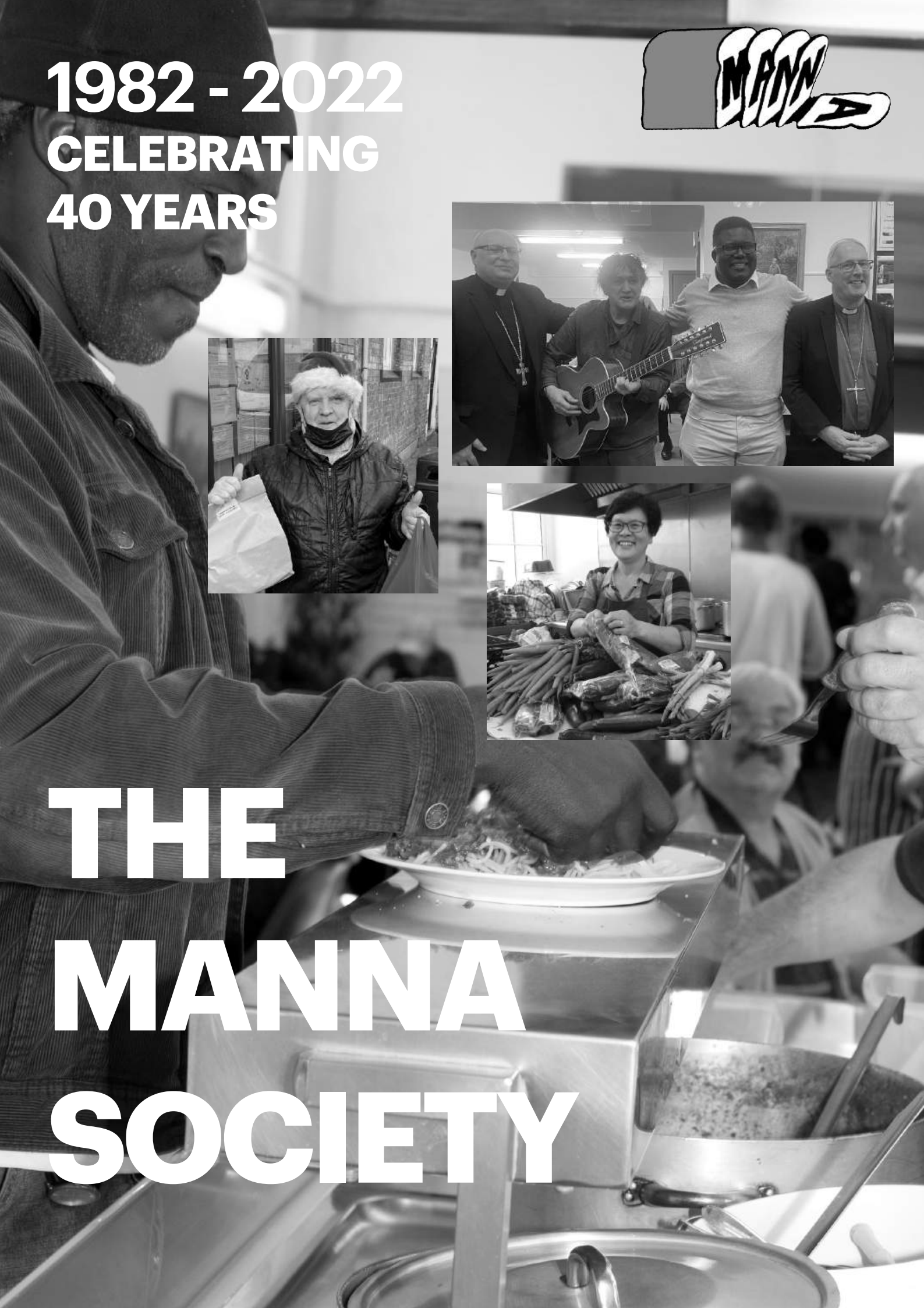
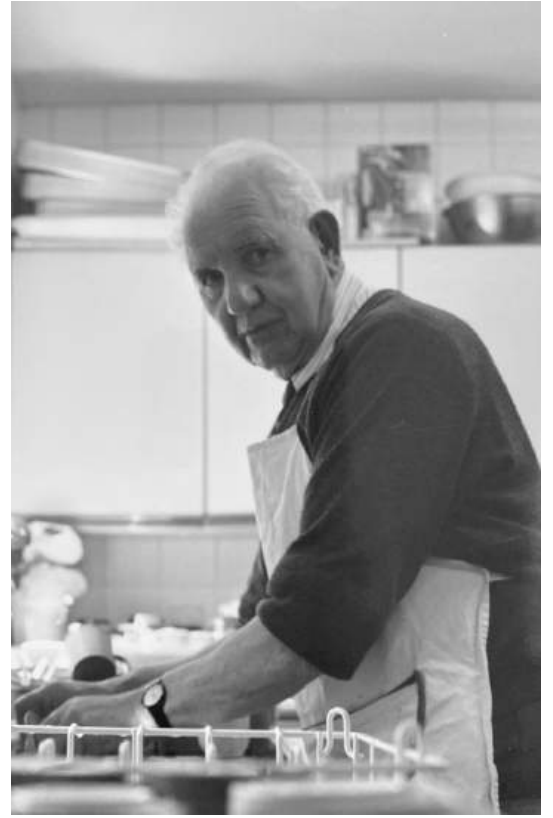


