

999
FOOD



EMERGENCY
FOOD AID
IN THE
THAMES
VALLEY
A SNAPSHOT

**ALISON
WEBSTER**

DEPARTMENT OF MISSION
CHURCH OF ENGLAND
DIOCESE OF OXFORD

Food Matters
connecting faith and food

LIVING FAITH MAKING A DIFFERENCE
IN THE WORLD

 DIOCESE OF
OXFORD

KNOWN FOOD BANKS WITHIN OXFORD DIOCESE



INTRODUCTION

The Diocese of Oxford is co-terminous with the Thames Valley region (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire), and therefore includes some of the most prosperous parts of the UK. Waitrose and Vodafone house their headquarters here; it is the home of the Camerons and the Middletons; of dreaming spires and pretty Cotswold villages; of shiny shopping centres like the Oracle in Reading and designer outlets like Bicester Village; of Ascot and Henley, and Eton College. If you have the means, you can eat at the best restaurants (or at least the most famous), in the UK: Heston Blumenthal's 'Fat Duck' in Bray, Jamie Oliver's 'Jamies' in Oxford city, or Raymond Blanc's 'le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons' in Great Milton.

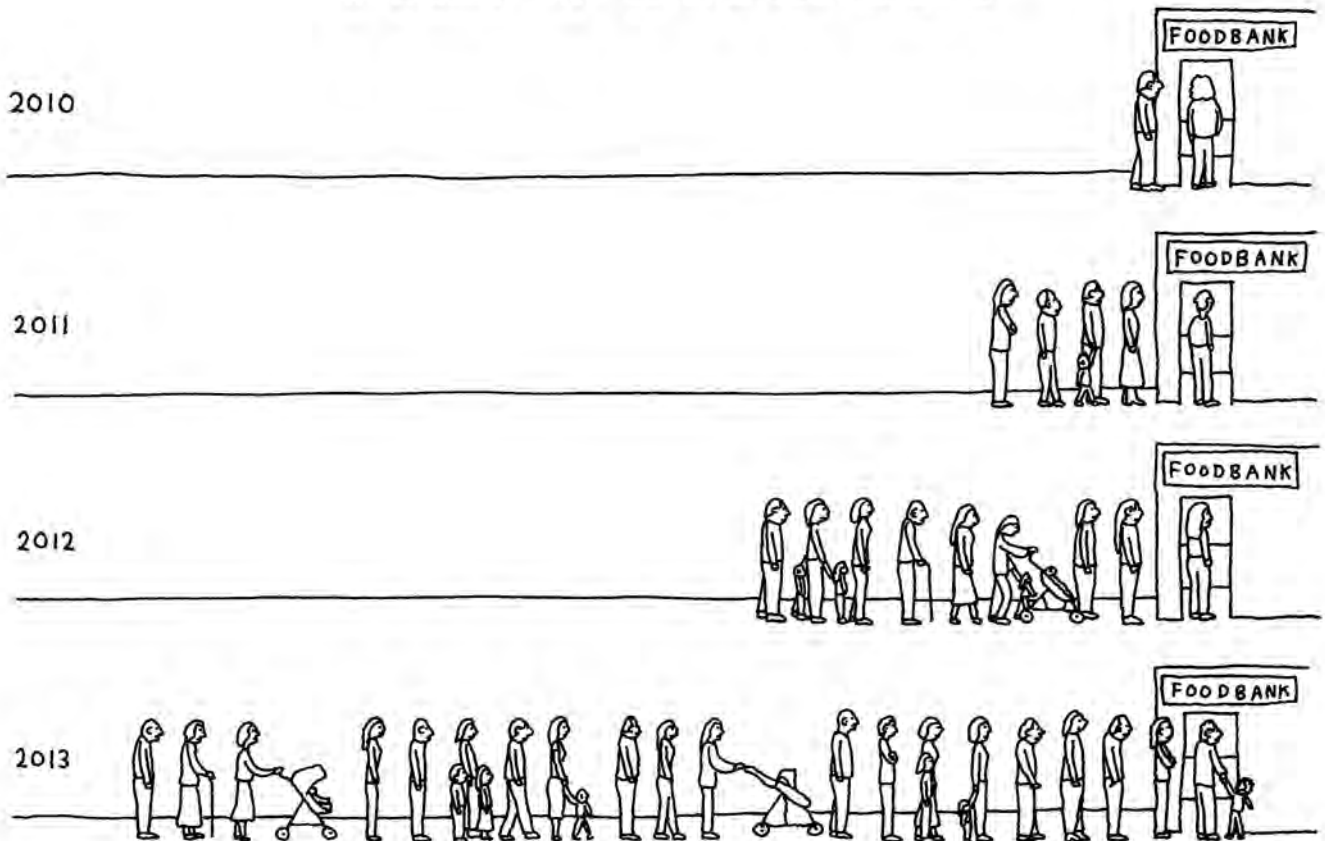
It is therefore a matter of particular concern to us that the past two or three years have seen a rapid growth in emergency food provision across our Diocese. There is now a diverse range of projects in operation – most commonly food banks, covering towns, cities and rural areas. Projects are centred in Abingdon, Aylesbury, Banbury, Bicester, Bracknell, Burghfield, Chesham (Chiltern Food Bank), Chipping Norton (North Oxfordshire Food Bank), Crowthorne, Didcot, Henley upon Thames, High Wycombe (One Can Trust, Bucks), Ivinghoe, Maidenhead, Milton Keynes, Newbury (West Berks FoodBank), Oxford City (Oxford Food Bank, Oxford Emergency Food, Iffley Community Cupboard), Reading (Readifood), Slough, Thame, Wantage and Grove, Windsor, Witney (Oxfordshire West Food Bank) and Wokingham (and this list includes only those we know of directly, there may well be others). In one wealthy town in Berkshire alone, £17,000 worth of food has been collected for distribution in four months by a newly established food bank – with 500 people helped so far. This is the town where one of the three food bank directors discovered a woman in the advanced stages of pregnancy and her partner living in a child's toy tent in winter, with nothing to eat, down a lane less than 200 yards from one of the churches.

