

# The Impact of Volunteering upon Volunteers' Faith: Responding to Holiday Hunger



Dr Stephanie Denning

[stephanie.denning@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.denning@coventry.ac.uk)

@SJ\_Denning

Illustrations by Beth Waters

**Coventry**  
University



**Research Centre**  
Trust, Peace and  
Social Relations

# The Impact of Volunteering upon Volunteers' Faith

- There has been attention in the social sciences and voluntary sector to **how religious faith can motivate volunteering**
- But there has been a **lack of attention on how volunteering can impact a person's faith**. This is important to understand if:
  - Faith as action is to be taken seriously
  - If volunteers are to be retained then we need to understand how volunteers are affected by their experiences
- Explored here in the context of a TLG MakeLunch holiday hunger project

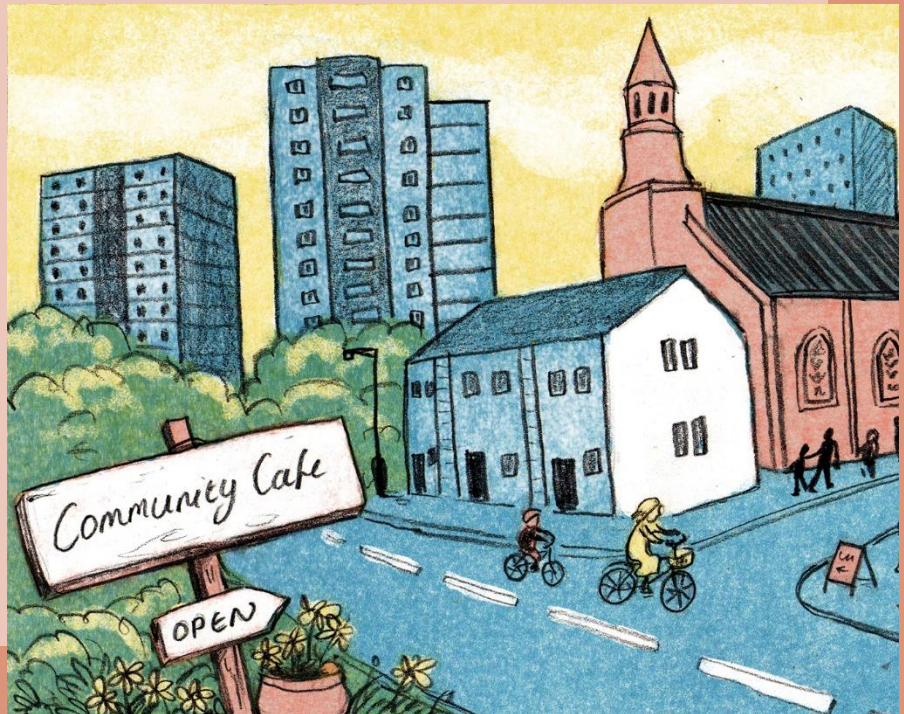


# Social sciences and voluntary sector research on faith and volunteering

- Social science and voluntary sector research has focused on **why people volunteer**, often through qualitative studies
- Attention should also be given to **volunteering experiences**. Current research considers:
  - One-off international volunteering
  - How people act out their faith in their lives Social action, discipleship
- **Persistence in volunteering**: a continual process of motivation, action and reflection

# Faith-based social action

- What is a faith-based organisation?
  - Not one single 'type' of faith-based organisation
  - Different approaches of faith-based organisations to responding to need
- The role of faith-based organisations in society
- A question remains over what impact taking part in faith-based social action has upon a person's faith



