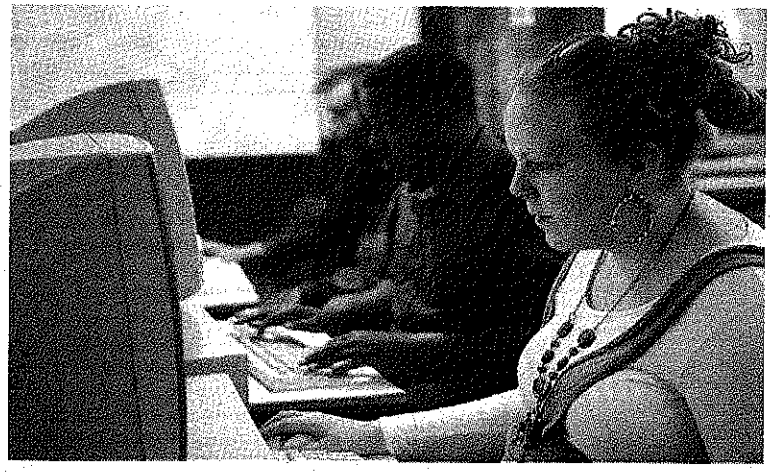
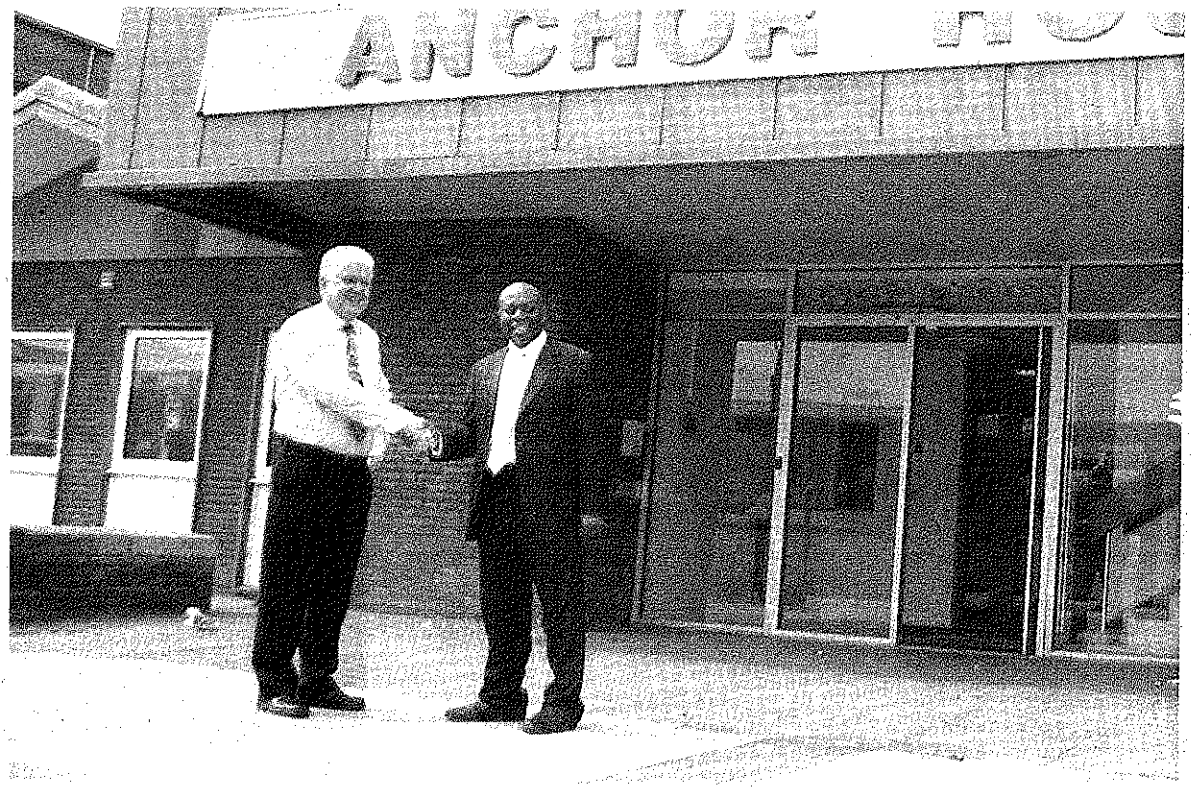




Clockwise from top left: Anchor House's computer room; its Director Keith Fernett *(left)* and Community Ambassador, Mickey Ambrose outside the building; an Anchor House graduation ceremony

an essential part of the organisation's aspirations programme, in which individuals are given opportunities to develop skills in key areas of obtaining and sustaining employment, education and training, health and fitness and personal development.