We celebrate the fact that Christians of all denominations are working alongside those of other faiths and those who do not identify with a faith tradition, to mitigate the immediate effects of food poverty. However, whilst it is an imperative of our faith to feed the hungry, our prophetic tradition also requires us to ask why the hungry have no food.

As part of a Diocesan project on global food justice (Food Matters, www.foodmatters.org.uk) we have therefore been carrying out our own explorations of the structural root causes of the need for emergency food aid, whilst also contributing to national research initiatives.

Anecdotal evidence in 2013 suggested that there had been an exponential rise in church involvement in emergency food initiatives. In response, the Diocese hosted a Justice Forum gathering in September 2013 (entitled '*Beyond Food Banks*') bringing together those involved on the ground in food banks with policy makers and food poverty experts. Partnering with us in this initiative was the national ecumenical organisation Church Action on Poverty (CAP), for whom this constituted one of their national roundtable discussions on the so-called Poverty Premium.

THE FOODBANK



PERHAPS WE NEED TO ASK WHY THIS IS HAPPENING

@davewalker / davewalker.cc

The response to the event was phenomenal. There were about 90 attendees, limited by the size of our venue. An additional thirty people wanted to attend but could not be accommodated, but have been included in our growing email network of those concerned about food poverty, developing our thinking and resourcing one another.

A key theme explored at the event was the perplexity that lies at the heart of Christian involvement in food banks: are we becoming a part of the problem of food poverty? How can we ensure that, whilst helping those in crisis, we do not collude with institutional injustice, and inadvertently help in the process of establishing informal emergency food aid as part of the welfare system in this country.

This publication has arisen from the '*Beyond Food Banks*' event. Evidence from that gathering has been combined with material derived from visiting seven (about one quarter) of the projects in the Diocese. *999 Food* is an attempt to bring together information about food banks and other projects that are currently operating in the diocese, to reflect on them, and to establish a 'snapshot' picture of the scene. We explore such issues as: who are the people using food banks? What are their stories? And what of those who set up and run food banks? Who is involved, why do they do it, and how are the projects developing?

It is called 'a snapshot' because things are changing all the time. The socio-political context is changing; and each project is developing: refining its objectives and delivery mechanisms and, in many cases, the range and nature of the services offered. This publication is from one Anglican Diocese about the ecumenical activity within our geographical area. It is offered as a contribution to the ever-growing literature and research on emergency food aid which – bit by bit – is helping to define the nature of the problem of food poverty and the growing inequalities that lie behind it, and explore the role of the state, voluntary and faith sectors in responding to it.

A SNAPSHOT OF STORIES: WHY DO PEOPLE NEED EMERGENCY FOOD AID?

Evidence from emergency food projects throughout the diocese makes it clear that the economic downturn, and the choice to pursue an austerity agenda in response to it, have had a big impact on those in our communities who have little by way of an 'economic cushion' to protect them from crises. There is a rapidly expanding gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The 'have nots' are people in transition – from employment to underemployment or unemployment; from one form of benefit system to another, or frequent changes from one job to another. The transition from relative security to utter precariousness and vulnerability is a journey that many families are making through no fault of their own. This journey can often be caused or accompanied by bereavement, stress, and mental or physical ill health. The cause can be job loss, a shift to lower wages, removal or reduction of benefits, and debt burdens. Punitive benefit sanctions and the end of crisis loans are the most recent additions to the list of challenges faced by the poorest in our communities.

Recent evidence from the Trussell Trust (for the year 2013/14) shows that static incomes, rising living costs, low pay, underemployment and problems with welfare, especially sanctioning, are significant drivers of the increased demand experienced by their network of food banks. 83 percent of Trussell Trust food banks surveyed recently reported that benefits sanctions, which have become increasingly harsh, have caused more people to be referred to them for emergency food. Half of referrals to food banks in 2013-14 were a result of benefit delays or changes.

In their recent report, *'Rewarding Work for Low-Paid Workers'*, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation states that in Britain, *'More than 5% of jobs (around 1.5 million) are what the Low Pay Commission (LPC) describes as minimum wage jobs... Approximately 20% of employees (5 million) earn less than the calculated Living Wage... This places the UK close to the top of the OECD league table of economies with a high incidence of low-paid workers.'*

A new survey by parenting website Netmums and Trussell Trust conducted in March 2014 reveals that more working families are struggling to make ends meet:

- A survey of 2,178 working families conducted by Netmums shows that one in five working parents have had to choose between paying an essential bill or putting food on the table in the last 12 months.
- A huge 78 per cent of parents in working families have cut spending over the last 12 months. 56 percent admit to having to buy cheaper, lower quality food.
- 43 per cent of those surveyed admitted that they are only 'just about coping' with balancing their family budgets and a quarter stated they have suffered stress as a result of not eating properly.
- Only 1 in 40 had turned to a food bank for help, with more than 70 percent saying that they would only do so as a last resort. This reinforces evidence from the government's recent DEFRA report which states that turning to a food bank is very difficult for many. It also reinforces the fact that food bank figures only reflect part of the problem of UK food poverty.

FOOD BANK CLIENTS IN THE DIOCESE OF OXFORD

Here are some real anonymised stories reflecting the needs and situations of food bank clients.

“ **Client’s Job Seeker’s Allowance** has been sanctioned because of one missed appointment. He has to walk over 20 miles to town to sign on. He has no money for electricity, phone (to ring up for jobs) or travel (for hospital appointments and training courses in town for jobs). He was told by Job Centre Plus that no payment was possible. He is applying for a budgeting loan but that can take two or three weeks to process.’

“ **A family** experiencing benefit delays. Three year old child. They live in a small village. It may be another week before benefits arrive.’

“ **A pensioner** has lost her purse with all her benefit money in it. She has no recourse to funds to pay her bills.’

“ **Karen** is a single parent, with two young children. She works as a cleaner and is struggling to stay afloat. Her parents don’t help and the father of her children is not around. Since she’s come off benefits she’s finding it hard to cope with all the bills, and to clothe her children and buy them shoes etc.’

