

Operation Stephen Report for AGM 2019

Operation Stephen was named after the man appointed by Jesus' disciples to help feed the needy in the early church. In offering a breakfast and welcome on Saturday mornings it is our aim to provide a similar service to those in need in Versailles: principally the homeless and those who live on the margins of established society. In this we complement other associations in the Versailles area, which provide basic needs for these people. Occasionally one of the leaders attends the regular meetings organised by social services for representatives of the Versailles associations which work with the homeless.

We can only hope to help our guests in a small way, but hopefully by providing a consistent service we provide a little stability and loving care to their lives. The numbers of guests fluctuates, from a handful to up to 15. Because of the small-scale format, meaningful contact with the guests is possible in a way that is not with the larger "soup kitchen", and many volunteers have known the guests for several years now.

We held our first breakfast at St Mark's in October 2002, and have been running continuously virtually every Saturday since then. Since 2006 we have had the additional support of volunteers from our neighbouring Roman Catholic churches Saint Michel in Porchefontaine and the Eglise du Nazaréen in rue du Peintre Lebrun, Versailles. It is a great pleasure to work with these people from other churches, and also those who do not attend any church.

Currently we have approximately 15 volunteers on our core roster, with several loyal and long-serving members stepping down from the team in 2018 and some newcomers joining. We have 10 from St Marks and St Pauls, 4 from Saint Michel, one from l'Eglise du Nazaréen. The Operation Stephen team is currently quite small and therefore there is a real need to ensure attract a few more volunteers so that we can continue to offer this breakfast every Saturday of the year. Various other members of the St Marks congregation have very generously kindly stepped in to help during holiday periods to ensure year-round continuity.

We have teams of 4 on duty every Saturday led by the 'chef', who is responsible for unlocking and locking up, and buying the bread (or obtaining "unsold" bread from the previous day from a couple of local bakeries in Versailles Porchefontaine). Other team members often bring extra items such as croissants, cake or fruit. One volunteer, Laurence, has attended to cut guests hair. Our 'chefs' begin the breakfast with a short prayer at the table. Guests, including non-Christians, respect this prayer time.

The summer of 2018 showed a high attendance at the breakfasts with close to 20 guests attending as other facilities within Versailles are closed. Since early 2019 the average number of guests has fallen from 8-10 per Saturday down to 6-8. This is in part down to a few regular guests moving on or deciding not to attend and also another breakfast offer opening on a Saturday in the centre of Versailles..

Over the past year there was one incident of violence with a guest being banned from Operation Stephen for a period of one year.

A meeting was held in November 2018 with some of the volunteers to review practices and identify areas of improvements. This led to a few small changes in rules, notably an explicit clarification that racist remarks were unacceptable during the breakfast and a more structured approach to managing any disciplinary actions.

It is planned to organise an annual BBQ with the Op Stephen guests on Saturday 29 June. A local scout group, led by the daughter of one our French volunteers, has offered to help organise this event.

Thank you to all these volunteers and especially Elizabeth Harper who does our shopping and keeps the kitchen in order.

Dan Roulstone