

Bishop Martin Seeley writes... (December 2022)

When I was visiting a church top-up shop the other day, a hard-working volunteer said to me, "I know this is a bad thing to say, but this top-up shop is successful." He was measuring success at the Ipswich church by the number of customers coming to the shop – they were expecting more than forty the next day, queueing from early in the morning. He knew it was bad because no one in our county and country should have to rely on a top-up shop, or a foodbank, or any other sort of food programme.

The numbers of people seeking help for food, to feed themselves and their families, has increased dramatically the last several months, as has the number of top-up shops and food-banks now found across the county.

Who is seeking help has changed too, with food programmes across the county reporting seeing more young people, families and pensioners wanting help. The biggest change has been in people who would not have thought they would need help a year ago, now coming on a weekly basis – working families who cannot make ends meet. The people who a year ago were "just managing", now can't cope. Customers at the Haverhill food bank include people working in Addenbrooke's Hospital.

Top-up shops across Ipswich, of which there are ten and soon to be eleven, provide food for 600 customers a week.

And we know it is not just about paying for food that people are struggling with. Many are finding themselves unable to pay for food and the fuel to keep their homes warm. More and more families are falling into fuel poverty, and in debt to energy companies.

The energy companies' remedy is to place people on pre-paid meters, which works out more expensive, and a proportion each day is taken by the company to pay off the existing debt. So the debt just gets worse. Or you have less heat.

We know that the problem has become much worse because of inflation, and inflation is largely due to the increase in energy prices as well as the impact on, for example, wheat prices, of the war in Ukraine. And we must not forget that we have just been through a very costly pandemic, which

itself has been a factor in inflation, and Brexit is also understood to have contributed, with the consequent labour shortages and pressure on import costs.

So the question is complex, yet food banks existed before the dramatic rise in inflation, which started in mid 2021, standing at about 2% in July 2021 and a year later was 10%. So we are facing an extreme situation right now, and then there remains the underlying problem – why do foodbanks exist at all in this country?

The Government has sought to mitigate the impact of the high inflation, with the energy price cap, the energy bills support scheme, cost of living payment, pensioner cost of living fuel payment along with the winter fuel payment, and a disability cost of living payment. These are substantial interventions, and very welcome, but they do not help those in greatest need, those who are still struggling because their income, whether through benefits or through employment, simply is not enough.

I have wondered through this, why the help the Government is providing could not be more targeted, so that those who really do need extra help receive that and are not moving further and further into debt.

As it is, churches and community groups are stepping into the breach, and countless volunteers are making sure that help is provided. Of course, this is core to the Christian message, to love our neighbours, and so to reach out and help those in need, near and far. But it is also core to the Christian message to seek the justice of God, and that means asking why are we in this situation at all? And that question becomes more perturbing when we look at the conditions of poverty of many families before the jump in inflation. Why is this possible still in this country?

A staggering 4 million children are living in poverty in the UK, more than one in four.

Again, the causes and the solutions are not straightforward, otherwise we would surely have sorted this out by now. But that does not mean they are too complex, and unsolvable. We will solve this when, together, we want to. That may seem a strange thing to say, but it really is an act of public will that will enable us to tackle this enormous challenge, and make the change for the better.

We had a glimpse of an act of public will during the pandemic, when we collectively decided that the only way we were going to get through the crisis was to realise we were all in it together. That sense lasted a while, and worked wonders, with Government, individuals, employers, community agencies and charities, and faith groups, working to ensure everyone was taken care of.

We need a similar collective act of will to want to eradicate the causes of poverty, those deep-seated causes whether that be insufficiency in the welfare provision, or undervaluing of certain jobs. And maybe we have seen enough of the impact of poverty during this cost of living crisis to begin to say to ourselves, that this is just not right, and we can change it.

And maybe there could come a day when I visit that top-up shop in Ipswich, and the same volunteer says to me, "This top-up shop is a success – we have no more customers, and we are closing down."

Now that would be a good thing to say.