“ **Man and his partner** sanctioned from benefits for four weeks. No job, no home. Staying with relations or in a tent.’

“ **A single man** is being assessed for a higher rate of sickness benefit. It will be another two weeks before he knows if he’ll get it. It will make the difference as to whether he can afford to feed himself.’

“ **Mandy** lives on her own. She has been struggling with a long-term drug addiction but is now on a methadone programme. She has had to attend hospital appointments some distance away, so has had to use her money for bus fares. Recently bereaved, we encouraged her to return if she ever feels she needs counselling for her loss, as we have details we can pass on to her.’

“ **Sam** lives on his own. He is looking for work in the construction line, preferably with a small company so that “he can get to know people and not be just a number”. He has moved into a new flat and needs to pay the rent. He has a young son and sees him on alternate weekends. He loves him very much and wants to be there for him as he is not happy at home. Sam has had mental health issues in the past, and feels discriminated against in finding a job. He may seek counselling.’

“ **John** is a carpenter by trade but is out of work and finding it very difficult to get a job. He looks after his two teenage sons. The Job Centre made him an appointment but that was 15 miles away and he couldn’t get there, so his benefits were stopped. He is awaiting a decision as to whether or not he will be sanctioned or his benefit reinstated.’

“ **A woman and her teenage son** had left home due to domestic violence, but are being located into temporary accommodation today. They are starting from nothing and waiting for benefits to come through.’

“ **A couple** had walked eight miles into town this morning to attend an appointment at the Job Centre and did not know how they were going to walk back home with the food we gave them. A local church gave them money for their bus fare home. He had missed an appointment at Job Centre Plus and had benefits sanctioned for four weeks.’

“ **Sean** used to be in the forces. He was left traumatised by war, has lots of problems and is now on his own, estranged from his wife & children. A Royal British Legion welfare officer accompanied him.’

“ **Single lady with an adult son.** She has been caring for her mum until she died recently. She has applied for Job Seeker’s Allowance but seven weeks on still has not had any benefits. She asked for an advance of benefit payment at the Job Centre but was refused.’

“ **A young man** with a “mix up” with his benefits. He is awaiting a medical review from the mental health authorities as he is being assessed for bi-polar disorder. He is hoping that after the review his benefits will be paid again.’

“ **Family,** two adults and two children, referred by Homestart. Mum has multiple health problems.’

“ **Martin,** has suffered with severe depression for many years. Also has an alcohol problem. Benefits are changing so he is in a gap due to changes in circumstances.’

“ **Sonya** is on benefits. Next payment is due in a couple of days. Her flat leaked last night and her cooker has been damaged. She cannot get a crisis loan for a replacement. Directed her to a local furniture charity, which she will access on Friday when her benefits arrive. Meanwhile she may be able to use her neighbour’s microwave.’

“ **Young man** has a disability that makes it difficult for him to work, even though he is a trained chef. Delay with benefits means he’s struggling to feed himself and his two young children.’

“ **Steve** is a veteran from the Falklands war. He has health problems and his benefits are in a mess under the new system. He was burgled yesterday whilst attending a family funeral and sentimental items were stolen. Visibly upset.’

“ **Darren** was a heroin addict (now on Methadone), but he still has a problem with alcohol. He is sofa surfing. His family is in Scotland, so he manages to go home only to attend funerals. He became visibly upset when talking about this. I asked if he had ever received counselling for bereavement. He hadn’t. I encouraged him to think about this and to come back if he wanted details. I offered to pray for him after he had gone. He was very grateful for this, and for the food.’

“ **Anthony** is 19 years old. His parents are in prison. His grandad, who he was very close to, died recently. He lives on his own and has a probation officer. He was recently sanctioned because he hadn’t filled in a form properly at Job Centre Plus. He has appealed, but if that fails he will be without benefits for four weeks. Encouraged him to get more vouchers if this happens, and gave him CAB’s details for support and advice. He has a job interview on Monday, but can’t afford to get there. Encouraged him to go to the CAB first thing. He was very grateful for the food and said he would like to volunteer one day.’

“ **Sally** has been an alcoholic since she was a teenager, and suffered both physical and emotional abuse as a child. She was told often that she was useless. She married to get away from home, but ended up with a violent husband, so her drinking got worse. She had children who now live a long way away. Sally tried to take her own life three weeks ago, and ended up in hospital. She has just started attending a crisis group and she is hoping to come back and see us in a month to tell us that she has stopped drinking....’

“ **Nathan** lives on his own. He hasn’t worked for years due to back pain. He appeared very stressed on coming in, and complained about being directed to us at the wrong times, and has been out of food for three days. He was very pleased to have our help. He has a dog, which helps him get out of the flat, and he says keeps him sane. He doesn’t see his family much – they have “helped him out too many times in the past”.’

A SNAPSHOT OF PROJECTS: WHAT IS BEING DONE?



WOKINGHAM FOOD BANK

A small shop front in the middle of the town houses both the stocks and the distribution point for the relatively new Wokingham Food Bank (affiliated to the Trussell Trust). On September 3rd 2013 it fed its 500th person (from more than 180 families), having opened its doors in May. The food bank opens Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons, with a short session on Saturday mornings for emergencies. Bulk collections are brought in on Monday and Friday mornings.

Those who need the food bank are referred from other agencies, and on arrival with their voucher, fill in a short questionnaire and chat to food bank volunteers about their preferences and needs. As a relatively small operation, the project can offer friendly face-to-face support, as well as a more 'bespoke' service regarding the kind of food (and latterly also cosmetics and sanitary products and pet food) to each person in need. Simple recipe cards produced by the Mothers' Union in the Diocese of Oxford are also made available (contact margaretl.barnes@btinternet.com). These give ideas for meals that can be cooked using the products in the food parcels.

