

## 999 Food

### Reflecting on the justice issues surrounding the growth in emergency food aid

**Jean works three twelve hour shifts a week in a residential care home. The company she works for have not paid her for two and a half months, due to a range of 'administrative errors' (theirs). In the run-up to Christmas Jean attends a community food project in Oxford – her only source of food. Her daughter has just graduated, and has returned home to look for work. She is waiting for her Job Seeker's Allowance claim to be processed. Jean is also a full-time student of business studies – her work funds her studies. There is no money in their household for bus fares or heating. Because of her employer's error, she has lost her right to pay her council tax by direct debit, and is in debt to her landlord.**

**Justin'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.**

**Sam and his partner have sanctioned from benefits for four weeks. He has no job, no home and is staying with relations or in a tent.**

These are three typical stories from food bank projects in the Diocese of Oxford. The evidence we have collected 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. 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.

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, 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. Food banks are not 'the answer' to the problem of hunger in our wealthy society. Many are worried 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.

Liz Dowler, Professor of Food and Social Policy at the University of Warwick says 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.’

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 and 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 government, 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 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.

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](http://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’.

As a faith community, the Christian churches are called to ‘go deeper’: to reflect prayerfully; to look beyond the simple act 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?

Alison Webster is Social Responsibility Adviser for the Diocese of Oxford, and author of '999 Food: Emergency Food Aid in the Thames Valley' (see [www.foodmatters.org.uk/999-food](http://www.foodmatters.org.uk/999-food) )