

Good faith: Church in Glasgow to open just for addicts

Minister devoted to addiction fights despair with love. Catherine Pepinster reports

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Laurent Vernet wants to steer clear of politics and focus on the malaise he says many addicts feel

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For Laurent Vernet, it's not about the nuisance of having to step over used syringes, or the crime wave fuelled by addicts seeking money for their next fix. His ministry is about a fresh start for those drug users whose actions may blight the wider community but who need help to break their habit and recover.

"I want to offer them a new community, one that doesn't judge them or proselytise," said Vernet, a Methodist minister originally from France who is now working among Glasgow's addict community. "It is a chance for a new beginning."

Vernet, 55, has big plans rooted in the despair that he witnesses daily. As well as being appointed Scotland's first religious "minister for recovery" he aims to open a church dedicated to recovering addicts. "We don't believe in conversion to Christianity, that's not what this is about," he said. "But we can walk alongside people in recovery. We can offer them safe space."

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Strathclyde Methodist Circuit's appointment of a full-time minister for recovery followed pioneering work at Woodlands Methodist Church in Glasgow, where Vernet was based as the church minister.

Woodlands, where the links with drink and drug problem users dates back more than 40 years, has been running religious services for people in recovery, including Bible readings, prayer and worship. It also holds meetings for addicts and hosts regular sessions held by Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. More than 400 people a week attending regularly.

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Scotland continues to struggle with [high levels of addiction](#). Despite a fall in the number of deaths last year, the country still has the worst drug-death rate in the UK and in Europe. According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, there are 90 deaths every month on average.

The Scottish government is proposing the decriminalisation of drugs for personal use, citing the much lower numbers of deaths from drugs in Portugal since it enacted decriminalisation in 2001.

Portugal had 74 deaths in 2021, compared with Scotland's 1,330, despite having almost double the population. But drug law reform depends on the UK government, which opposes the change.

Vernet is steering clear of the political arguments and focuses instead on what he says many addicts feel, a deep malaise. "Often addiction is linked to despair," he said. "People don't know who they are. They can despair because of the addiction, but it goes deeper than that. We can offer a sense of identity and also that a higher power loves them."

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His project, called New Place for New People, has been given a financial fillip by the sale of Trinity Methodist Church on Shettleston Road, Glasgow. "The congregation there was in decline and they felt the responsibility of running the church was causing stress for the people

left,” Vernet said. “So they said spend the money raised by the sale on serving people in recovery. They do believe that by their church dying, and this work going on because of it, that is a resurrection.”

Vernet has also started Recovart, an arts project for people in recovery led by a professional artist, that explores people’s addictions and their lives. He also runs training sessions to help former addicts develop skills in coaching, public speaking and report speaking so that they in turn can help other addicts.

Vernet moved from France to Edinburgh, where he lived for 30 years, working in international marketing, before being ordained five years ago and transferring to Glasgow.

He assumed that his focus would be on homelessness and refugees, and had no knowledge of or interest in addiction, but found that there was a need for a particular ministry in Glasgow. His recovery church has been inspired by a similar venture in Newcastle, where religious services for addicts are held at the Anglican cathedral.

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The Newcastle venture, started by Jon Canessa, a cathedral priest, and Tracey Hulme, a Methodist minister, focuses on mind, body and spirit, to help people recover from addiction.

Newcastle also has big problems with drugs and alcohol that were exacerbated during the Covid lockdowns. Canessa said: “People with acute alcohol addiction often started drinking too much at home during lockdown. To address this, and any addiction, takes real courage.

“Often it’s a way of coping with trauma, because people have experienced violence or abuse. But when the addiction is chronic, they are at a real risk of dying”.

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