The overall objective of this outcomes and person-centred approach is to enable residents to eventually move on into more settled accommodation and employment.

The reality of taking account of the often complex lives of homeless people can be hard-hitting.

Recently, a 39 year-old homeless man died of a heart attack outside the premises of Anchor House.

Before his death, Michael had been the victim of a ruthless attack on his life when a car driven by gang of men attempted to run him down, and, after having failed to do so, the gang proceeded to beat him with baseball bats.

Michael was hospitalised with severe injuries and returned to Anchor House with a metal plate in his head. After this violent event, access to appropriate services for Michael was very difficult, his needs were not taken seriously and he was generally treated with little respect.

Michael's story resonates with staff at Anchor House in their experiences of others' unproductive attempts to access mainstream community services, only to be faced with the harsh reality of social exclusion.

All of us know something of loss. To be homeless is to suffer the loss of not only a home or the network of friends, family and community, but in a profound and perhaps more important sense, it implies the loss of capacity: the capacity to be free to play a role in society, to build a life. Fundamentally it can mean the loss of self-worth and dignity.

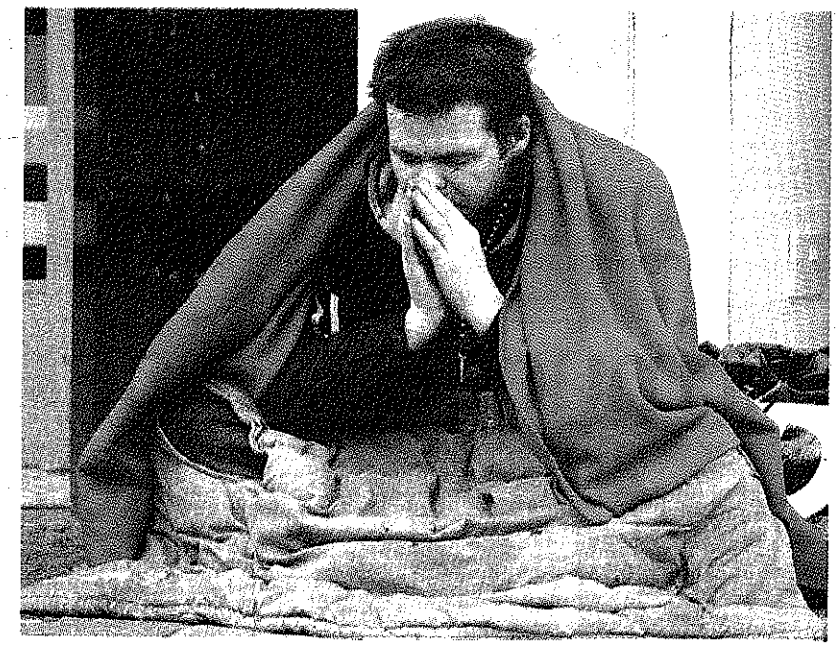
Organisations such as these and others working with the homeless in the Catholic community exist to build individual capacities and to harness shattered senses of self-worth and dignity, because behind every case of homelessness, there is a human person.

The Church, in its mission to vulnerable and marginalised people, emphasises the importance of addressing the conditions of those living on the fringes of society.

A genuine concern for the common good must seek the good of all, not just the 'visible' sections of society and, as long as the loss of human dignity is at stake, homelessness will always be a big issue for the Catholic community.

If you would like to learn more about the work of organisations within the Catholic community who through the provision of social care services are working to alleviate poverty and social exclusion in the UK, go to Caritas Social Action Network's website *www.caritas-socialaction.org.uk*

For more on Caritas Europa's zero poverty campaign, visit: *www.zeropoverty.org*



Faith and mission: A homeless man prays on the streets of London
Pic by: GARRY KNIGHT

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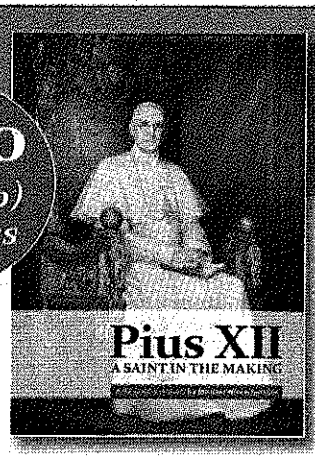

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