

CARITAS IN ACTION

‘The stone which the builders rejected...’

Lorraine Cumbo

The coronavirus pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on society, with many organisations that support the poor and marginalised particularly affected, especially charities and voluntary organisations. Some have been forced to close or suspend activities, but thankfully all of Caritas Salford’s front-line services have continued to meet beneficiaries’ needs during the significant pressures of lockdown. This has provided an opportunity for renewal and collaboration with others.

Cornerstone Day Centre in Manchester is part of the Caritas Diocese of Salford family and has a long history of serving vulnerable and disadvantaged adults, the majority facing homelessness, rough sleeping or destitution. Others are seeking support with asylum or benefits applications, and some just want a place get a cup of tea and feel part of a community. The centre’s strong reputation as a place of welcome and hospitality for those who are marginalised or isolated has meant that during the recent pandemic they have been a natural focus for support.

During the early stages of lockdown Cornerstone was inundated with food donations, especially from local businesses, universities and large organisations seeking to avoid wastage when closing their outlets. This was met with a significant increase in demand for emergency support before local authorities were able to establish temporary accommodation and assistance to those sleeping rough. Cornerstone was supporting over 100 people a day with basic food and essentials. Often clients were not fully aware of how to stay safe so we provided advice and promoted social distancing.

As the lockdown continued the staggering national response to provide accommodation for an estimated 15,000 homeless and rough sleepers naturally meant a reduction in those needing emergency food parcels or packed lunches, though some were not fed in their temporary placements and continued to come for food. We were also still providing our support to a newly emerging group who had not previously been at our centre. One young woman said she was unemployed and not receiving benefits, meaning she and her



children would go hungry. As well as emergency food support, she was given assistance in accessing and chasing emergency benefits. Telephone support also increased to those who visited the centre for social and community engagement. Without family support Cornerstone is often the only constant in the lives of those isolated so our regular welfare checks reminded people that they were not alone.

Typically, this time of year sees our biggest fundraising event, the Big Sleep Out, which helps keep our services afloat and shines a spotlight on some of the challenges for those who sleep rough. Initially forced to cancel, we have since transformed the event into the online Big Sleep In, encouraging people to sleep anywhere in their home except their bed in solidarity with those experiencing one of the hidden forms of homelessness, ‘sofa surfing.’

Without the invaluable support of volunteers, Cornerstone’s work could not continue. Many of our regular volunteers were older or had pre-existing conditions, placing them in the ‘extremely vulnerable’ category, forcing them to isolate at home. We have been grateful for their continued prayers, telephone contact, advocacy and other support, often in the face of isolation and even bereavement. Those volunteers able to continue were joined by new people from diverse backgrounds, many of whom were furloughed from their work or unable to continue with studies. Local clergy also joined our team.

The pandemic has given new impetus to working with Local Authorities and other charities in the area. The creativity and sharing of practical support and expertise is something we plan to build on for the future to plug any gaps in our services, leaving nobody behind.

Providing food and basic essentials has been core to the mission of Cornerstone for many years. When the centre operates normally it is not just a place where the hungry are given food and the thirsty a drink. It is a place of gathering and welcome where people who are isolated or vulnerable are treated with dignity and without judgement.

The pandemic has highlighted the significant and continuing problems of homelessness and isolation within our society. It has also indicated areas we need to develop and improve upon in the future. While the urgent response provided by central and local government has been extraordinary, our challenge now is to maintain this provision, building new structures and partnerships to ensure that people are not only given food and other daily essentials but are aided in moving forward in life.

■ **Lorraine Cumbo is a Social Worker and the Operations Manager of Caritas Salford’s Cornerstone Day Centre.**

■ **Caritas Diocese of Salford is a member of CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network), the Church’s social action agency in England and Wales. For further details contact info@caritassalford.org.uk www.caritassalford.org.uk**

Ellis Heasley

PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

Violence against South Sudanese Christians is a reminder that Sudan still has a long way to go

One South Sudanese Christian was killed and four were seriously injured in a mob attack which took place on 20th June in the Shagla area of Omdurman, west of Sudan’s capital, Khartoum. The killing is the latest event in a series of attacks on South Sudanese Christians in recent weeks, and serves as a reminder of Sudan’s long history of religious and racial intolerance and violence, and of the challenges that remain during the transitional period and ensuing years.

Maribel Bang, 35, died when a mob of young Muslim men shouting *Allah Akbar* (God is Greater) attacked the group of Christians at random with knives and batons. He survived by his wife and four children. Another man and three women were seriously injured in the attack. Sources told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that the mob had also threatened to burn down the neighbourhood, where a large number of South Sudanese refugees live in makeshift shelters.

CSW observed a worrying increase in attacks if this nature during the month of June, particularly after the imam of a mosque in the Al-Jerif East neighbourhood of Eastern Khartoum called on worshippers to “cleanse” the “Muslim area” of South Sudanese Christians in an address during evening prayers on 6th June. The imam also informed worshippers that the South Sudanese nationals were infidels, criminals, and brewers of alcohol.

On 7th June, the day after the imam’s address, a series of mob attacks ensued in which several Christians were injured, including one incident at a local market where a group of Christians was targeted with batons and rifles. More South Sudanese were attacked and injured the next day, and 16 temporary plastic shelters which housed South

Sudanese Christian refugees were burnt down.

While local sources report that Muslim men had been harassing Christians in the area for a long time, the recent spike in mob violence is a timely reminder of the need for continued scrutiny of Sudan’s human rights record, and of the situation for religious and ethnic minorities in the country.

This month, the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) meets for its 44th session. Sudan is one of many countries on the agenda, but there have been efforts in recent years pushing for reduced monitoring of the country’s human rights record. While Sudan has come a considerable way since the removal of Omar al-Bashir over a year ago, and the subsequent creation of a Transitional Sovereignty Council comprising the military and civilians, incidents such as the attack on Mr Bang, reports of a 50 per cent rise in rape in North Darfur and random killings of farmers in the Nuba Mountains by members of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) who were responsible for severe human rights violations against protesters during 2019, illustrate that much more needs to be done before the HRC can reduce its attention on the country’s considerable human rights challenges.

Please pray that God would protect South Sudanese Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities from further attacks. Pray that God would comfort the family and loved ones of Mr Bang and heal those who have been injured in the violence. Pray also that those who seek to stir up sectarian tensions would be exposed and held to account, and that the international community would maintain appropriate monitoring of violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights in Sudan.