

Sculptor can find no place to lay his bench in London



SEARCHING for a London home for his sculpture Jesus the Homeless, which features Christ huddled under a blanket, and sleeping on a park bench, the Canadian sculptor Tim Schmalz thought that he had found the perfect host in St Martin-in-the-Fields, in London.

But, despite the church's long-standing ministry to the homeless, the Vicar, Canon Sam Wells, said that he could not accept the sculpture because of a rule banning anyone from sleeping or lying down inside the church.

"It would open us to ridicule. People would say: 'Jesus does it: why can't I do this?'" he said on Monday. "It sounds trivial, but it is significant that we have a whole-site policy that doesn't allow people to lie down on our site."

Mr Schmalz has been looking for somewhere in London to place the artwork. It has already been installed in seven cities around the world, and is due to be erected in Washington, DC, and Rome in the coming months (News, 22 August).

He said that he was surprised by Canon Wells's response. "People might say: 'Why should Jesus be able to sleep on a park bench when real homeless people cannot?' The irony of that just speaks volumes."

Canon Wells described placing the statue at St Martin-in-the-Fields as "sending coals to Newcastle".

He said: "That's why I suggested it shouldn't be in St Martin-in-the-Fields. . . We don't need a statue; we are the real thing."

There were other reasons why the church turned down Mr Schmalz's offer, Canon Wells said. Not only did the statue not represent the reality of being homeless in central London, where more people slept on overnight buses than on benches: it also objectified the very people St Martin-in-the-Fields was trying to help, he said.

"They are called Peter, or Sally; they are not just homeless people, but people with a past, and a future, and an identity. It could be in danger of encouraging stereotypes, and trying to turn people into issues. The homeless are not a different caste. They need to be the chief drivers of their own redemption rather than being objects of pity or concern."

But Mr Schmalz said that "In a sense, the job of an artist is to objectify things. This statue objectifies the homeless person within the context of the most sacred and precious respect, as the Son of Man wanted us to see them. . . You have this church in the centre of London. What was the idea of building that church? It was to proclaim Jesus. This sculpture does that visibly. It's a 24/7 preacher of one of the most powerful parts of the gospel."