

# Lazarus Centre Chaplaincy Newsletter

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## Coronavirus prompts rethink on our response to homelessness - with some hopeful signs

Reports such as those posted by Ben Knight on the ABC News website highlight some positive outcomes emerging from housing rough sleepers in hotels during the pandemic. The reports range widely across Australia and tell stories of those whose lives have been transformed by the experience of safe and secure accommodation.

One example is the story of a 19-year-old man who was approached by an outreach worker near Melbourne Central and offered hotel accommodation. He had been homeless for four years and was not looking forward to another winter on the streets where personal safety and survival were the primary concerns. Carers are finding that once people's primary needs for stable accommodation are met it is easier to surround them with the support needed to rebuild their lives.

This news triggered memories for me from 2013, not long after I began as chaplain to the Breakfast Program. Keen to learn what best practice was among those working with those faced with homelessness I soon heard of a program called Melbourne Street to Home. This program was based on a model that emerged from the US in the 1990's that prioritises housing over other interventions so that life reconstruction could continue from a secure 'home base'. The promising results of the program were documented in a 2015 report by Guy Johnson and Chris Chamberlain from RMIT.

<https://cms.launchhousing.org.au/app/uploads/2016/07/ms2h-final-rpt-4-publication-20150318.pdf>

As promising as those results were it seems it has taken the urgent conditions of the pandemic to really move things along. There have been some additional, and to some perhaps, counter-intuitive outcomes.



Sam and Pete serving take away at the 'COVID ready' Lazarus Centre Breakfast Program

A University of Queensland study has concluded that it is economically advantageous to house rough sleepers in secure and safe accommodation. The study concluded that housing a person saves the community \$13,100 per tenant through savings from health costs (\$832,335), justice and policing (\$122,904) and homelessness services (\$169,364). The study was done in 2015 but its implications are particularly relevant to today as this need to house people in vacant hotels offers the opportunity to consider longer term possibilities.

It seems clear that the housing first model offers very good prospects for helping people to overcome their experiences of homelessness. At first it may seem counterproductive to offer safe, secure and comfortable accommodation before dealing with underlying issues such as emotional difficulties, mental illness, chronic medical conditions and addictions. It is not surprising that the reverse is true – that it is very difficult to deal with those issues while living rough. Housing first - the clinical and economic arguments are important, but most importantly - it is the right thing to do.

Fr Philip Gill

Further resources:

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-28/coronavirus-hotel-plan-for-homeless-to-be-extended-in-victoria/12498750>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-08/housing-homeless-in-pandemic-has-worked-lets-make-it-permanent/12330442>

<https://www.launchhousing.org.au/homelessness-services/rough-sleepers/melbourne-street-to-home>

## Mother Esther's witness to the 'darker side' of Melbourne



Replica of Little Lon cottage, exterior photograph by John Broomfield Museum Victoria with Mother Esther CHN inset

The 11<sup>th</sup> September is the day we give thanks to God for the life of Mother Esther, founder of the Community of the Holy Name. When I think of her I also think of a visit I made some time back to the Melbourne Museum where I was confronted by a reconstruction of a couple of 19<sup>th</sup> century cottages that once existed in Little Lonsdale Street (pictured above with Mother Esther inset). Those who could afford to pay rent lived in tiny two room hovels no bigger than a caravan. Visitors to the exhibition could walk inside and experience the simplicity of life of many in those days. I could only imagine what circumstances faced the poor in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the 'gold had run out'. This was the reality that confronted Emma Silcock when she arrived from England in 1888.

Emma had been a novice in an Anglican religious order. She took the name Esther. Recovering from an accident her doctors suggested a time of recovery in warmer climes. Esther chose Melbourne because she had relatives here. Soon after her arrival she began working with the Mission to the Streets and Lanes of Melbourne. Bishop James Moorehouse challenged the clergy of three inner city parishes, St Paul's, St Peter's and St John's Latrobe Street to begin a mission to the impoverished people of the city. A committee under the leadership of Canon Henry Handfield, Vicar of St Peter's engaged Esther to lead the mission. In an article in *The Melbourne Anglican*, Fr John W. Stewart wrote:

As the Community continued to grow, more work was undertaken. There were no sickness benefits, no dole and pensions for the aged did not exist. Sister Esther saw the great need – a less courageous person may have felt it all too much. But not Esther. The Sisters were to get up at 5 a.m. and with the help of a couple of Scouts with a wheelbarrow, would go to the city market to buy meat and vegetables. This was made into soup and given to over four hundred men, women and children. There would be a policeman at the front door and another at the back door to make sure nobody ran around for a second helping!

Esther initially undertook the work as a deaconess but felt deeply a vocation to the religious life. She was joined by two others, Ellen and Christina and their work in the slums of inner Melbourne grew until the building became inadequate to cope with the demand. Plans were made for a country retreat for 'fallen and friendless women'. This project came to fruition as the Mercy House at Cheltenham. In 1894 Esther was professed as a religious sister and with her two helpers and others they became the nucleus of the Community of the Holy Name.

The sisters, under the leadership of Mother Esther, continued their tireless work among the underprivileged of Melbourne. By 1929 the city was in the grip of a depression. By this time there were 25 sisters visiting the women's hospital, Pentridge prison, supporting those appearing in court and doing probation work as well as assisting desperate men to find what scarce work there was.

Mother Esther fell ill in 1931 and shortly after she died. Her inspiration continued to empower the work of the mission which continued to expand.

We celebrated Mother Esther's at Mass on Friday morning the 11<sup>th</sup> September as we did so people we lining up at the Lazarus centre for Breakfast and later students would come to collect meals prepared in the Parliamentary kitchens and packaged and distributed by Ree and her team of volunteers. Assistance as vital now as ever.

All who work among, support and care for those facing homelessness and poverty can take great encouragement from the faithfulness and courage of Mother Esther and her companions.

Fr Philip Gill