

NEW HOPE IN THE CHURCH

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- Published: The Warehouse
- <https://www.warehouse.org.za/2020/06/19/new-hope-in-the-church/>
- Date: June 19, 2020

Walking into the old church community hall of St Peters Anglican Church in the heart of Mowbray on a Thursday evening, one will be welcomed by a community of people who gather to eat a wholesome hot meal together each week. Many live on the streets, some live in houses nearby and further afield. All want to share this meal and weekly connection. Rather than the traditional 'soup kitchen', the church have been gathering to eat together for eight years now.

But if you walk into that hall today, you will see mattresses, room dividers and a cosy set up that has provided a safe community for ten men who live on the streets to weather the COVID-19 storm. As has been aptly said, we are all facing the same storm, but the boats in which we face the storm are worlds apart.

"Opening the church up for this was not an unusual or strange thing to do," explains Charlie Alexander, who works for the church and is part of the team serving at the microsite, "Because our Thursday night dinners together with our community of people who live on the streets, has been going on for years."

Whilst it may be something 'new' in that people have not slept in the church like this, it made sense to use the church as a place of refuge. "We consider our Thursday night dinners an expression of our church in the community, not as a side thing," explains Charlie, "So, as soon as lock-down was announced, we began thinking about how we could as a church respond with our buildings and people," says Charlie. "For me, the church continues to be open – when it came to the microsite, it was not a supernatural thing that happened – it was a logical thing to do because of our relationships with homeless people before COVID-19."

Richard Bolland, a member of St Peters and co-founder of an NGO that exists to help homeless people in Cape Town, and other church leaders and members, discussed how to create a safe space for people during this crisis. It was agreed that New Hope would run the microsite in partnership with the church.

Hosting ten guests is no small task though. "I am one of the people on the leadership team of volunteers and people from New Hope – we share the load between us all – each taking a day of the week to make sure everything is working well and meals are prepared, and handling emergencies if they arise," says Charlie, whose wife, Lauren, also serves in the personal growth support part of the community. "There are many people involved – this is church."

There have been many encouraging things during this time and Charlie feels positive about the church community and New Hope, and how they have all pulled together with different gifts and resources. There is an amazing team of doctors, social workers,

supervisors and volunteers who make sure everything happens and all guests are cared for well. Some are showing up to serve as leaders for the day each week, others are making meals, or giving equipment -like a lady in the church who helped get computers to the church for training – others are helping with maintenance, many are giving and serving in different ways.

“The thing that encourages me the most is how things have worked out with finances, and how generous people have been, even in the midst of the current economic challenges. People are generally holding onto what they have, so that it can last, but with the microsite we have seen enormous sharing.”

With space for only ten people, the team did interviews and screenings to see who the situation would best suit, something that was not easy to navigate as the team hoped for consistency of lockdown community. “We lost one dear man due to illness during this time, which caused us a lot of sadness and collective grief.” After the funeral one other of their guests decided to leave, and a new round of interviews were done, and one more person added to the group.

The guests who were either living on the streets, or at the Strandfontein camp before the microsite opened, are enjoying three meals a day and snacks and warm drinks, with ample opportunities to be involved in workshops, skills groups if they want to. There are two main purposes for the microsite – firstly, *relief*: making sure people can leave the streets for the period of the lockdown and get the help they need, and the second, ensuring that people have the opportunity to leave the streets in the long term. “The guys are navigating their lives on the streets, and we have to understand that certain things have happened to them, they have faced many setbacks, and they are trying hard to survive, so what the microsite does is give them a space to find rest and food and safety, and hopefully, post COVID-19, they can get training and find what they want to and can do – the possibilities are endless.”

Charlie’s experience has been enriched by watching the personal growth in relationships developed within the group and how calling out who we *‘are’* as opposed to who we are *‘not’* has helped build personal relationships. “It’s a bit like that for the church too – if we call out the church for who we *are*, and not what we are displaying that is *not* who we are meant to be.” Charlie’s prayer is that this time will cause the church to re-examine more and more who we *are* – as the Church, and explore how we can use our partnerships, buildings, space and more beyond COVID-19.

“I believe this time is reminding the Church about who we *really* are,” says Charlie, “And I sense we are working towards a new expression of church, becoming more of who God designed us to be.”

This enriching time has left Charlie asking many questions, such as, Does the existence of a pandemic change the fact that people are suffering on the streets? People’s lives are at risk living outside without COVID-19. What happens beyond COVID-19? How can we *‘be’* church when some of us are living outside?

“What does *‘going back to normal’* look like and do we want that?”

“The microsite is running well; we have plenty resource and volunteers and it’s working so well with teamwork and effort. So what happens after the COVID-19 crisis? Will we carry on? How can we continue to use the space we have once this particular storm is over, together as a church community in a sustainable way?”

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New Hope: New Hope is committed to “Learning to be human together. Giving and receiving with hope. Together, developing dignified alternatives to homelessness.” <https://www.newhopesa.org/>

St Peters Community Dinners: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XogSh7AbZ-A>