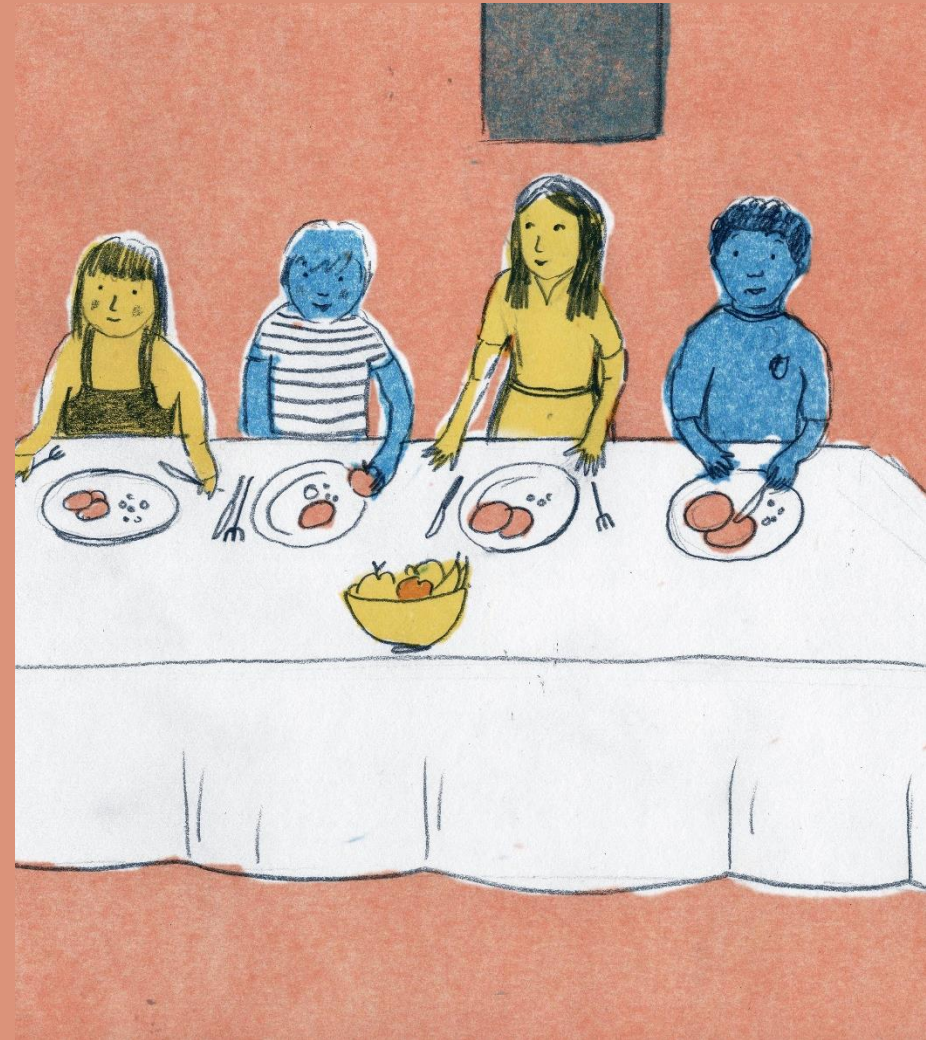
# Research context: Responding to holiday hunger

- Holiday hunger: when children do not have enough to eat in the school holidays
  - Estimated 3 million children at risk of holiday hunger in the UK (APPG Hunger, 2017)
- TLG is a Christian charity that through its MakeLunch programme has over 60 Lunch Kitchens across the UK
  - Lunch Kitchens give children a free hot and healthy meal, and play time
  - I established and ran one Lunch Kitchen over 20 months





# The Lunch project: play and food



# The impact of volunteering at Lunch on volunteers' faith



Volunteers referred to volunteering impacting upon their faith in two dominant ways:

1. Encouragement and challenge of volunteering at a faith-based project where there was not explicit faith content for the children
2. The challenge of offering an unconditional welcome



# 1. Faith-based volunteering without explicit faith content





# Faith-based volunteering without explicit faith content: encouragement

- Volunteers who were encouraged in their faith by volunteering at Lunch predominantly understood their **volunteering as an expression of God's love**
- Their experiences at Lunch therefore **reaffirmed their faith motivation**
- These volunteers specifically perceived the **lack of evangelism as positive**





“It feels totally with integrity that you can do that sort of activity [Lunch] for the sake of giving the kids a good time, giving them a good experience,

giving them some food, without having any sort of preachy element to it at all, but that whole activity in itself is an expression of the Gospel in action. So I felt the impact upon my faith was to feel reassured it was a really good expression of my faith.”

(Daniel, volunteer, interview September 2016)



# Faith-based volunteering without explicit faith content: challenge

- A minority of Lunch volunteers shared they were challenged by the lack of religious content for the children
  - These volunteers tended to come from more evangelical backgrounds than the majority of volunteers who were liberal Anglicans
- In particular, these volunteers were challenged over whether there needed to be Biblical teaching for the children

“And so I used to question is this really doing what I'm meant to be doing here? Am I really saying God's name enough here today, to these children? To make them understand? And someone went ‘no Anna you're missing the point. You're actually doing something and that's seen as God's work enough’, do you know what I mean?”

Just because you're not reading the Bible out to them it doesn't mean you're not doing God's work.”

(Anna, volunteer, interview  
October 2016)





"I wouldn't know it was a Christian event if I was an observer"

Henry, volunteer, diary (August 2016)





## 2. An unconditional welcome?





# An unconditional welcome? For volunteers

- Inspired by Christian teaching on unconditional love, I aimed to value volunteers in their different capacities and welcome anyone who wanted to volunteer
- Other volunteers recognised this aim and reflected on this themselves in diary writing...

“She’s a remarkable woman... [but] in the context of the kitchen she’s very slow and not terribly mobile, and at times I was aware of having to rein in my frustration...

as I was getting the pizzas out of the oven, these lovely creations the children had made, I dropped some of the them on the floor (rushing, probably)... these were individually named pizzas. Big problem.”...

(Violet, volunteer diary, October 2015)





“So she stood, hiding me and whispered to just pick them up... In the end she saved my bacon (to say nothing of the children’s lunch and their feelings if their special pizza had been the one to go) – another person might have insisted they had to be binned.”