There are 14 churches in the town supporting the food bank. A monthly shopping list is produced, keeping people of the town informed about the kinds of foodstuffs that are needed. Any food that the food bank can't use is given to the local Salvation Army to help feed local homeless people. David, the project leader, reported that when the project began, he was aware of more than 30 people sleeping rough in the town.

www.wokingham.foodbank.org.uk

Wokingham is wealthy, but property is expensive. Those who use the food bank are often embarrassed and ashamed. Volunteers are able to reassure them that they are not alone – indeed, there are many people in similar situations of need. But involvement in the project gives volunteers a very different perspective on the town. Half those coming for food are affected either by benefit changes, delays and sanctions, and changes to Housing Benefit.

The local MP, John Redwood, has visited the project, as has the mayor. Moral support comes from the local council, and the local press, the Wokingham Times. With the use of social media too (eg a facebook page and a twitter presence, [@wkgfoodbank](https://twitter.com/wkgfoodbank)) the project is able to keep churches and other supporters informed. There is also an initiative called 'Wokingham Food Bank Angels' – people who are willing to give small donations monthly to enable the project to cover the regular outgoings that keep the project going (eg rent and bills).

The practical logistics, even for a small food bank, are complex. Food from private donors is collected regularly from a range of collection points. But at harvest festival time there are 17 bulk donations from churches and schools, and one weekend a year in November is 'Tesco's Weekend' where volunteers give out leaflets to shoppers explaining what the food bank is and why it's needed, and encourage donations that are then matched by the supermarket.



READIFOOD

This Reading-based project, run by a Christian charity called Faith Christian Group, has a twenty to thirty year history, showing that emergency food aid is nothing new. It was originally set up as a soup and sandwich run, but has now been operating as a food bank for well over ten years, albeit very small to begin with. Readifood also works with rough sleepers, the 'street poor' and runs a small housing project, 'Stepping Stones'. It covers Greater Reading, out to Pangbourne and up to Emmer Green. A partnership is in place with Woodley Food Store and the Burghfield and Mortimer Food Bank with whom food is shared. There are no links with the Trussell Trust network.

Early in 2012 the project was approached by Reading Borough Council who knew that a food poverty crisis was looming. Although ambivalent about the Christian basis of the project, the council did not want to set up a new emergency food aid project that would duplicate what Readifood was already doing, so a deal was worked out whereby Local Authority funding was made available to Readifood to feed the growing number of people in crisis in the city. Significant in this is the fact that from April 2013 the funding for 'Crisis Loans' was withdrawn. People who would in the past have received a loan to tide them over until their benefits were organised are now referred to Readifood for a food parcel. The parcels are put together in bags – a set list of contents aimed to provide 3 days worth of food (which is also about all one person can carry). They differ in size according to single, couple, or family. Vegetarian, diabetic and Halal parcels are provided to those who need them.

The biggest growth for the project was in 2012, from distributing 35 food parcels a week, to 110 per week. In 2013 this number stabilised at around 95 per week, but the organisers are anticipating another large increase in demand. Many parcels are one off requests. Others will be for up to 4 weeks. Readifood rarely helps beyond that, with the exception of some whom the project has come to know as experiencing long term poverty. Often these are working people on a very low income.

The project stores food in a large industrial unit (4,500 sq foot) on the edge of the city. All four Waitrose stores in the area support Readifood. Food, toiletries and sanitary products come from other supportive retailers and from generous individuals via churches and schools. £60,000 worth of food per year is given and distributed, with 130 volunteers involved in collecting; 15 in packing, sorting and delivering. Most new food banks which have come into being over the past 5 years are based in local churches and work on a voucher scheme whereby people come in to collect parcels. Readifood operates a different model, having traditionally delivered to a client's door. Today there is a mix of delivery (about 50%) and distribution points, including the Post Office in Reading Civic Centre.

There are around 100 partner agencies making referrals to Readifood. There has been a noticeable rise in the numbers of people having their benefits sanctioned, i.e. temporarily stopped whilst entitlement is reviewed. Readifood Co-ordinator, Malcolm, says, 'It is tragic that benefits are stopped whilst being reviewed rather than continued and only stopped if a problem is found.'

www.readifood.org.uk



ONE CAN TRUST, HIGH WYCOMBE

The striking thing about the One Can Trust is the clarity and coherence of its vision – to give LOVE. In deciding on a way forward initially, the OCT considered the Trussell Trust model, but decided against this in the end. OCT is an independent charity – cross cultural, cross-generational, all-inclusive – its values underpinned by Christian faith in action. Volunteers are of many faiths and of none. Local churches are used as pick-up points for food parcels (six so far with further ones planned across South Buckinghamshire). The Trust sees itself as a community, and aims constantly to build itself as a community, with everyone involved feeling equally a part of it: those who use the food bank, those who donate food and money, those who volunteer in a myriad of ways, and those involved in its governance. All are ‘can openers’ – part of a circle of support. As with other food banks, those who receive food sometimes become volunteers once their immediate crises are resolved.

OCT has developed a way of reaching those in rural areas in the environs of High Wycombe, though the main need is within the urban areas. Food is taken by agencies that perform home visits – and the food is either delivered by volunteers to the agencies, or picked up at OCT’s storage facility, hired from Big Yellow in the town. Referrals are by email.

The food bank offers pickup points on four days each week, with the opportunity for coffee and signposting to other organisations at some of the sessions. In 2011 OCT gave away 121 food parcels. In 2012 this increased to 850, and in 2013 to 2011. Food comes from churches, schools, supermarkets and local businesses as well as individuals. In 2013

82% of food bank users need one, two or three parcels only. The majority of these are unemployed and experiencing benefit delays.

Financial support comes from schools, churches, local businesses, independent regional funds (e.g. Comic Relief), and local government to cover OCT’s operational costs. The founder has a background in marketing, sales and business administration. Levels of community engagement are high, so very many people in the town know of the One Can Trust. In the beginning the project worked hard to reach out to businesses, schools and churches, but now the experience is that they come to OCT, though there is always a need to keep up the momentum.