1982 - 2022
CELEBRATING
40 YEARS



THE
MANNA
SOCIETY





40 YEARS



Cha Power Chair - The Manna Society



I first had contact with the Manna Centre in the early 1990s as a community psychiatric nurse working with people who were homeless. I was immediately struck by the ethos of the centre based on kindness, compassion, and the genuine care provided to everyone that crossed their door. There was a non-judgemental attitude in the centre, everyone was valued, everyone was cared for and everyone had a story to tell.

I observed the staff going above and beyond any role expected of them; the respect shown to the centre users was replicated by all those who attended. As someone coming to offer a service at the centre, I felt safe and welcomed. I realised that this compassion is a part of all our staff and volunteers and central to this approach was Nannette Ffrench who is a conduit of this kindness and humanity. On top of this compassion, our staff and volunteers have shown an immense dedication to the Centre over the years.

I would like to celebrate the journey of the Manna Centre over the last forty years and the countless number of people that have been helped. I want to give huge thanks to all our supporters whose generosity have helped us both financially and by giving of their time so we can provide a comprehensive service seven days a week.

The only sad element of this is that we live in London, an incredibly vibrant and wealthy city but we still have an ongoing problem with homelessness and access to affordable housing. We have new generations of people who need our services some from London, some from other parts of the United Kingdom or from the rest of the world , all hoping for a better life.

In Nannette's words we will continue to "feel the pain and the injustice on the streets around us" but we continue to strive to support everyone that comes to the centre.



MILESTONES

1982 - 2022



October 1982 - Nannette opens the day centre at 6 Melior Street

July 1987 - Manna House (dry house) opens in Hampstead (closed March 1996)

May 1989 - Farm Lane Hostel opens in Fulham (closed 2005)

2003 - Centre opens 7 days a week

May 2015 - Centre moves to 12 Melior Street

January 2022 - Re-opening after pandemic

THE BEGINNING

By Nannette French



I am privileged to have been around when God built what is now known as the Manna Centre. As is often the case, a new beginning can often be linked to a particular chapter in one person's life. We each have only our own story to tell – this is a chapter in mine. During the latter part of 1982 I was coming through a rather dark period in my life. I found it a frightening experience. Life had been fairly clear cut up till then. A passage from the Psalms, "O that today you would listen to my voice, harden not your heart," broke into the darkness. Somehow that glimmer of light let me see and, in a strange way, feel the pain and the injustice on the streets around me and I felt I was being called to do something about it.

Consequently, I approached Bishop Henderson, then area bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark, and I asked him for a property. When he asked me what I would do with it, I remember answering that I did not know, but I would open the doors and we would be shown. The building at 6 Melior Street, SE1, was given freely by the Diocese. It had been a nursery school in the past but was no longer being used and was badly in need of repairs. The roof leaked and there was no electricity, water or furniture. One of the first visitors was my brother, Barry, and we lit a candle and prayed together.

