

#### **The Vision**

The Magdalene Group was born out of a vision given to two Norwich Magistrates, Doreen Betts and Doreen Green in 1992. Both had daughters who were at the beginning of their adult life, facing the future from a place of privilege. A life of privilege which included the support of a loving and secure family, a university education which gave them the freedom to choose their career path and to plan their future, to dream of finding that 'special' relationship and one day to have a family of their own. Two young women whose futures were no different from many others we all know. As magistrates, both Doreen Green and Betts regularly sat in court, frequently, dealing with young women who were brought before them charged with being 'common prostitutes' and breaking the law. Both ladies were deeply moved by the plight of these young women who had no support, little education and only knew of relationships which abused and used them. Often, the only way they had of raising the money to pay their fines was to go back out on the streets. Many times Doreen would silently pray for these young women who came before her that God would send someone into their lives who would show them that relationships could be built on trust and unconditional love. As she left court one morning, Doreen was overwhelmed by the realisation that this was a task that must not be the sole responsibility of the courts and social services but must be undertaken by Christian churches. As a very junior magistrate she knew that she needed help and guidance before she could begin such an undertaking. She approached Doreen Green, a member of the Norwich Bench with many years experience in the courts and a wealth of knowledge concerning the extensive range of agencies in the City to whom they could turn for advice. Doreen Green listened carefully to the proposal to establish a prostitute support group. Both women were well aware of the bold and difficult step they were contemplating and they knew that by putting her good name and reputation at risk, Doreen Green had much to lose. However, they decided that they could not ignore the call. They agreed that if one girl found her way out of prostitution, such efforts would be worthwhile.

# The Birth of the Magdalene Group

Letters were sent out to the leaders of twenty Christian Churches in Norwich, asking them to identify women in their congregations who might be interested in setting up a steering committee to explore the possibility of establishing a support group for prostitutes. The first meeting, which was attended by twelve ladies, took place in St Martin's Church at Palace Plain. The women represented many denominations and came with a wide variety of skills and experience. The meeting was led by Doreen

Betts and Doreen Green and included Sue Eyley, Jean Furness, Maureen Fitzmaurice, Jill Green, Toni Moon, Jean Reeves, Una Reid, Rachel Mc-Quarrie and Edna White. Following several monthly meetings of prayer and intense discussion about the way forward two things were decided; firstly to change the name from Prostitute Support Group to The Magdalene Group and more importantly, to set up a training programme in order to widen their knowledge and help them understand some of the challenges they might face. There were talks from the many agencies which had contact with the working girls; the police, medical personnel such as doctors and nurses, social workers, the probation service and legal representatives, not to mention the experiences of one or two women who were working in prostitution. It was during this period of training that Una Reid, a member of the steering committee, told members of a project in the Red Light District of Amsterdam which was doing remarkable work with prostitutes. The decision was taken to visit the area and see at firsthand what could be achieved.

#### **Amsterdam**

The trip to Amsterdam was undertaken by five members, who spent the weekend visiting two Christian projects working with prostitutes. Youth with a Mission (YWAM) was run by a team of young people who worked with 'window prostitutes'. The members of the Magdalene Group were

introduced to very young Fillipino and Asian girls who had been brought into the country on the understanding that they would be given waitressing jobs. Instead, they found that their so-called benefactors withheld their passports and curtailed their freedom, putting them on display in windows for the sole purpose of prostitution. It was a heartbreaking experience meeting these young girls far from their families with no knowledge of the local language and no support system in place, trapped in a life of prostitution by men who were abusive and ruthless in their quest for the big money they could make from the girls misery. With the help of the YWAM members the ladies from the Magdalene Group went behind the windows held hands with, and spoke and prayed with the girls.

