

## **Hope Kitchen - how it started**

On a bitterly cold November evening we set out into the dark streets of Hastings looking for people in need of hot soup and a cup of tea. We had flasks, mugs and sandwiches and were well wrapped against the wintry weather. It was awful to think that some people were going to spend the whole night out in these conditions without food or proper shelter. We wanted to show that we cared by offering something to eat and drink as well as a few words of encouragement. Most of us knew little of what it meant to be homeless in Hastings and St Leonards. We had a lot to learn about the problems that homeless and marginalized people face and what we could do to help but at least we had made a start.

A Hastings men's prayer group had been reading in the bible about how Jesus had healed a man who was unable to walk. The man wanted to get into the house where Jesus was teaching but because of his disability and the fact that the house was packed it seemed impossible. His friends had an idea of how to get him right where he needed to be – next to Jesus. They made a hole in the roof of the house and lowered him down with ropes into the presence of Jesus in order to be healed. The practical help of his friends changed this man's life forever. But what could we do for the people of Hastings besides praying?

It became clear to me that a soup kitchen was a simple way of showing God's love in a practical way and as I spoke to others I realized that many were thinking along the same lines. Chris Sears MBE was one of many who had the same vision. He had much experience of working alongside homeless and marginalized people and with his help we soon had a group of interested volunteers. As well as food and drink we believed we had more to offer – Hope. In fact that became the name for the soup kitchen - *Hope Kitchen*. Run by members of many different local churches Hope Kitchen could offer advice about local agencies regarding health, addictions and housing but also prayer and encouragement and something of the gospel or good news of Jesus Christ.

One of our first challenges was finding a suitable venue. After some false starts we soon found that Wellington Square Baptist Church could be the answer. Amazingly they were looking to help people in the town centre in some way, they had a suitable basement and were delighted to support Hope Kitchen. That has been our home since then which the church generously lets us have for two evenings each week.

At the same time as recruiting volunteers and starting some training sessions we began trying to contact people on the streets to let them know about Hope Kitchen. We went out in the evenings in the town centre as well as other locations, taking hot soup with us and letting people know about the soup kitchen. At first it was hard to find anyone as people sleeping rough often tuck themselves away for safety. However when we started in the church hall at Wellington Square word soon got around and we were really open for business. We still open on Thursday and Saturday evenings between 7.30pm and 9pm and welcome anyone to join us for soup, sandwiches and a hot drink. As a team we

meet at 7pm for Christian worship and prayer for the evening. After closing at 9pm and cleaning up the kitchen and hall we meet together again. This is a time to reflect on any issues that have arisen during the evening and to pray for all who have visited Hope Kitchen as guests or volunteers.

During the last 10 years we have learned many lessons and often been humbled by the response from our guests. We all know that it is an amazing privilege to be involved in this work.

Sylvia a trustee and regular volunteer adds: -

*It has been so encouraging to see guests such as M, who came away from a lifestyle of prison, alcohol etc to retrain as an HGV driver. He now has a full time job and good accommodation and occasionally calls back from Brighton to see us. Another guest, C, was close to death on several occasions due to drug abuse. His life turned around and he now works full time supporting people with addictions, has a new partner and is full of 'joie de vivre' - so different from when we first knew him. G had been unemployed for some years; since taking a work placement he has found new confidence and self-esteem as he creates furniture from reclaimed wood. It is a joy to see the sparkle in his eyes as he feels fulfilled in his daily life rather than bored and hopeless. Many guests show real appreciation of Hope Kitchen. A recent quote was from MG, who said 'you know I don't come here for the food except when I'm desperate. I come because I love you all and it's interesting to chat, it's a good place to be'. Yesterday another guest, J, crossed the road especially to tell me 'It's wonderful what you all do, I can't thank you enough'. I was able to tell him we do it from choice, not obligation, and that he is loved.*

I would personally like to thank all the volunteers who have been involved in Hope Kitchen over these years.

Mike Cooper  
Chairman Hope Trust Hastings