The need is real, and is here to stay. But the project is constantly developing. ‘One Can Hope’ is the logical outgrowth of these plans – a new strand of work that aims to empower those with the most extreme need, linking these families with the skills and resources that are in plentiful supply within South Buckinghamshire. The plans include a drop-in centre and café, offering breakfast and support, a community choir (One Can Sing), learning gardens (One Can Grow) and other skills – and community-building initiatives. The local MP, Steve Baker, is actively involved and supportive, and took part in the parliamentary debate on emergency food aid with briefing by OCT. The Mayor of Wycombe has chosen OCT as his charity of the year, and he too is actively involved in bringing the community together around the work of OCT. Corporate support has come from Maritz, Tesco, Asda, Waitrose, Buckinghamshire Community Foundation, Starbucks, Barclays and Santander.

www.onecantrust.org.uk/one-can-foodbank

OXFORD FOOD BANK

Oxford Food Bank operates a model that contrasts markedly with that of individual emergency parcels of non-perishable foods. Majoring on the need to reduce food waste from supermarkets and wholesalers, the Oxford Food Bank distributes fresh produce to 50+ charities and community projects throughout the city. It operates 9 hours a day, seven days a week, diverting 3.5 to 4 tonnes of food per week from landfill, and enabling about 8000+ meals to be served to vulnerable people – eg asylum seekers, homeless people, mental health service users and children. It delivers food with a commercial value in excess of £750,000 per year.

Oxford Food Bank has a volunteer complement of over 120 people from right across the political/age spectrum (from 16 and 75), of all socio-economic backgrounds, the food bank also offers the opportunity for sociable and fulfilling participation. 'Our organisation provides a practical outlet for ordinary human decency' said Robin, co-director, continuing, 'It frustrates us that other places are not adopting this model. If Oxford can do it, any place can do it. We waste so much food in this country.'

The project is entirely voluntary, with no paid workers at all. It has never had government or

www.oxfordfoodbank.co.uk



local authority funding. Robin says, 'We raise our own funds and because we are entirely voluntary we can guarantee that for every £1 donated we create at least £25 of Food Benefit.' 75% of their funds come from individual continuing or 'one-off' donations. Fundraising is to pay depot rent, vehicle maintenance, fuel and insurance. 'We now offer a critical support function for the charities we help,' says David Cairns, the other co-director of the project. 'Many projects serve food to attract clients. Before we got involved, they would have to budget for fifty to sixty pence per meal per client. Now the charities can spend that money on their other specialised services, and the food they serve is nutritionally improved'.

Sophie, the Countess of Wessex, honoured the Oxford Food Bank with a royal visit in February 2014.

They are now linking with other food banks and community organisations to provide fresh healthy food parcels to those in most need.

Robin and David are willing to talk to anyone who would like to explore setting up a food bank along the lines of the Oxford model, in their areas.



BICESTER FOOD BANK

Bicester Food Bank is open every day from ten until midday. It is affiliated to the Trussell Trust, and has offered advice and support to other initiatives in the region – Abingdon, Didcot, Kidlington, Oxford, Chesham, Woodstock, all of which came to learn from Bicester, but set themselves up independently. Bicester finds the Trussell Trust link helpful as there are conferences at which volunteers and staff can meet others and exchange ideas for good practice.

In the year 2012/13 the food bank fed 1954 people. So far in 2013/14 (6 months in), it has fed 1300 people, so demand is up significantly. As an example, for the first two weeks of October, reasons for needing the food bank were as follows: debt, 100; benefit changes, 93; benefit delays, 97; low income, 85; homelessness, 53.

The food bank works with the Salvation Army drug and alcohol service, with the churches in Bicester (updating church leaders via the ecumenical Ministers' breakfast), and with the twenty five or so referral agencies that distribute vouchers, including church leaders, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, GP surgeries and family centre.

www.bicester.foodbank.org.uk

Four volunteers work each session. On Fridays there may be up to 21 families coming in, and there is an opportunity to sit and chat with the food bank users to see if there are any other needs that volunteers can help with. Originally the food bank was housed in a church hall, with food packaged when the client needed it, from a series of tables. The project is now based in an office building, with food housed in cupboards, so no longer displayed in full view. The 'frontage' is also now less obvious. Many people are embarrassed about coming in, and the more that can be done to mitigate those feelings, the better. The hope is that ultimately the food bank can offer cooking lessons, feed homeless people and to have a shop front in town with a cafe. Recently a link has been made with Oxford Food Bank, enabling Bicester to distribute fresh vegetables alongside the non-perishable foodstuffs.

Income for ongoing costs comes from private donations, council funding, churches and local businesses. There is a need constantly to maintain the public profile of the food bank, not least through communicating with the local community, and ensuring frequent features in the local press.



MILTON KEYNES FOOD BANK

Milton Keynes food bank is an independent project which began in 2004. It distributes food parcels 6 days per week from 5 different serving centres and runs a mobile service once a week to 8 different locations. Between 2010 and 2012 it saw a 70% increase in demand for its services, distributing 9000 food parcels in 2012.

During the Harvest season (Sept/Oct) half of the two hundred schools in Milton Keynes donate food – some 100,000 items. An initiative called, 'Big Little Give' just before Easter is another opportunity for people to give, and many do (some 20,000 items). The churches provide the backbone of givers, but they are not alone.

Key reasons for people needing the food bank are benefit-related problems (such as awaiting benefits starting, transitions between benefits), reduction in Council Tax Benefit, changes to Housing Benefit. The coming on stream of Universal Credit will also increase demand for the food bank, it is thought, and the Social Fund having moved under the auspices of the Local Authority has increased demand for food bank parcels.

www.mkfoodbank.org.uk

At Christmas time the food bank prepares some 322 hampers. Letters are written to all the different care agencies, and each agency can send ten nominations for receipt of hampers. The hampers are uniform, though they also include a small age-appropriate gift for children. This hamper scheme is supported by local businesses such as Volkswagen, Mercedes, and local Financial Services.

137 different professional care agencies (such as Citizens Advice Bureau, families centres, YMCA and GP surgeries) can refer people to the food bank. Churches and schools can also refer.