The following day was spent visiting a Catholic Mission where the nuns provided a place of help, support and acceptance. The Sitting Room was beautifully furnished, with comfortable seating and flowers and plants on the tables. In the basement there were medical examination rooms and a dentist's surgery where volunteer doctors and dentists offered medical and dental care to the girls who all talked about the humiliation of accessing statuary treatment and often being made to feel worthless, like dirt! It was this second project which fired the imagination of the Amsterdam visitors. Returning to Norwich they enthused about what they had seen, knowing without doubt

that this was the way forward; that a scheme such as the Sitting Room could work well in Norwich. It was agreed that the next step would be to raise a considerable sum of money and that the best way to do this would be by becoming a Registered Charity. One of the steering committee members, Maureen Fitzmaurice, volunteered to undertake this task and the Group was registered in September 1994. It was also necessary to seek out suitable premises in the Red Light District of Norwich from which a Sitting Room could provide all the facilities of the Amsterdam Mission. Doreen Betts and Maureen Fitzmaurice set about visiting various properties in their search for that special place. It was at this time that Doreen was asked to speak at a meeting of St Vincent De Paul in St John's Cathedral where she met two men who were to have a very significant impact on the future of the work. The meeting was chaired by John McLean who told her of St Peter Parmentergate, a redundant church in King Street, right in the centre of the Norwich Red Light District. The other man was Father John Drury, the Dean of St John's Cathedral. Father John's support and encouragement to persevere and keep going despite the set-backs, was very influential in the early development of the project.

## A Sitting Room in Norwich

On John McLean's advice, Doreen arranged a visit to the church in King Street and she

and Maureen set off to view the two tier vestry unit. There was no electricity or running water; it was filthy dirty and full of junk and spiders' webs. However, they both knew without a doubt that this was the place they were looking for. Negotiations with the landlords, the Norwich Historic Churches Trust, began and a rent was agreed and a programme of restoration was embarked upon. The members of the steering committee faced a huge challenge. Should they raise the money to cover the costs of the restoration before they began the work? Or should they step out in faith confident in the knowledge that God's hand was in the Charity? It was agreed to put their trust in God and begin the work immediately. It was an amazing journey. God was with them all the way. Never once did a bill arrive which could not be paid. Sometimes a bill and a cheque to cover it would arrive in the same post. New volunteers were joining the Magdalene Group all the time. Among them Theresa Cumbers who had a major influence on the refurbishment of the building and who was later to become the first employee as Project Manager leading the Magdalene Group towards widespread recognition. The restoration and transformation of the two vestries into a Sitting Room took about six months. A big arched oak door provided entry to the property, which was later to become the symbol of the Magdalene Group; a doorway to a new life. On the ground floor a small kitchen, a shower room, and toilet facilities were designed and installed. Upstairs a new carpet covered the floor and a three piece suite and carefully chosen small occasional tables gave the feel of someone's home. The intention had always been to buy furniture which the committee members themselves could live with. The final effect had that WOW factor, causing many of the working girls, who saw it for the first time, amazement that so much thought had been given to their needs. The opening celebration was attended by a wide range of people; some influential, such as city councillors; there were clergy from local churches, volunteers, friends, family and supporters and well-wishers. It was agreed that they were looking at one of God's miracles. The Sitting Room opened completely free of debt. It must be put on record that the husbands and families of each member of the steering committee played a huge part in this success. Their loving support and words of wisdom were invaluable as each new presented challenge itself.

## **The Work Begins**

The strength of the Magdalene Group was in the committee. Each lady came with her own particular skills and experience. One such member was Rachel McQuarrie who, together with her husband Charles, pioneered the setting up of the project for the first nine months. For many years they had worked with young people with challenging behaviour and this experience was vital in the early days. Rachel was able

to build relationships with the working girls and train volunteers in developing the skills needed to work with their clients. It was a successful beginning. Gradually the girls began to visit the Sitting Room and learnt to trust the people working there. It was a big step for them to take. They came from a life of abuse and humiliation where they had been made to feel worthless and unloved. They had never before met people who would give without wanting something in return. Seldom before had they experienced unconditional love. By this time the task of applying for Registered Charity status had been achieved and it was time to appoint officers. Doreen Betts became the first Chairman, a post she held for over ten years, Maureen Fitzmaurice was Vice-Chairman, Jill Green served as secretary and Susan Eyley was appointed treasurer. In those early days and for many years, trustee meetings were held in the home of Alan and Doreen Green in the Cathedral Close. where their special brand of hospitality provided comfortable surroundings and helped to forge lasting friendships.