(Violet, volunteer diary, October 2015)



# An unconditional welcome? For volunteers



- However, not everyone that wanted to volunteer could be welcomed due to **safeguarding**
- There was also unprompted reflection in volunteers' diaries over whether **collective prayer** was inclusive for volunteers



# An unconditional welcome? For children

- For volunteers who understood their volunteering as an expression of God's unconditional love, there was then a **challenge in what it meant to give unconditionally at Lunch**
- Is it possible to give unconditionally?
- This results in questions over what **expectations** were put upon the children attending Lunch, and how volunteers expected the children to appear:

“Difficult to gauge how essential the lunch part is for the children. Would they really ‘go hungry’? How many?”

(Jack, volunteer diary,  
August 2015)

# An unconditional welcome? For children

- Some volunteers expressed concern about Lunch **being taken advantage of**, to which another responded:

“My immediate response was that Christian faith is all about being taken for a ride – in the sense that when you offer things with no strings attached perhaps others will take advantage, but that shouldn’t stop you from doing what your faith requires of you.”

(Camilla, volunteer, diary August 2015)



# Conclusions

- There is a need to extend the question of how faith can motivate volunteering to how volunteering can then impact upon a person's faith
  - This needs to be explored in a wider range of contexts
- At Lunch, volunteering impacted upon volunteers' faith in two ways:
  1. Encouragement and challenge of volunteering at a faith-based project that was without explicit faith content
  2. The challenge of giving an unconditional welcome

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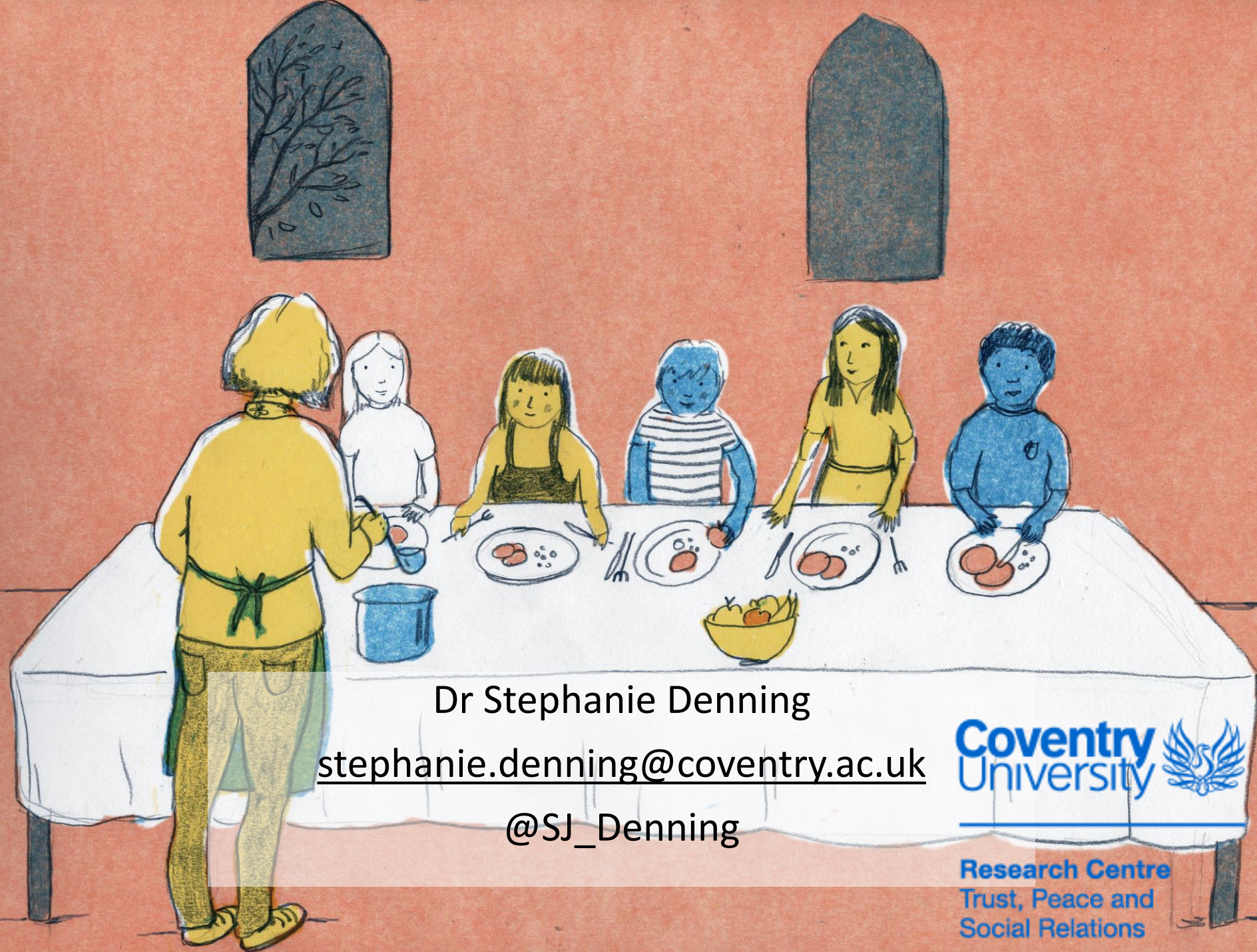
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