The food bank has just had to take on a second warehouse for storage, and there may be a need for a couple of additional distribution centres. Some three hundred people give £3 a month towards the on-costs. Local companies come in to help with serving, and sometimes give sponsorship. The Milton Keynes News runs four or five stories a year to keep the profile up, and the Milton Keynes Citizen made them 'charity of the year' recently. There are more than 70 volunteers working for the food bank.



WEST BERKS FOODBANK

The West Berks FoodBank was established in March 2013 as a Christians Together in the Newbury Area (CTNA) initiative, partnering with the Trussell Trust Food Bank Network. Existing food crisis schemes in the area had found that they could no longer cope with the increasing demand for their services and so, after researching the need, CTNA joined with Churches Together in Thatcham and Hungerford Churches Together to set-up an area-wide service as a registered charity. Opening before April 2013 was thought to be key due to the welfare reform changes being introduced at that time. There are two other food bank organisations that had already been set up in West Berkshire, namely Lambourn and Burghfield & Mortimer.

The food bank operates from three distribution centres inside churches in Newbury, Thatcham and Hungerford, and has a centralised warehouse, courtesy of a local charity, The Greenham Common Trust. They open 5 days a week across the three distribution centres for two hours every afternoon, and clients are referred using a voucher system by a network of 43 local agencies.

In its first year of operation the food bank distributed 1377 food parcels, each containing enough food for 3 days for each household, feeding 2988 people (2075 adults and 913 children). 51% of the parcels were given out due to benefit issues, including benefit sanctions which can leave households with a vastly reduced or no income for weeks or months at a time.

The food bank is wholly run and managed by over 100 volunteers, divided into the functions of distribution centres, warehouse, office and collections (food donations). So far, there has been no problem with recruiting help (or with having

enough food). The mission of feeding those who have nothing and who would otherwise go hungry seems to be one that many people want to respond to, both with and without any faith. Those working at the distribution centres are interviewed, and have initial and on-going training to ensure they are equipped to work alongside the whole range of people who come in for help.

Volunteers share a cup of tea or coffee with clients who come in, and offer a listening ear to those who want to share their difficulties. They also actively signpost people for help or advice with their particular issues if they are not already getting this support but feel in need of it. The centre is not just about giving out food and is an opportunity to show care and kindness, and perhaps re-ignite hope, with people who are in food crisis.

From January 2013 to March 2014 over 40 tonnes of food has been donated. The collections team gather the food into the warehouse from churches, local businesses and organisations, schools, and permanent supermarket collection bins in addition to organising special weekend collections at local supermarkets. Each church has a food bank representative who takes news of the food bank back to their congregations to increase a sense of ownership and the collections manager keeps everyone up-to-date with current shortages and developments.

They have found that, particularly during the winter months, many who come for a food parcel cannot cook what they receive because of fuel poverty and so the food parcel items must be chosen to accommodate this. This is still a gap in provision that has not been addressed since the abolition of crisis loans. Similarly, people looking for work struggle to

afford the phone and travel costs associated with job searches and interviews, but must comply with their job centre requirements to avoid facing benefit sanctions.

There is a preconception amongst some clients that the food bank is a government scheme or that the supermarkets donate all the food. They are humbled when they learn that it has been provided by people in

their own community and that we are all volunteers, and often promise to donate or volunteer themselves once they get back on their feet financially.

Potential developments for the future include a mobile distribution centre to reach isolated communities in the rural areas of West Berkshire and extension into the east of our district by establishing a distribution centre around Calcot.

www.westberks.foodbank.org.uk

A SNAPSHOT OF THE FUTURE: WHAT NEXT?

It is a gospel imperative to look after those in need, so giving food to the hungry is basic to Christianity and has been for over two thousand years. However, as explored at the beginning of this publication, such support can be problematic and perplexing. Emergency food aid is, and should be, exactly that: a short term crisis intervention. Those who run emergency food aid initiatives are well aware of this. No-one I encountered was satisfied with food banks as 'the answer' to the problem of hunger in our wealthy society. On the contrary, many were worried and concerned that, whilst helping individuals, they may be fuelling a larger political problem by colluding with injustice and letting the government off the hook for leaving

many of its people without the means to feed themselves and their families.

At the 'Beyond Food Banks' gathering, this was most powerfully expressed by Liz Dowler, Professor of Food and Social Policy at the University of Warwick when she said this, '*...People need sustainable livelihoods rather than insecure poorly paid work, and social welfare benefits which offer dignity and sufficiency rather than penalties and indebtedness....systematising the dependent impoverishment of significant numbers of our citizens to an ineffectual, disempowering, food handout, under a mantra of "choice and responsibility" and the Big Society, is deeply questionable. What is needed is food justice, not food charity.*'

RESPONDING TO STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

In 2013 the Church Urban Fund carried out research amongst Anglican parishes, 'Hungry for More: Church-based Responses to Food Poverty'. The survey found that the current focus is on emergency activities, such as food banks, rather than work that seeks to address underlying causes (see opposite).

CUF speculates, 'There may be several reasons for these results: food banks are relatively cheap to set up, do not require specific professional expertise to deliver and they help to meet an immediate need. Churches may also feel unsure about how to address structural problems such as the rising cost of living, low income or benefit changes.' In summary, the report identified three strands of intervention: relief, rehabilitation and development – urging churches to move from the first to the second and third strands. Evidence gathered from the Diocese of Oxford suggests that such developments are already well underway, though – as CUF points out – there are certain necessary interventions that cannot be made at local level, but only by national government.

- 81% of respondents indicated that their parish church supports a food bank, in one or more ways.
- Just 30% of churches are running an organised activity to address one or more causes of food poverty (examples might include bulk buying of fresh food to bring down prices, or the development of food growing initiatives and allotments).
- The majority (62%) of food banks have been running for less than two years – indicating the rapid growth of the food bank network in recent years.
- Specific gaps currently exist in church-based activities to tackle the causes of food poverty. For example, 67% of respondents say that the rising cost of living is a 'major' or 'significant' problem in their parish, but just 3% of churches are providing an organised response to that problem and just 24% are responding informally.

