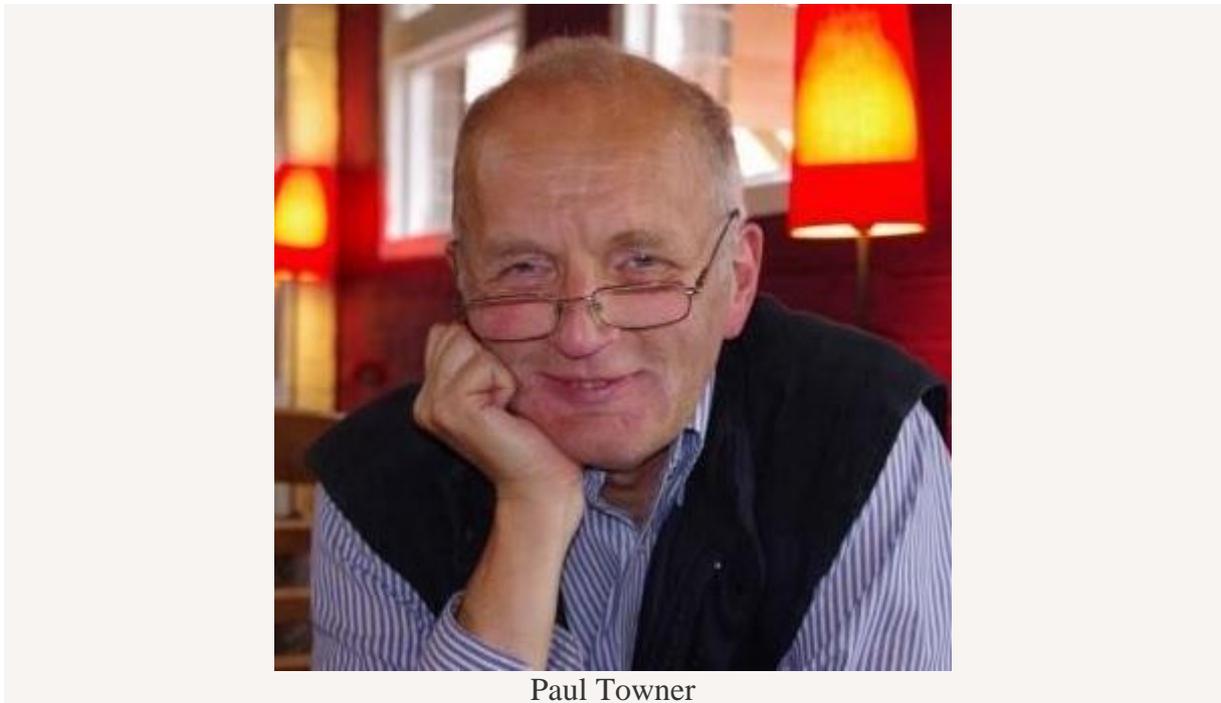


A friend to the city's homeless



Paul Towner

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OFFERING help to the homeless has formed a key part in the ministry of the Rev Preb Paul Towner, a clergyman who is credited with reviving the vision of a 19th century Hereford philanthropist.

Paul spent more than 30 years in the Herefordshire diocese before retiring last week with his wife, Anne, to Cheshire, a strategic spot on the map for visiting their three grown-up children and five grandchildren who live in varied parts of the UK.

His wife, whose forbears include the renowned explorer, Sir Wilfred Thesiger, worked at Hereford College for the Blind for 13 years. Paul, aged 65, was a maths teacher before entering the church, and moved from the northern reaches of the diocese in 1999 to become vicar at St Peter's and St James. After his 17-year ministry here, he leaves behind him the flourishing Hereford Homelessness Forum, of which he was a co-founder, as well as Hereford Ventures – the spelling is deliberate – which seeks to “re-energise” the vision of John Venn, for many years vicar at St Peter's. “He did so much to alleviate suffering and social injustice”, Paul explains.

Arriving just before the Millennium, he quickly became aware of Hereford's homelessness problems. “There was no joined up thinking,” he says. “People would have to get on a bus to Gloucester, there was nothing here for them.” The forum brought together all the relevant agencies as a team, and progress was made.

“I knew little about homelessness, I was pitched into it, and it became a significant part of what I did,” says Paul. A good team-builder, he did what he calls the

“ecumenical stuff”, drawing all the churches together, and a series of caring projects emerged.

After a major rethink, St Peter’s was reordered to become more inclusive. “It’s given us more flexibility in relation to what we do,” says Paul. Once again this year, the building will host a winter shelter.

Under the Hereford Venntures’ banner, there are street pastors – trained church volunteers watching out for people on busy weekend nights, and family pastors, actively helping some of the county’s most troubled families.

“More than 1,000 families fall into that category,” says Paul. “Working with the council we have taken on 42 families. It’s a privilege to do that and it’s ongoing. There are hopes for rolling this out across the county.”

Meanwhile, the Lean on Me volunteers are trained to care for the injured or impaired – on average this service saves 24 ambulance call-outs a month. Vennture ambassadors, meanwhile, support the vulnerable and provide first aid, their mission to make Hereford a better place.

“What is happening is fantastic, and it’s nice to think that that awareness mechanism is now in place,” says Paul. “Someone was kind enough to say I had made a difference, but I think I have just been an enabler.”

He warns that a vicar’s job is great, but incredibly demanding. “Unless you just can’t avoid it – in which case it’s the best job in the world.”