

A review of my placement at The Dining Room - six months in.

By

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When I began my placement at The Dining Room, I had no ideas about what the placement would involve or what it could and would become. I had heard about The Dining Room from friends who had been, and, ironically enough, meeting Joshua Knoop at one of the small home church gatherings we used to participate in. So, my preconceptions about The Dining Room, were a cross between the stereotypical collection of old men in rags sharing a meal, huddled around a table, all eating silently, heads down, while a dowdy pasty-white pastor extols their sins from the front of the room, and one where volunteers serve from behind a counter or bane-mare.

So, I was a little apprehensive but somewhat excited that I would finally connect with this local ministry, after Deb Andersen, my course facilitator suggested giving David Knoop a call to arrange a placement with him. However, at this stage, all I was armed with was my own preconceptions, a couple sheets of paper with a blank space for David to agree to my placement with his signature, and my passion to serve. I had told previously told Deb that I was interested in working with families and men, so I was somewhat confident that this would involve *something* like that!

Now, some six months into my placement, I realise that so far it has been quite an amazing journey, one that I don't believe I expected, or that my course believed was part of the placement. This journey has taken me from my somewhat middle-class-family, raised-in-a-middle-class-church perspective of homelessness, poverty and humanity from the clinical-at-arms-length safety I once naively believed was possible to serve the poor with, just like Jesus, to one in which I know it means sharing life, laughter, tears, the touch of a hand shake or hug, alongside journeying through good times and bad times, and a heart and mind that ignores what society so blithely ignores but labels. My journey would not have been as complex or encompassing without the mentoring of David Knoop and the friendships of both volunteers and guests alike.

Along with my involvement with the guests at the tables and on the floor as a volunteer, I have been honoured to have become a Team Care Worker, a role that is somewhat unique for The Dining Room. This role has allowed me to watch and see the amazing grace that is evident at the tables, courtyard smoke's and bread line as volunteers, each I imagine having gone through a similar journey to myself, connect regularly with the guests, and welcome those who nervously, each in their own way, make their way into the dining rooms. Caring and watching these volunteers makes me aware of how precious and how fragile they are. I consider it a joy and privilege to be responsible for their welfare for the short time they spend with guests and volunteers alike, while they in turn are there for the hearts and minds of the guests.

Recently, I have also begun working closer with David in greeting and meeting with the guests, all the while monitoring the Dining Room as a whole, living and complex crowd of humanity. I am discovering that this not an easy role which I am taking on, or that David assumes each week. It is a role in which I have much to learn. I have only just begun to see the intricacies of monitoring the health of the crowd, how the ebb and flow of

individuals can affect the greater community. I have come to understand that the key to this is awareness, being alive to the present. I wonder how different our society would be if as a community we gained that awareness, and stepped out from behind our picket fences.

Finally, I must express my thanks and appreciation for the complexity and work that the placement entails. I appreciate that it is not merely attending the regular weekly events as a volunteer, merely attending than participating, as my course expects and calls for. Rather, I have been given the opportunity to grow, to really understand, and comprehend that the welfare system is not about numbers and situations, but rather about complex human beings and their complex lives. So, yes, it may be a little inconvenient to do the extra work called for, such as this review, but I believe the results and education, far outweigh the inconvenience.

An amazing amount of things and learning has occurred over the past six months. I am both excited and eager to see what the remaining five months of the placement have to offer under David and the team. The conclusion of the placement will not be the end of my journey of serving and learning, merely the beginning of a lifelong journey following Christ and learning from mentors such as are found at The Dining Room in Croydon. I value my relationships with David, the volunteers and guests, and The Dining Room and its simple message of grace will stay with me long after the placement ends.