

# The Christ House Newsletter

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*For Friends and Family*

*Xmas 2008*

## A CHRISTMAS LETTER

Some people don't like to get letters from a family, telling what the year has been like. They call them "bragging letters." I don't consider the letters as bragging just because they tell the good stuff, the happy things. We really don't have to share our sorrows and pain, particularly at this festive season.

I am always pleased to hear how friends and family have fared, with accent on the positive, particularly those that through time and space have moved to the margins of communication. Friends and family at a distance, but still friends and family.

How are we doing at Christ House? We are doing OK. Struggling, but OK. The house has been full for most of the year, which means around six residents; there have been thirteen new comers, and of these, a volunteer and six residents fit into our plan of about six months at Christ House, time enough to get papers and status in order, to find a job, save a bit, and move on to their own place.

Most of the men are from Africa presently, hence there are some severe adjustments to be made by them. The cold comes as a shock and they don't know how to deal with it. Some few on the macho side think they can tough out near freezing weather with a sweater and a smile. Usually by the time they have gone from 142<sup>nd</sup> Street to the subway at 138<sup>th</sup>, they have gained a new insight!

Cultural hangovers can be a problem, which is no surprise; they are a reality for any of us

going from one culture to another. Many are used to going bare foot in their homes, and it takes a while for them to learn that if your feet are cold, you are cold!

All of the residents have jobs or are going to school. That is, of course, a good thing, one that we are very proud of. The down side to it is that the jobs are not the nine to five type, so it is impossible to maintain the strong community atmosphere where we can all sit down and eat supper together..(cont. p.2)



*"Johnny" is the latest addition to our family. He is from Nigeria, the only son of a man who was murdered because of his political involvement. Johnny was asked to replace his father as the spokesman of the dissident group, and when he refused because he was only 20 and lacked experience, he was told he had better leave the country while he could. He fled the country without papers, spent ten months in detention, and came to us upon his release on probation. Getting a GED is his big goal right now..*

Vijay has come back to us to volunteer his service once again. It is very helpful because his presence allows David to take some time off, pursue other things, and yet know that the house is covered. Vijay lives with us but volunteers time and several places, most of them residences or soup kitchens

Vince Hanney is in his 15th year at Ozanam Hall. There is an ongoing building refurbishment that requires much of his time strategically restructuring the computer systems network as well as relocating over 2000 telephone lines. During 2008, he spent more than six weeks in the Philippines where he and Professor Frank Smith, from Columbia University, have been working to create a professional non-profit Board of Trustees for The Infant Jesus Academy, ([www.ija.edu.ph](http://www.ija.edu.ph)), a private Catholic school system operating 3 K-12 campuses throughout the Islands. In his spare moments, Vince also handles Christ House's official books and financial filings with the IRS. He wishes everyone a Merry Christmas and a New Year filled with many blessings.

Money is tight at Christ House. That should not come as a surprise to no one. We don't get a lot of grant money, and what we do get is being cut back. Donations are down because our mailing list has shrunk and times are tough. We are getting by, however, and are forced to reflect now on our beginning. It was an act of faith, a belief that God wanted this to happen. It has been twenty-seven years on a wing and a prayer. Why should it be any different now.

But if you know of anyone who might be interested in our ministry, please pass this newsletter on or give us an address. We can't expect the Lord to do the work for us.

Few of you have been able to visit us in the

South Bronx, so let me tell you a little about "the hood."

There are chronic problems of poverty and violence in the area, but there are pockets of new homes, antique stores, historical markers and other good things.

One of these good things is the number of programs dedicated to helping the people of the area. The South Bronx is dotted with them, and they are not huge institutions, but small store fronts, converted homes, and basements of churches. Let me tell you about a few in our immediate vicinity:



*The John Travis Center building, on the corner of 142<sup>nd</sup> and Willis Avenue.*

We call this Sister Helen's Place, although she has been dead for several years. She was a Third Order Dominican and named the ministry after her dead husband. It is managed by a another lay woman volunteer named Dorothy.

Owned by the city, the building was rehabed and now serves primarily men who are fighting the fight against alcoholism. They must be involved in an AA program to live in one of the apartments. The men are responsible for maintaining their apartments, which is practical training and discipline for them.



*St. Benedict the Moor Center, a store front operation on St. Ann by 140<sup>th</sup> Street.*

St. Benedict the Moor, a soup kitchen plus a counseling/drop in center, and has also some apartments to rent to people in 12 step programs. More recently it has sponsored a community garden where locals can grow vegetables for themselves. . It was started by Fr. Roger, a Franciscan priest who was chaplain at Lincoln Hospital and was tired of seeing alcoholics treated and then released without any place to help them on the outside. He has gone to God, but he left a wonderful tribute to the spirit of . Francis.

Another right around the corner from us is Abraham House. The building started as My



*Abraham House, 420 Willis Avenue*

Brother's Place, went to My Father's Place, both residences for homeless men. After a Sister on staff was murdered there, it was taken over by some European Sisters, and became a place for women and children who have family in jail.



*The Dominican Sisters' Family and Child Care Center on Alexander Ave at 139t St.*

This little sign and street level entrance is the gate to heaven for many women in the area. Founded and staffed mainly by the Dominican Sisters many years ago, it is still funded by them. It serves the needs of the area women, many of whom are poor single mothers. Among its services are counseling, day care for children, job training, and even a small food pantry.

Head Start is, of course, for the children. It is particularly important in an area like ours, because there are many fractured families and single mothers who must work. Also the level of education in the home is not conducive to getting a child off to a good start. The programs are generally well attended and valued by the families.

(Photo on next page.)



*Head Start 490 East 143<sup>rd</sup> Street*

### A Christmas Message

Christmas can be a bitter-sweet time for us. There is the recognition that our souls crave more than the everyday, work-a-day life we experience. Christmas makes us reach out to family and friends, to share more of ourselves through gifts, time, and energy; and this is a goodness filled with wonder.

There is also, unfortunately, the crass and gross commercialism that has infected the spirit of the feast like a virus. Good spirits are for sale, and the air waves are full of cheap, sentimental versions of the great Christmas classics.

Behind all, beneath all, we must search for the true meaning of Christmas. It lies, of course, in the manger at Bethlehem.

In recent years we have been presented with awesome photos from the Hubble telescope or some other scientific marvel; these show the unimaginable vastness of space, the sheer beauty of the silent inhabitants of the cosmos, and any thinking person has to gasp at the grandeur of creation.

What then of the feast we celebrate on Christmas Day? It is the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord. It is the Incarnation we celebrate. God so loved us that God became one of us, in order that we might become, in some way, like God - an image more staggering than the cosmos. That is always the power of love - to unite, to fuse together as one.

It is only in this context that we can truly celebrate Christmas. All the tinsel, snow, Santas, wrapping paper and tables groaning with food have true meaning only in the light of the star of Bethlehem.

We have much to celebrate. Too much for us to grasp with our little minds, so easily distracted by all the “stuff” of Christmas.

I pray and wish for you is that this Christmas season will remind you once again of the Love which is God. And as the shepherds found God in a very human situation, may we all do the same during this season and in the coming year..

Brother Tom



From all of us at Christ house we wish all of you a

*Merry Christmas*

Simbawe, and Nigeria

*Joyeux Noël*

Guinea, and Congo

**с РОЖДЕСТВОМ ХРИСТОВЫМ**

Chechtnya

*Feliz Navidad*

Colommbia