

Bringing the real joy of Christmas home to the poor, sick and isolated

Ken Madine

Christmas is a joyful season when families and friends spend time together enjoying food, friendship and good company – but for many it can bring fears of profound loneliness and isolation, even guilt or shame.

Michael, 64, lives in South London. He is well travelled, owns a motorbike and enjoys philosophy, music and company. From early childhood, he found it hard to relate to other people and in his 20s began to self-medicate with alcohol and marijuana. He married twice and had three sons but his condition and behaviour worsened.

Eventually the toll on his last marriage proved so great that he walked out. Years later he was diagnosed with a complex mental health condition, the symptoms of which can be controlled by medication, and he gave up substance misuse 13 years ago.

Eight years ago, he suffered a brain injury in a road accident and since then life has been even more of a struggle, especially at Christmas. “For me Christmas brings a profound sense of dread because it magnifies my feelings of loneliness”, says Michael. “And Christmas Day itself is really tough”.

Michael was referred to the SVP and two members of the local Conference recently visited him to discuss his needs. “I was encouraged to know there’s someone out there who cares and I think it’s so important that they’re here to help people all year round, especially at Christmas”.

In some areas of England and Wales, the work of the parish-based SVP groups, known as Conferences, has extended into larger scale Community Support Projects which SVP members help raise funds to establish.

These ‘special works’, which complement the work of the Conferences, are run by a mix of paid staff and volunteers, and SVP members remain involved in their oversight. The services they provide play a vital role in the community throughout the year, but over the Christmas period they can offer a lifeline for those experiencing loneliness, isolation or struggling with poverty and for whom the festive season is a difficult time.

The projects include a network of over 40 local shops which offer low cost goods and provide employment and volunteering opportunities for local people; furniture stores; supported lodging for people at risk of homelessness; approved premises, which support men in their transition from prison back into society, and Support and Advice Centres.

St Vincent’s Support Centre in Leeds helps over 3,000 people every year. The team of staff and volunteers know the value of kindness and treat everyone with respect and confidentiality. “We welcome everyone here regardless of their situation or circumstance”, says Sheena Eastwood, the centre manager.

“Each individual comes to us with his or her own story and unique experience. They may come to learn English, for counselling, immigration advice and support, or for debt, housing or benefits advice. Some come to work with us as volunteers and in the process gain experience and new skills which improve their chances of finding employment.”

At Christmas, the everyday work of the centre continues but with a focus on making the festive season a better time for those for whom it would otherwise be very bleak. SVP members, businesses and well-wishers bring donations of food and children’s gifts and some give their time as volunteers.

Abby is a single mum who was at risk of eviction after losing her job and falling behind with her mortgage payments. The help she received with managing her debts enabled her to stay in her home, and the guidance and encouragement from the centre’s work club helped her secure a job at a national chain store in Leeds. Although



Staff at the St Vincent’s Support Centre in Leeds and, below, Christmas in Leeds.

times are still hard for Abby, she has started to rebuild her life and for the first time she can see some light at the end of what has been a very dark tunnel. Thanks to the generosity of local supporters, last year the centre was able to give her a food hamper and some gifts for her 11-year-old son, to make sure they were able to enjoy the Christmas period.

Abby later wrote to say ‘...thank you for helping make our Christmas so special... we’re now able to spend Christmas at home together, me and my son’.

Christmas can bring additional pressures for parents and carers of children. Every child is exposed to the frenzy of Christmas advertising and will

Last Christmas we were able to help 55 families with presents and welcomed nearly 200 local children to our free Santa’s grotto. I remember one young mum who had just found out that she would have no income until the New Year. She arrived destitute, with nothing at all for Christmas, and left with presents for her three children and food to last her until the food banks opened again. But what’s most important to me is that she left with a renewed faith in humanity; isn’t that what Christmas is all about?

“Christmas Day can be intensely isolating. While it’s seen as a time for sharing and spending time with loved ones, the reality for many is far from this. We know from our experience with

has no family and suffers from a range of medical issues and learning disabilities. He is self-sufficient and keeps himself busy during the majority of the year but has nowhere to go on Christmas Day.

