



C&YW Opportunities – report feedback form

Name

Alex (Sandy) Nunn

Based on your trip to:

Mission House, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



Please tell us about your experiences, including some reference to the impact upon your own faith or development:

I spent nine months from October until the end of June predominantly with homeless people in three different projects, some time at an old people's home, a morning in a living Church community and in the Red Light district once a week. The Mission House gave us the choice out of 24 projects, 8 of which were homeless shelters, and I made it my priority to gain as much experience in that field of social work as I could, as well as put the Red Light District project down as one I was really interested in. While the homeless work could well be similar to that of Britain, the Red Light District was truly unique given how much of a tourist trap it is and how 'glorified' it's made. While I had no direct work with the prostitutes (I'm male and a potential client in their eyes so their behaviour changes) I was fully immersed into the work of the project, what they did and how I and the other male volunteer fitted in and contributed. Ian Rowe and I spent an evening in the kitchen preparing food to order that was then taken to them, allowing contact to be made and a relationship to be formed between the project and the prostitutes. To spend an extended period of time in a place like that means you can't help thinking about the model that the Dutch employ, how much does it protect the workers, how doesn't it protect them, how the Dutch government benefits from such a model and what they're doing to cut down on trafficking and the prevention of poverty. It was an eye opener to the stark reality that life is not black and white, sometimes the lesser of two evils is a genuine (short-term) solution and that in a field of work like that, pragmatism goes a long way. This can be quite challenging, as a Christian there's a potential to want to 'run in and save them' instantly away because the job they have is so undesirable and incorporates an element of sin. Having support to go through that, to understand that 'running in and saving' is actually quite patronising and takes away someone's dignity and agency was a lesson well learnt and I'm a better Christian and person for it, all thanks to a few hours a week in one of the more controversial contexts in life.

The same can be said of my time with homeless people, I came across some horrific circumstances with people who were dealing with their problems on so many levels and at different stages of acceptance, or denial. My role was to simply be, to spend time with them for a few hours, listen, talk, laugh and more. In the beginning it was quite intimidating and awkward, but those hours turned more meaningful as trust was built and I began to understand what people had been through. I quickly learnt that I alone could not solve their problems but could only ever encourage, signpost and support them through the process and for some build their sense of worth enough to think about even beginning the process. Again, I quickly learnt how to deal with being exposed to a really

disastrous problem and sitting by watching it happen in someone else's life, to witness ups and downs of fighting homelessness and being almost powerless to help practically. The want to be able to snap my fingers and the problem be solved doesn't go away but I realised that that journey a person goes on out to the other side makes them who they are and a stronger person for it. At no point did I ever stop and question God why this was happening to people, I knew it happened, I knew it would be challenging and this is what life throws at some of us. It did strengthen my understanding of how Jesus worked from the stories we hear in the Bible and how he works today. Just as I reflect on my time out in Amsterdam and my life in general, I am a result of my experiences and to understand God doesn't micro-manage lives in order for us to take ownership and agency of what we do and become more kind, loving and graceful individuals. That's what my time has taught me; the journey is as important, if not more important, than the goal, and that God's there every step of the way cheering us on.



What will you do/act upon as a result of your trip?

I have subsequently moved in to the social work field and I'm now working in the Warwick and Leamington Spa area with Social Services in the Warwick Children's Team. I'm drawing heavily on my time in Amsterdam; dealing with emotionally demanding contexts, being exposed to incredibly challenging home situations among many more experiences, I keep coming back to having dealt with aggression, controversy and challenging circumstances in a well supported and guided environment, with space for reflection and growth that's focused on building a young person up, in experience and faith (if they have faith). This hasn't overridden my calling to Church Related Community Work, I'm still feeling called in that direction! For now I'm enjoying being able to make a tangible, real difference to children and young people's lives in order to give them the best chance in life.