ANALYSIS AND ADVOCACY

Food bank activity, therefore, is not about the unquestioning distribution of emergency food aid. It involves addressing the associated issues that cause crisis situations. A crucial component of this is giving voice to these experiences and telling the stories in a political context. To quote Liz Dowler again, 'We need voices from the ground, telling it "like it is", to those with power to change things. We need "hybrid" food and community initiatives, where people engage in policy analysis and advocacy as well as offering a practical, ground-level response, with voice, creative ideas and shared possibilities for action. Those receiving, or working as volunteers & partners, can be powerful advocates raising structural issues and challenging the state's avoidance of responsibility and leadership. There is great potential for both local churches and local governments, in articulating the problems, promoting the Living Wage and proper contracts, and addressing food needs. Most of all we also need central government to take the issue seriously.'

The stories from food banks in Oxford Diocese clearly demonstrate that a web of needs surrounds each voucher and referral. Hunger is isolating, but never isolated. There is a need for work that is fulfilling and pays a living wage; there are disability and health issues; attendant caring responsibilities and stresses, not to mention domestic abuse and other relationship difficulties. And there is also a web of structural issues: long-term poverty, the vagaries of the benefits system, benefit sanctions, and the fact that public services are no longer the 'sure foundation' that enables people to feel secure in our society, but the shifting sand that may at any moment perpetuate a personal disaster. Having a job no longer guarantees a regular or sufficient income to sustain a household, especially since the growth of zero hours contracts.

There are also wider cultural issues, such as attitudes to money: why we have become a society in which people cannot function well without credit and debt, and in which food, though crucial to life, has been relegated to the end of the household budget list – only affordable after debts, rent, utilities and council tax have been paid. And the even bigger picture is that of the global systems of production, distribution and pricing of food; the global marketplace and its impact on affordability and quality.

Challenging unjust structures is therefore crucial. We immediately trip up on issues of power: who has it and who doesn't, and choice: who is allowed it and who isn't. Where are we placed as churches in these power structures? How are we using the power we have – through our members and our leaders, to create change for the better?

As churches we need to critique the so-called 'common sense' rhetoric around poverty and choice (as has been done very effectively by the Joint Public Issues Team in their publication, 'Truth and Lies about poverty, see www.jointpublicissues.org.uk). For example, much is made in discussions about food banks, of poor people 'not knowing how to cook with cheap ingredients to make nutritious food'. The main issue, of course, is that people use food banks because they have nothing. And you can't create something out of nothing. But that aside, many successful professionals cannot cook either, but it is wealth alone that protects them from scrutiny. There is a need to equip all citizens with a basic knowledge of cooking and good nutrition, and to facilitate access to fresh food – particularly in areas of economic deprivation which have become 'food deserts'.

GRACEFUL INTERVENTIONS: A SNAPSHOT OF CHRISTIAN REFLECTION



As a faith community, the Christian churches are called to ‘go deeper’: to reflect prayerfully; to look beyond the simple acts of giving, collecting, and distributing food. To mine the deeper significance behind warehouses of perishables and non-perishables, and the logistics of food bank organisation. Where is God in all of this, and how is our faith reshaped as we encounter extreme vulnerability amongst our fellow citizens?

In his theory of Gift (see *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*), Lewis Hyde offers a fascinating anthropological insight into how gifts work. He suggests that there are two economies at work in any society – the trade economy and the gift economy. While the sale of a commodity (trade) leaves no necessary connection between people, a gift establishes a bond of fellow-feeling. Where gifts are agents of social cohesion, mutuality and interdependence, trade keeps spheres independent.

Setting aside the economic questions of what happens if a trade economy is flooded with gifts (potentially skewing markets), Hyde’s theory offers us insights into the potential value of food bank activity beyond its practicality. Interestingly, in folklore food is one of the most common images for gifts.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus understood his own identity in terms of the bestowal of a gift. He talked of himself in terms of food and drink that must be consumed – he said he was ‘the bread of life’ and ‘the living bread that came down from heaven.’ He was always feeding people, sometimes in their thousands, and he broke the Sabbath rules to assuage hunger, angry that religion was getting in the way of a free-flowing gift. Jesus gave his own body and blood to his friends to eat and drink in the symbolic form of bread and wine at the Last Supper, saying, ‘Whoever eats me will live because of me.’ And he gave his life in real terms at the crucifixion. The purpose of that gift

was to restore connection; to dissolve the boundary between the divine and the human.

Food banks remove food from the trade economy and claim it for the gift economy, dissolving boundaries between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', the 'us' and 'them' of our brutal contemporary rhetoric about 'the poor', building community and intimacy. Although we must work for justice in the trade economy, we also invest in the gift economy because it is an investment in compassion. Though we are awash with necessary statistics about numbers of food parcels divvied up and families fed, the real impact of food bank activity is that it subverts and transgresses the values of a state that treats those in need as supplicants, not as agents, and that values only what can be counted. An older theory of the gift economy, that of Marcel Mauss, suggests that a compulsion is created in the receiver of a gift to reciprocate. Whilst some suggest this creates a 'power over' relationship, or a feeling of indebtedness, Mauss's theory is more a social theory than a theory of individuals, exploring the bonds created between groups. It explains how solidarity is built between groups of people. It is a common experience of food bank volunteers that users feel moved to reciprocate once their immediate crisis is over – either by donating food themselves, volunteering, or both. In other words, the formerly separate groupings of 'recipients' and 'donors' become fluid and porous. 'Grace' is Christian theology's equivalent to 'gift'. The gift of God's love is given free – without 'strings'. Because of that, it evokes reciprocation, but does not compel it.

