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St George's is a large church in Stamford, a picturesque market town on the edge of Lincolnshire. Although Stamford might appear very affluent, there is another side to the town. "We have this beautiful looking church, full of posh, middle class people and then people who can't afford the electric or to put food on the table", they explained.

Through the relationships formed by a former curate at St George's, they started hearing stories of people who were sleeping rough on the outskirts of the town. So, they reached out to different local services – the council's homelessness team, Citizens Advice, and the police. St George's gradually became known, and these links matured. Louise Rose, their Community Projects manager, explained: "What we find is that you have to go to one organisation to get one thing fixed and another for something else! There's all these different places that people need to access. It's too much when there's already so much going on in people's lives."

The Archbishops' Housing Commission was interested in what St George's are doing, because housing features in many of these stories. "It seems like everyone's got a housing issue. They might be with a private landlord who wants their property back and then all of a sudden, they're homeless. Rents are going up and up every year, so when they start looking for an alternative place to live, they can't afford it and they're stuck." By addressing multiple issues – such as debt, mental health problems, addiction and relationship breakdown – St George's helps people to secure a stable home and provides a community where people can feel a sense of belonging.

The church office acts as an informal drop-in, and every Friday, they run a community café, Friday Connect, where people can come for a cup of tea and a piece of cake - and a food voucher, if they're struggling financially. They have people who are skilled in mental health, someone from CAP – a Christian debt advice service, as well as a small team who are actively chatting and praying with people.

During lockdown, they felt almost "bereaved", as the community café has had to close temporarily, but they were able to maintain support for those who needed it.

One of their clients desperately needed a third bedroom. St George's explained: "They come from a horrendous domestic abuse situation and the boys are in this tiny box room together and they're practically killing each other. One has severe medical issues and the other is really struggling with anger and violence. But because she's in housing arrears, [the council] won't move them. But the reason she's in arrears is due to her domestic abuse. So they have worked with her to address the various issues that might enable her to get a house transfer, from helping her to fill out forms, applying for a DRO (Debt Relief Order), and accompanying her to the Citizens Advice."

Could this work provide a model for other churches? Working with other agencies, St George's is able to provide better support than if they worked alone. Someone called them "the glue between different agencies". Churches can try to do too much. Instead, try being the glue.

Notes:

1. The material for this case study was originally featured in Building Community, a 2019 report produced by the Centre for Theology and Community and the Church of England which launched the Housing Commission. It has been updated and revised.
2. One of the advantages for a church like St George's, being a relatively affluent congregation, is that it has the money to fund this kind of work, including employing several support and pastoral workers, like Louise. The hardship fund, which comes from donations by church members, is used frequently, for example to buy a tent for someone who is homeless, a hot sandwich for them every day, and a mobile phone so they can stay in touch.
3. The church is also using the skills of people within the congregation to support their community work. Rebecca is a trained doctor and is looking at how the church can offer counselling and prayer ministry for people affected by post-traumatic stress, working with the local mental health service. Another church member is an electrician and helps with PAT testing the second-hand white goods that are distributed through SHEP (Stamford Housing Essentials Project), another church-run initiative.
4. St George's has partnered with a Christian charity, Hope into Action, to offer long-term temporary accommodation for up to two formerly homeless men at a time. Following an assessment, residents can stay for up to two years, providing them with a secure base whilst they seek to address other issues that may have contributed to them becoming homeless, for example a debt problem or addiction. Hope into Action's Empowerment Workers also provide professional support, meeting with their tenants regularly, drawing up a plan of action, encouraging them to make the changes they need to, and where appropriate, signposting them to other agencies. At the same time, the church provides a mentor for each resident, offering friendly, non-judgmental contact, positive role models, and a ready-made community. Find out more about Hope into Action [here](#).

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