A Good Cause: A Dozen Years as Chaplain at St. Andrew's Church

By [Howard Amos](#)

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Father Simon Stephens is chaplain at St. Andrew's, a 19th-century church. **Howard Amos**

Father Simon Stephens has worked for 12 years as the chaplain of St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Moscow. Before that he served for 17 years as a chaplain in the British navy, including on the flagship Ark Royal. He is also area dean for Russia, Mongolia, Poland and Ukraine, chaplain to the British ambassador and the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative to the patriarch.

Q: What was the first time you got involved with a charity?

A: I was ordained 44 years ago at the age of 26, which is the youngest you can be ordained, and almost immediately I was appointed as a hospital chaplain in Coventry. Into my care came a pediatric ward where children were dying of cancer. Despite my education I didn't know what to say. I realized that the best people to help parents going through this hell are other parents who have been through it — and I was able to gather a group of parents together

in Coventry, and we set up a charity called The Compassionate Friends. That sort of work has a lifetime commitment, and I am still involved today. It is not a religious organization, God forbid.

Q: What charity or cause is particularly close to you?

A: The Step Up Orphan Opportunity Center [which is given premises by St. Andrew's] is close to me. Step Up gives people an opportunity. Step Up goes in, discovers what the gifts of orphans are — not what their problems are — and gives them a life. I've talked to scruffy teenagers who eight years later I've met on Novy Arbat as students who have got places at Moscow State University and are doing great things. I've also been privileged to talk to 23-year-olds whom Step Up has taught to read and write for the first time.

The Alcoholics Anonymous groups that we host are also very important for me. They are open every day of the year. A number of celebrities on CNN and BBC World have all been there and have been helped by the organization. There is no doubt that this is a lifesaver.

On the wider scene, of course, from Harvest to Advent, we have an appeal with the Salvation Army to clothe the naked and feed the hungry: caring for people whom often no other Christian organization will care for. If you take your vocation as a Christian seriously then you have to think very carefully about what is going on — and the Salvation Army is always doing that.

Q: How does charity work form a part of your job?

A: St. Andrew's is itself a charity! My job as pastor is to make sure that our large congregation is sensitive to the needs of minority groups living in the city. There are a lot of people who can't cope with the hard side of life in Moscow. A church is duty-bound to reflect the presence of Christ in its members. Without preaching a sermon, I believe that we are the heart, lips, feet and hands of Jesus in this crazy but wonderful city. People only meet the compassion of Christ in his church.

This is why I get a little concerned when I see senior church leaders in Moscow driving around in stretch limousines with police escorts. It's been a great privilege for me to see the resurrection of the Russian Orthodox church, but in the building of churches and in the gilding of cupolas and domes, you must not forget the needs of the sick, the dying and the poor.

Q: How does charity in Russia differ from other places where you've worked?

A: We have to have an iron will to cut through bureaucracy in Russia. The biggest hindrance in Russia is bureaucratic legislation. You can't open anything here unless you have a bit of paper! People's hands are tied by the legislation of the federal government. And perhaps the idea of charity is to some extent a new idea. As walls come tumbling down and curtains are pulled back, people are beginning to see for the first time that there are other choices that can be made in terms of caring for the marginalized in society.

Step Up and Alcoholics Anonymous are organizations without a Christian message, but the Salvation Army obviously has a Christian foundation.

Q: How do you choose what to support?

A: I don't choose! When I came to St. Andrew's Moscow, Step Up was already there. As a Christian priest you can't ignore good works — they're under my roof. Vodka is killing many men and young people and, therefore when Alcoholics Anonymous comes to see me, I cannot, if I take my vocation seriously, say that I haven't got time for them! These two charities are God-given to me. We have another charity in the tower — we are not allowed to have bells because we are not Orthodox — the Anglican-Orthodox Education Center with 10,000-20,000 volumes. I use every opportunity to promote dialogue between Christians of all denominations.

Q: Do you give money to panhandlers you see on the street?

A: That is a problem for me. Every morning I go down to the British Embassy and in the underpass I meet half a dozen people begging and I do not have the money to help all of them. I have to use intuitive skills. I have to identify a person with real need and support them. Every day people come to my door. The policy is I don't give them money. When there is a real winter I give them food, but then I find it dumped in the snow five minutes later because they wanted money to buy alcohol.

To some extent I feel embarrassed about living in my official residence, which is a palace and a half! I'm not allowed to rent it out. My home belongs to the city government, and the church belongs to the federal government — and bureaucrats say who can live there and how it can be used.

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Step Up: http://www.vverh.su/, +7 (495) 629-51-17
The Compassionate Friends: http://www.tcf.org.uk/
Alcoholics Anonymous in Russia: http://www.aa-europe.net/countries/russia.htm
Salvation Army: www.salvationarmy.org, +74959112600 (Russia)

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