### Recognition

With the opening of the Sitting Room came the need to look for a Project Manager. Following rigorous interviewing, Theresa Cumbers was appointed. Theresa's special talents ensured that the work of the Magdalene Group became known very quickly throughout Norwich and beyond. Social Services, the Vice Squad,

medical workers, the Norwich housing department, councillors all became aware of the professionalism and unfailing commitment of the dedicated band of volunteers which made up the Magdalene Group. The volunteers offered their support to the clients who had hospital appointments, who needed help with finding accommodation or the advice of a solicitor. The Sitting Room became the focus of a "dropin" centre which was open two days a week providing a place of help for many of their problems, comfort and security and acceptance. One of the highlights of the clients' week was the Wednesday morning visit to a swimming pool arranged by Theresa Cumbers and Janet Robinson and a group of volunteers. The Outreach Team went out one night a week with a vehicle driven by one of the men. The volunteers would offer hot drinks and words of comfort inviting the women to visit the Sitting Room. It was Theresa's networking skills which ensured that each incoming Lord Mayor of Norwich was aware of the existence of the Magdalene Group. This resulted in the offer of the Council Chambers at the City Hall for the AGM's. Local churches were also made aware of the wonderful work which was being done providing the charity with a wide bank of volunteers. Mr Richard Felton of Felton Fundraising was appointed. His ethical Christian approach to the needs of the group, his wide-ranging experience, contacts and excellent knowledge ensured that the group's work and finances were secured for many years ahead. The Magdalene Group Trustees were always aware that his commitment was more than a professional interest but came from a deep conviction that this was a greatly needed service in Norwich. Theresa's organisational skills were put to excellent use when the Trustees agreed that, to raise much needed funds and to get more publicity for the work of the Charity, The group should put on a Summer Ball which was held at the Dunston Hall Hotel in 1998. This was a great success raising the group's profile as well as a very satisfactory profit. The Group was delighted when the Right Reverend Graham James, Bishop of Norwich and the Right Reverend Peter Smith, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia both agreed to be Patrons. When Bishop Peter was appointed Archbishop of Cardiff he very graciously agreed to continue his patronage. His replacement, as Bishop of East Anglia, the Right Reverend Michael Evans, was happy to continue in the footsteps of his predecessor and he too became a patron. When he took up his appointment as Archbishop of Southwark in 2011, Archbishop Peter agreed to give further support to the charity as patron. The patronage, help and wise advice of all three Bishops has been greatly appreciated and highly valued by the Group. One landmark event in the history of the Magdalene Group came in the Summer of 2004 when Bishop Graham and his wife Mrs Julie James generously offered their garden for a Garden Party

#### Growth

The Project Manager and the Trustees were constantly looking for more ways to provide the clients with as much help as possible in their quest for a new life outside of prostitution. On discovering a scheme in the USA, it was decided that Theresa, as Project Manager and Doreen Betts, Chairman, would take a fact finding journey. The visit provided the outline for a new management plan which would include offering the working girls computer skills, art and craft lessons, how to budget the housekeeping and cookery lessons. All were designed to prepare them for a life away from prostitution. This programme resulted in 20 girls changing their lifestyle. By 2001 Theresa Cumbers had become one of the founder members and a Trustee to the National Christian Alliance on Prostitution (NCAP) and the Magdalene Group was very soon affiliated. NCAP now has 56 affiliated groups from around the UK providing a valuable support and information forum for all those charities working to help men and women caught up in prostitu-Through Theresa's networking skills, the Magdalene Group played its part in the production of the Home Of-Publication "Prostitute fice Review-Paying the Price". The review cited the Magdalene Group as demonstrating best practice in its programme of rehabilitation of working girls. This review highlighted the fact that working girls should be

to raise money for the group. classed as vulnerable adults.