Once the doors were open people began coming in – calling for many different reasons. Some of the men who came had overnight accommodation at a men's hostel in Tooley Street nearby. It was winter and they had nowhere to

go during the day. People, especially from the different churches in the area began to call and offer help and support and there was lots to do. A frequent visitor, James O'Hara (who spent his nights in the park as he was barred from the hostel), told me one morning that he knew where we could get bread for nothing. James introduced me to Pino at the Bakery in Bermondsey Street. For years we collected all the bread we needed free of charge – surely manna from heaven!

The number of callers increased and a drop in Centre seemed to be emerging. Three priests came to see me to find out what the building was being used for and as a result of that meeting I felt we needed to name the building. So, the Manna was born in March 1983 when I claimed the building for the poor and named it The Manna Centre. Manna, because the bread we were given was distributed freely every day; manna for me personally, and for many people visiting every day. A nearby garage wrote the name on a car number plate (paid for by instalments) and the “Manna Centre” was put up on the wall outside – where it still is today.

In 1985 Ray Towey, a consultant anaesthetist at Guy's Hospital, became interested in what was taking place. He was to play a significant role in the development of the Manna Centre. He, as a person and with his gifts, was just what the Manna needed. Ray set aside a lot of time for discussion and work to put together a Constitution. Having a Constitution was a step in the direction of applying for charitable status. The first Annual General Meeting of The Manna Society was held on 25 October 1985. The Chairperson was Ray Towey and a management committee was elected. In May 1986 the Constitution was well in place and an extraordinary general meeting of the Society was called on 30 May to accept it. This was required before it could be presented finally to the Charities Commission. The Constitution was unanimously accepted and in July 1986 the Society attained charitable status.

People, too many to mention, by their lives, gifts, and the contributions they have so generously given, have all brought The Manna Society to where and what it is today. Rose Ablett volunteered in the Centre for well over 20 years. So many others have been involved and have now moved on to other things. Paddy Boyle was appointed as Director of the Centre in August 1986 and his team continue to play a vital role in the life of The Manna Society. In 2010, Bandi Mbubi became the Director and Paddy took on the Administrator's role (4 days a week).

Manna was the food from heaven that appeared miraculously each day to feed the Israelites as they travelled through the desert.

The Manna Centre offers food for homeless people who wander through the urban desert, an oasis of hope.



© Tricia de Courcy Ling



'I close my eyes tightly shut and imagine what life would be like with literally nothing, no clean clothes, no food and no loving family'

Katharine Gray (aged 10 in 2002)



MY OWN FRONT DOOR

By A. Tregenza



The Manna Centre works. I am proof. In the words of Max Bygraves, “I wanna tell you a story.” It is mine, the only one I know, ‘cos I experienced it first hand.

I’m writing this on a crisp bright November morning, the window in the east wall of my living room gets the sunrise, and this morning red cloud streaks on dark cyan fields, and I have the first coffee of the day.

I was a professional, living in NW London in a three-bedroom house with a wife and child. After 22 years we got divorced, and I left with 2 suitcases and moved into a bedsit (which cost more in rent than my house mortgage). So much loss, so much anger.

I started viewing the world through the bottom of a vodka bottle. I took 3 years more before I lost my job, my home, my friends, and my will to be. My only ambition was to survive the next hour.

Two years ago my windows were the smashed and grime-coated ones of an abandoned and trashed warehouse near Vauxhall in S W London, which I shared with two other derelicts and innumerable pigeons.

Trash, dirt and excrement enfloored the surface where my mattress offered temporary escape behind my eyelids. With closed eyes in the hours of cold darkness, I was at home in my head; my world, the soft machine of my body; and precious were those moments - or hours - of peace behind closed eyes.

Daylight hours, I’d drift. To cope, I would construct a mind-set of carefully-erected mental blocks, and would use these to cope with time units of 60 minutes. “Aah, I got through that hour, and I’m OK - now for the next hour.” Walk to the park, sit, scrounge a sandwich or tin of lager from the small army of civilisation’s outriders that wandered the streets and parks of the metropolis as I did.

