

Night out in London

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue



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I came to St. Martin-in-the-Fields last July. It's a complex organization; to get to know it I've spent time as a concert usher, a sous-chef, a bookstall volunteer and an aide in the day center for homeless and vulnerable people. I spent a half hour each with 50 staff, church members and neighbors, and I even turned out for the cricket team. This is England, after all. So it made sense to spend a night outside.

In the U.S., people who know the name St. Martin-in-the-Fields think of it as an orchestra. When I was appointed as vicar here countless American friends congratulated me on taking over the world-famous academy—and were impressed I'd hitherto kept my musical prowess so quiet. In the U.K., by contrast, people assume St. Martin's is a homeless shelter. Since 1927 the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields has gone on BBC Radio every December and made an appeal for supporting the ministry to homeless people; this year it brought in a record \$3.25 million. It's not unusual to overhear this conversation in Trafalgar Square: "That's a beautiful church, and such a great location." "It used to be a church—they turned it into a homeless center." The congregation members don't know whether to feel proud or exasperated.

I had two companions for my night on the streets. One was an overseas national whom I'll call Tugo; he'd been in this country for a long time but had no prospect of getting citizenship. I know Tugo because when I or one of my colleagues open the church at 7:30 a.m. each day, a dozen or more foreign nationals follow us in to find warmth and shelter and hover around during morning prayer like a cloud of

witnesses. They remind me that we're all homeless, really: we have no abiding city. Tugo is sometimes among them. His friend, whom I'll call Becky, has a different story: orphaned when young, she'd come to London years ago to trust her own wits more than the unreliable attention of her siblings.

Tugo and Becky wanted to know why I was doing this. Was it some kind of publicity thing? Was I checking up on them in some way? I said, "There's a story in the Bible. Jesus says if you want to meet him, then hang out with people who are hungry and naked and have nowhere to go." "I'm not naked," said Becky, adding, "Don't get fresh with me." I said, "I think he meant that we all put barriers between ourselves and God, but people like you, you don't have as many barriers, so when I look at you like I'm doing now, I can see Jesus—I see Jesus through you." "But I'm a Muslim," retorted Tugo—half challenging, half pondering. I replied, "I think that's probably Jesus' sense of humor."

It broke the ice. Tugo took me on the rounds. We went to the coffee bar where he knows he'll be offered a spare muffin; to the burger store where they'll give him hot water for tea; to the hot dog stand where there's a chance of a sausage and a chat. He looked scornfully at the place where a mobile soup kitchen shows up: "Them people do more harm than good—look at the fights breaking out over there as they dole out the food. I don't take handouts, me." It seemed an ironic statement after the activity of the previous half hour, but I could see what he meant: all of Tugo's transactions depended on and deepened genuine relationships. He wouldn't accept food from a stranger who was salving his or her conscience.

Later we picked up Tugo's sleeping bag from a store where he protected the owner from the predations of other street people. We picked up some cardboard (for a mattress) from a stationer who was a bit casual about recycling. We did our nighttime ablutions in a hotel where the receptionist liked Tugo's jokes and cheerful company. I was a student—and these two strangers and pilgrims were giving me quite an education.

We bedded down in a carefully selected spot, sheltered from wind and rain but not from a piercing security light. I didn't sleep much: I got used to the cold but not to the drunken noises and the feel of boots brushing past us. Becky and Tugo had plenty of stories about being kicked and punched.

For my two companions, the best thing about the homeless center wasn't the medical treatment, the showers, the food or the employment advice. It was the chance to meet people like themselves. Salvation doesn't lie in programs or resources; it lies in friends. My night out was the same; the best part was getting to know my two new friends.

They refused my offer to take them out to breakfast. As I headed back to my apartment, Becky said playfully, "Did we show you Jesus then?" "Yes," I said, "I think you did."

"Do us a favor," Becky said. "If we do this again—let's make it in the summer, hey?"