## The work continues

One aspect of the work which the Trustees had not envisaged in the early days was the need to visit working girls in prison. The nearest women's prison is in Peterborough eighty miles away. Consequently, staff and volunteers found themselves making monthly trips to Peterborough. As the work grew, it became obvious that larger premises were needed. Over the years, it had been necessary to rent various other properties as well as the original "Sitting Room". Now the opportunity had arisen for the trustees to consider having all the work, office, "drop-in sitting room" and training facilities under one roof. Premises were available at the King's centre immediately opposite St Peter Parmentergate Church. Through the generosity of the King's Centre Trustees, Magdalene Group was able to afford the very reasonable rent levied Soon after this the Magdalene Group was left in the capable hand of the newly appointed Assistant Project Manager, Michelle Lee whilst Theresa was on sick leave. The Jigsaw Programme was undertaken in 2002. The aim was to provide a prevention strategy by visiting schools and speaking to young people about relationships and what constituted an unsuitable or dangerous liaison. The initiative proved very successful in the beginning and worked well for several years but had to be discontinued when statutory

funding was withdrawn. However, the scheme was re-introduced some years later and is now one of the most important aspects of the work done.

# Public Recognition

It was with great pride that, in 2003, trustees, volunteers and Project Manager, Theresa Cumbers found themselves visiting Norfolk County Hall to receive the Queen's Golden Jubilee Award. Only three such awards for unsung service to the community were given in the East of England. In 2005, as president of the Royal Norfolk Show, the Right Reverend Graham James, Bishop of Norwich chose the Magdalene Group as his charity and granted the group free space at the Show. This opportunity was used to sell the crafts made by the clients in the Drop-In Centre and put up display boards explaining the work done by the Charity. A Tombola table raised valuable profits for the group. "Supporting People" was a Government funded scheme which was designed to help clients with lifestyle, tenancy and parental access problems. These criteria fitted in well with the remit of the Magdalene Group and consequently the charity worked closely with the Norwich Social Services in providing the necessary support to women facing these difficulties. Statutory funding is often shortlived and this partnership lasted approximately two years but provided much needed income for the group in very lean times.

### **Staff Changes**

The year 2006 saw the end of an era. Theresa Cumbers retired. Theresa had worked unstintingly for twelve years as the outward face of the Magdalene Group. During that time she took the charity from obscurity to widespread recognition. With her caring acceptance and understanding of the working girls' difficult lives she had led them to trust the Magdalene Group volunteers and enabled many of them to change their lives. Her successor had a hard act to follow. The Reverend Canon Mair Talbot came highly recommended and her post as hospital chaplain to the mental Health Trust prepared her for some of the problems she might face as Project Manager of the Magdalene Group. A service of inauguration was held in which she was commissioned by the Right Reverend Graham Jones and the Right Reverend Michael Evans, two of the Patrons. Mr John Drake, Sheriff of Norwich welcomed her on behalf of the City of Norwich. Mair was later joined by a Pastoral Secretary, Jane Hazell, who brought her excellent skills to the work both in the office and in the "Drop-In Centre". The Trustees were advised of the need to define the Magdalene Group's Electoral College. For many years the Friends of the Magdalene Group had brought in small amounts of income. Now it was time to review the system and stimulate interest with the intention of encouraging supporters to become members with voting rights. Maureen Fitzmaurice as