We conclude with a real life 'parable'. The Mail on Sunday (MOS) chose Easter Day 2014 to 'infiltrate' a food bank and 'expose' purportedly lax systems that allowed an undercover journalist to walk away with

free food without going through the identity checks he would have been put through to receive public money. Clearly the MOS expected moral outrage amongst the public hoping, presumably, to incite indignation amongst hard working families about the undeserving poor, gaining freebies that should not have been due to them. The opposite happened. Public outrage was directed towards the MOS and its journalist for lying to the Citizen's Advice Bureau then, in effect, stealing from the food bank. The result was an additional £50,000 in donations to the Trussell Trust. Generosity triumphed over mean-minded persecution of those in greatest need. The message, *'There but for the grace of God go I'*, had rightly won over, *'It could never happen to me.'*

Nigel Webster from the food bank in question (Bestwood and Bulwell in Nottingham) said at the time, *'Is it not something to be celebrated when communities come together to help the weakest? Should our first instinct be to help, or should we turn away those who struggle to feed their children because they cannot provide what the likes of the Mail on Sunday would consider to be adequate information? We will always err on the side of compassion. We do not want to see a single person or family in this city go hungry. We look forward to the day when every employer pays at least a living wage and every payday lender and loan shark has gone out of business. A day when people can live in their homes without the threat of violence, and a day when the whole of our society treats the poor, the sick, and the disabled with the respect they deserve. Until that day we will continue, along with many of you reading this, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, help the sick, and set the oppressed free.'*

CONCLUSIONS

This publication has sketched something of the current situation in the Thames Valley with regard to food poverty and attempts to alleviate its immediate effects. It has explored something of the churches' contribution to this task, and reflected on some of the reasons why, for Christians, making sure people have enough to eat is a key component of our faith.

We can pull out the following suggestions for further work on food poverty that, as Christians, we might take up:

- Collect stories of food bank users' lived reality in contemporary Britain, and advocate for the vulnerable by telling those stories in the public square.
- Challenge punitive, inaccurate and unfair representations in the media and elsewhere about those in crisis situations of need.
- Campaign for measures that will promote affordable and nutritious food for all socio-economic groups, good work, and sustainable forms of food production and exchange.
- Campaign against social systems and structures that force people into situations of crisis (eg financial exclusion and debt, benefit sanctions, changes to the welfare system that discriminate against those with disabilities, unacceptably low wage levels and insecure work contracts).
- Converse about faith! Reflect on and discuss how your involvement in food poverty initiatives is challenging and changing you, your experience of God and of one another.

CONTACT US



As a diocese, we will continue to develop our evidence gathering and thinking about food poverty. If you have read this publication, know of a food initiative that isn't mentioned, and would like to

tell us about it, please email alison.webster@oxford.anglican.org

If you would like to join the growing email network of those working to combat food poverty, please simply send us an email with that request.

In particular, we would like to know:

- What initiative are you involved in? How does it work and what are you aiming to achieve?
- What changes do you see, in terms of your own project and the context in which you are working?
- What trends are you noticing?

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RESOURCES AND USEFUL WEBSITES

For more theological reflection on food banks, the Mission Theology Advisory Group have produced a paper, see bit.ly/CofE-mission-theology

For Discussions at parish level, the Joint Public Issues Team (Methodist, United Reformed and Baptist Churches, and the Church of Scotland) has produced a resource publication, *'Faith in Food Banks? Resources for Churches'*, includes a brief introduction to why there has been an increase in food bank numbers; facts and fiction; what people can do (including practical, political and prayer); six Bible studies; and resources for all-age worship and prayer. See www.jointpublicissues.org.uk.

For the DEFRA report on food banks, 'Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid', see bit.ly/food-security-uk

Trussell Trust www.trusselltrust.org

Church Action on Poverty: www.church-poverty.org.uk, especially the publication, 'Walking the Breadline', and the campaign, 'Britain Isn't Eating'.

Church Urban Fund: www.cuf.org.uk, especially the report, 'Hungry for More'.

Oxfam: bit.ly/oxfam-action, see campaigns on the living wage, welfare cuts, and decent work.

Responses to food poverty through teaching people to cook, and reducing food waste, see www.cancook.co.uk.

Also www.foodforlife.org.uk.

Food poverty blog: www.foodpoverty.wordpress.com

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every sale, purchase, and payment must be properly documented to ensure the integrity of the financial statements. This includes recording the date, amount, and purpose of each transaction.

Next, the document outlines the process of reconciling bank statements with the company's internal records. This step is crucial for identifying any discrepancies and ensuring that the books are in balance. It involves comparing the ending balance of the bank statement with the ending balance of the cash account in the general ledger.

The document also covers the preparation of the income statement, which shows the company's revenues, expenses, and net income over a specific period. It provides a clear picture of the company's profitability and is essential for management decision-making.

Finally, the document discusses the importance of reviewing the financial statements for errors and omissions. It stresses that a thorough review is necessary to ensure that the information presented is accurate and reliable. This includes checking for proper classification of expenses and correct calculation of totals.

Why is emergency food aid provision growing rapidly in one of the most prosperous regions of the UK?

The Thames Valley is the home of dreaming spires and pretty Cotswold villages; of shiny shopping centres, designer outlets and the most expensive schools and restaurants in the country. Yet many are hungry. *999 Food* celebrates the fact that Christians of all denominations are working to mitigate the immediate effects of food poverty. It looks at seven projects in detail, exploring how they work, who uses food banks and why. This publication addresses the issues of structural injustice that underpin the need for emergency food aid, and calls for advocacy, campaigning and Christian reflection, alongside action. In short, to feed the hungry, but also to ask why the hungry have no food.

“ *This is extraordinary. Brilliant. Useful.*’ **Eli Merchant, One Can Trust, High Wycombe**

“ *An excellent piece of work. The stories are extremely powerful, even those that are told in just a few lines.*’ **Anne Richards, Mission and Public Affairs Division, Church of England**

“ *The detailing of so many different kinds of responses to problems of food poverty is extremely useful. The accessible prose really helps make some very thoughtful and complex points for the reader.*’ **Professor of Geography, Queen Mary University of London**

“ *999 Food is very powerful. The stories in particular are as ever, just shocking.*’ **Rachel Lampard, Policy Adviser, Methodist Church**

Food Matters
connecting faith and food

LIVING FAITH MAKING A DIFFERENCE
IN THE WORLD

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