I could not cry, I could not permit myself the luxury of any emotion or feeling other than fear, which was necessary for survival. A shambling solo dosser is an attractive target for gangs of thugs - to vent the grey despair of their own ugly lives through extreme violence.

I had no past - all memory was repressed. To let thoughts of a former life leak through would hurt too much; I could not cry. I held myself together by a sheer act of will -another hour to survive. Sometimes the bubble burst. The laughter of schoolchildren could pierce the skin of my carefully encapsulated ego with steel needles, reminding me that I had a son whom I could no longer see - because of the guilt and shame of my condition.

Whilst homeless I met M., and we'd become friends. He'd seen that I couldn't hack it as a rough sleeper, and knew that I had to get myself sorted. So it was that one morning M. says to me "You need sortin' out my lad, it's time you got to the Manna Centre. Walk this way, it opens at 9.30, so we've enough time to get there."

Thus it was that I visited the Manna for the first time - six foot of shambling, mumbling, grime-encrusted disaster goes in. My face is streaked with dried blood - small wounds from embedded glass fragments. I get a shower, shave and a clean set of fresh clothes , thanks to people I now know and Ted and Pat. I sit with Paddy in his office, and talk to a man who can listen - a rare talent! Many phone calls later he finds a hostel that has a single spare room.

Joy, relief, as I walk round the room, touching walls, bed, taps - as a child with a new toy. Release of tension, I feel **safe** and saved. I remember taking long showers for the pure sensual pleasure of warm water on skin, and simply because I could. I write Paddy a letter of thanks, and I realise that for the first time in ages I can send and receive mail - I have an **address**. Thus I was empowered. I was a citizen. I could speak, think and feel, and interact with others.

I got re-settled by being registered with the council, and eventually I am offered an old person's flat (I am an old person). The whole process took about a year. Hostel life is a thing that has to be endured, but it's worth it. The end result is one's own front door and the restoration of a chap's confidence and self-esteem. I go on computer courses and end up teaching them. Life is an adventure again.

Homelessness in itself does not traumatise: it is rather the result of trauma. Many adopt the bravado of the "knight of the road" philosophy, and the rejection of materialistic values of society, adopting the role of rebel.

Though this may be true in some cases, I find it difficult to accept. I see it as a veneer to cover the pain; and it is this pain - the result of some tragedy or another - that precipitates an inability to care about the consequences of losing the social tools of holding life together.

Every homeless person has their own story of pain. The youngster running away from abuse within a dysfunctional family, or the businessman going bust. It's the evolution of events, one thing happening after another, and can take years.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

By Bandi Mbubi

We do not know for sure what the future holds; uncertainty is part of life. When will the current costs of living crisis end? Would it cause a sharp increase of homelessness and poverty? What about affordable housing, would it become truly affordable? Would we face another pandemic similar to the one we've just had? Would the war between Russia and Ukraine escalate into a widescale war?

To navigate this uncertain future we need strong values to keep us afloat, and they're to be found in our past, in the stories we tell ourselves, and in the hope we've always held, here at the Manna Society, for a 'just society' without poverty and homelessness.

When I first joined the Manna, I loved listening to Nannette Ffrench talk about her experience of setting up the Manna Centre, the vision she had for the place, and why we needed to treat people with respect, dignity, love and acceptance, regardless of who people are. These are Christian values, but also human values, shared with people of faith or no faith. It's our response to God's call, as Nannette would put it: "O that today you would listen to my voice, harden not your heart".

Over the years, I've witnessed how the Manna has in various ways transformed not only the lives of service-users who come to us for assistance, but also the lives of workers themselves, employees and volunteers alike, as well as trustees. At the core of this transformation is our values of respect, dignity, love and acceptance. As long as we hold on to these values for decades to come, and continue to apply them to the challenges of an ever-changing world, we'd succeed in finding a way through to the more 'just society' we've always aspired to.





**1 in 53 people
were homeless
in London in
2021**



**640 people
sleep rough in the capital
on a typical autumn night**