secretary undertook to establish the new categories of membership which were agreed as Associate, Voting, Corporate and Life. Corporate membership is offered to churches whose congregations are supportive of the work done. In March 2010, Canon Mair Talbot resigned to return to her former role as hospital chaplain. By September, the Trustees had appointed Suzi Heybourne as the new Project Manager. Sara Plastow was installed as the Jigsaw Co-ordinator, and finally by the end of the month the post of Administration Officer was filled by Helen Rosbotham. These three new members of staff have combined their talents and enthusiasm to give the organisation a strong and vibrant work force. Under their careful management, the charity is once again thriving and fulfilling the Mission Statement drawn up almost twenty years ago. Suzi ensures that all aspects of the work continues, recruiting and training new volunteers and keeping the work of the Magdalene Group in the public eye. Sara is contacting schools throughout the county offering the Jigsaw programme. This entails a certain amount of networking which has always been a priority. Helen's role is to ensure that there is a well-run office at the hub of the organisation and a welcoming voice at the other end of the telephone.

## Pioneers and Volunteers

The success of the Magdalene Group has always been through the dedication and co-operation of all personnel. Trustees, staff and volunteers have shown great commitment over the years, always putting the client group's needs at the heart of all decisions. In particular the volunteers' remarkable stoicism, the way they soldiered on with the task in hand through all the difficult times when funding was low and staffing levels were dropping; providing the caring and understanding so necessary to the welfare of the girls; this determination merits great admiration and recognition. The Magdalene Group owes a great debt of gratitude to those early pioneers who helped to forge the organisation into the strong asset it is today. The first treasurer, Sue Eyley, was a great supporter who sadly died a very young woman. Brian Dowler, took over from Sue and for several years was a great source of expertise and quiet diligence. Ray Sykes served as Treasurer for 11 years during which time his careful handling of the finances saw the charity grow from strength to strength. Among the noteworthy secretaries was Romayne Bailey. Romayne's support was invaluable as she kept all members informed as well as always being aware of the needs of the women visiting the "Drop-In" centre. The Magdalene Group benefitted greatly from her wise counsel. Sally Pearson and Peter Watts became trustees at a time when, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Charity, like many others, was experiencing financial problems as statutory funding became scarce. Their special talents helped with highlighting better ways of dealing with the shortfalls which arose. The Reverend Canon Ivan Bailey began his support for the Magdalene Group through his connections with local radio and television where he was able to speak about the work which was being done as often as his broadcasts would allow. Canon Ivan then went on to become Chairman, when, in his own inimitable style he guided the charity through some difficult changes. At the time of writing this report the current Trustees provide a secure base for the work of the charity. Bishop Peter Fox, as chairman, gently leads the Board of Trustee into the future. He is ably supported by Father James Walsh, Dean of St. John's Roman Catholic Cathedral. Father James brings a quiet wisdom and well-balanced view to discussions. Barbara Drake and Caroline Elliott both contribute their own special talents and gentle approach to the needs of the clients and volunteers. The latest addition to the Board of Trustees is information and research in Norfolk Social Services. Nicholas Miller, who comes recommended highly with many years experience with Social Services inspectorate. Behind every successful charity there is always a silent army of supporters. For the Magdalene Group this has to be the volunteers. Many of whom, like Jan Miller, Andrea Buttle, Mary Ashton and Sally Clarke, have given near and above a decade of service. They have been the caring face of the organisation offering their support and skills, nourishing meals, hot drinks on cold nights and friendship

to hundreds of working girls in Norwich. Their dedication is an inspiration. The Magdalene Group is greatly indebted to the individual members, churches, and grant making trusts, who have consistently and faithfully supported the charity contributing time, effort and money ensuring that the work continues.

#### **Tributes**

It was with great reluctance that Doreen Betts' resignation in 2006 was accepted by the Trustees. Doreen had given many years of dedicated service to the organisation. Most of those years were spent as chairman leading all members of the charity with integrity and understanding. Without her initial vision and compassion for the working girls, Norwich City would not have had such a unique and valuable asset. In recognition of her unstinting loyalty and commitment to this wonderful work, Doreen Green was made Life Vice President in 2007. Doreen has made this role her own by continuing to support the charity with regular visits, wise advice, and encouragement. The Trustees, staff and volunteers are very appreciative of the time and dedication which she offers.



