Befrienders; Talk and listen to God in the city!

“We are still mourning for the victims of the suicide bombing at Manchester Arena in May 2017, however we are getting stronger afterward against terrorism and we stand together for our community, because we belong to Greater Manchester and we are friends to each other!”

This is a part of the conversation with a person at ‘Befrienders’.

I am so pleased to introduce ‘Befrienders’, a project which is part of my final year placement as a Church Related Community Worker (CRCW) in the United Reformed Church. This placement is different from my previous experiences in the southwest context, working alongside vulnerable communities. Befrienders is larger, in response to the high volume of homelessness in Manchester. Befrienders has existed as a ‘friend’ to the Manchester community over fifteen years and is located in the heart of Manchester city centre. Befrienders provided food parcels to vulnerable adults before Food Bank was formed in the UK. Befrienders aims to engage with people who live in vulnerable circumstances and relieve them from their devastating circumstances.

Although people may visit Befrienders to receive food parcels for their physical needs and to ask for some advice relating to their personal problems (e.g. addiction, depression, loneliness etc.) I notice that Befrienders is also the place to sit, talk and listen. Deacon Ruth Lackenby, who is involved in this project, emphasises that Befrienders is used for evangelising in many ways. Befrienders has an open policy and everybody is welcomed. People can come in to sit and have a warm drink with some nibbles. If they do not want to talk, that’s fine but if people do, our friendly volunteers are ready to talk and listen. The Methodist Central Hall chapel is open alongside Befrienders and is the place to reflect with quiet music on, perhaps to light a candle, and people can write down their struggles or prayer requests on the board. This kind of ministry of presence is vital, as an oasis in the midst of a noisy city life.

In this modern society, it is hard to find a place to be welcomed and to meet a person who may embrace you as you are, especially in a big city. People who step into the Methodist Central Hall for Befrienders have various reasons, such as looking for a company, through a Community Chaplaincy
appointment, for food parcels, for a community artists meeting, during a lunch break, for free coffee, needing a shelter from heavy rain, for socialising, waiting for a train and the list is endless. I have observed that all of them are valued in Christ!

Befrienders works closely with other agencies in the city (i.e. Community Chaplaincy, Barnabus, Boaz Trust) and partners with them against poverty; providing a better service to the community. Befrienders’ strong calling for the City is to make friends and be a good friend to them. It is a huge mission for Befrienders; ‘Let people know that God loves us!’ In fact, this mission seems to start from a warm welcoming smile, a sit, a chat and hopes to build relationships; Jesus showed a good role model of this with his disciples. I pray that each person in Befrienders became a good friend of us, as well as to Jesus. It may take a long time to see this friendship, nevertheless we will carry on sitting, talking and listening. Because we are Befrienders!