Laura is 28, employed full time and divorced with three children. She has an active social life but last year, for the first time, she faced the prospect of Christmas without her children, as it was her former partner’s turn to have them on Christmas Day. She did not want to spend the day alone dwelling on her life previously, or the fact that her children were not with her.

Lisa is socially isolated for the majority of the year. She suffers from anxiety and does not mix well with people. Her family finds it difficult at Christmas, as she does not like being around small children and becomes agitated and wants to return home after a few hours. Alongside the SVP’s Support Centres, its Conferences often support people in need at Christmas. Last year for example, a volunteer from Porchlight, a local charity working with homeless people, approached an SVP Conference on the North Kent coast, to tell them about an elderly couple they had recently encountered.

Jessie and Jim were in their late 70s, Jessie had a serious medical condition and Jim acted as her carer. The couple lived in a rented flat and relied on housing benefit, but it did not cover the full cost of their rent and they had to top up their housing costs from their pension, leaving them short of money for food, light and heating.

It was just a week before Christmas, and being short of money, they had not been able to make any provision for the festive season. The local SVP Conference had just finished distributing Christmas hampers for local families in need and funds were somewhat depleted. Despite this, they dug deep and put together a generous Christmas hamper for the couple and delivered it. They also gave them a supermarket gift voucher so they could buy a few special treats.

Jessie and Jim were added to the Conference list of regular visits and they continued to visit them thereafter. In January, the Conference received an email from Porchlight thanking them for responding so quickly and telling them that their support had made all the difference to Jessie and Jim’s

Christmas, and had given them hope for a better future.

Finally, Jessica and her partner have two children and their autistic son suffers from Cystic Fibrosis. As he turned 16 earlier this year, she had been told he would be assessed for a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to replace his disability benefit and details of an appointment would be sent in about three months.

In July, all benefits suddenly stopped without notice. On enquiry, she was told they had missed the appointment – an appointment they knew nothing about. After endless phone calls, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) agreed it was not her fault and said they would re-establish the process and she would be given another appointment in about three months.

Thanks to her persistence and a lot of help from the Conference, the PIP was finally agreed and paid at the end of October and Jessica used it to clear a back-log of bills. However, other benefits which she had been told would be reinstated automatically were not paid as promised and she was told she would have to re-apply for them.

As they included housing benefit, this left them vulnerable to the threat of eviction. The SVP Conference supported the family with food parcels and money for gas and electricity for three months while they waited for the reinstatement of the benefits, to which they are entitled.

Earlier this week their disabled son lost his coat and Jessica used all the cash she had to buy him another. This meant they had nothing for gas or electricity and the SVP Conference member found them late one evening, huddled together in their car trying to get warm. The SVP will continue to support them and plans to ensure they have the best Christmas possible.

As we approach another Christmas season and images come to mind of families celebrating and spending time together, the SVP is ready to lend a hand of friendship and offer practical assistance to anyone facing loneliness, isolation or struggling with poverty. *If you or someone you know is in need of help, for more information about joining the SVP or to donate, contact the SVP national office:*
Tel: 0207 703 3030
Email: info@SVP.org.uk or visit
Web: www.svp.org.uk



be well aware of the excitement and sense of anticipation among their school friends. Sadly, for too many parents and carers, Christmas brings a heavy burden and when money is tight, meeting children’s expectations seems impossible, often bringing feelings of inadequacy, even guilt or shame.

But St Vincent’s can help make possible what can seem impossible, as Sheena explains: “Thanks to our supporters we have new toys donated throughout the year, so we can offer parents and carers the chance to choose a gift or two for their child.

“We don’t wrap them, but leave the selection and wrapping to the adults because they know their children best and we want them to enjoy the moment and feel a sense of ownership over it.

local people in Leeds that Christmas can even be the worst day of the year”.

St Vincent’s throws open its doors on Christmas Day. Volunteers and guests are all welcome and everyone is valued. Last year over 30 people came to share Christmas lunch and enjoy the festive time together. Among them was Jean, a 73-year old lady who lives alone and has no family.

Widowed for 20 years, she has an active weekly routine which includes spending time with friends. “Jean told us that everything stops for her at Christmas. All the people around her go away to spend time with family so she would otherwise be totally alone on Christmas Day”, says Sheena.

Other guests include Mark, a volunteer at St Vincent’s. Aged 62, he