

This weekend, an army of volunteers will set to work on preparing Christmas Day lunches organised by Church of England parishes. Lifts will be provided, potatoes peeled and supermarket surplus food delivered for meals where whole communities will sit down to eat together - from homeless people to isolated carers, young families and people struggling to afford food bills over Christmas. For many churches the meal is a continuation of support they provide all year. We talked to priests and pioneer ministers across the country about their plans.

Heston Groenewald, vicar of All Hallows' Church in Leeds, is preparing to receive 120 guests this Christmas at a community lunch. The meal will be prepared using supermarket surplus food sourced through The Real Junk Food Project. The church already hosts a Real Junk Food Café twice a week in the church hall.

'It is heart-breaking to see how much food is thrown away by supermarkets – over the course of last year our little café used 15 tonnes of surplus food - but especially at Christmas time. Last year we served up 'waste' turkey, duck, ham, chicken and nut roasts with all the trimmings, followed by pudding and the biggest cheeseboard I've ever seen. We had more than enough food for more than 100 of us to go home with seconds and thirds. The meal is a brilliant catalyst for community-building: the first hour of lunch preparation is done by Muslim and Jewish chefs while Christmas worship takes place. It also inspires generosity and friendship. Last year Syrian chefs created a 'festive fusion feast', and this year they are bringing delicious Middle Eastern desserts as their Christmas gift. We have been inundated with people volunteering their time and energy to share Christmas Day, to help 'feed bellies not bins' and to create space for neighbours to meet and become friends. Last year was a little bit of a Christmas miracle - and we're hoping and praying for another.'

Sara and Barney Barron, pioneer ministers on the Leigh Park estate in Havant, near Portsmouth, are organising the third Christmas meal at Park Community School on the estate, where an estimated 30,000 people live. Their posts are partly funded from the Strategic Development Fund, part of the Church of England's Renewal and Reform programme.

'At the moment we have around 120 people booked but we are expecting a few more at the last minute. We have a number of local funders and businesses for the Christmas Day meal, so we are able to provide people with a really decent Christmas dinner, personalised presents and entertainment. We didn't want to be taking home people after lunch to be on their own. After lunch, we will have inflatables for the children, Christmas films and a quiet area for grownups with newspapers, magazines and coffee. Our whole ethos is working in solidarity with the local community - the people that come into help are often people who are on their own. A whole range of people come to the lunch. Everybody sits and eats together from rough sleepers to a headteacher and local councillors. We have people on their own and single parents with small children. It's an area of high economic deprivation so some people come because they can't afford a Christmas dinner. People ask why we 'sacrifice' our Christmas Day and our family day – but it is a real joy to do this. There is a real sense of the Kingdom of God in this meal, with such a range of people sitting down around the table to eat together.'

Christine Threlfall, priest-in-charge of Broughton Team Ministry in Salford, started a food pantry and food club earlier this year using supplies from the FareShare charity and a local food bank. The church will host a Christmas lunch for the first time this year.

'Lack of money is a huge issue in our parish, people are struggling to pay the bills and put food on the table. The food pantry is open six hours a week. We have 35 customers and it works by allowing people to choose 10 items for £2.50. The savings make a massive difference to people with very little or no disposable incomes. While the shop is open, three times a week, we hold a lunch club for around 25 people. With no spare cash, local people can't access help, especially if the help is a bus fare or taxi ride away. We offer computer access, emergency food packs and a Place of Welcome because local people need help.

On Christmas Day there are no buses and the taxis charge double. We are fortunate that we have found grants to help us pay for transport and a Christmas meal on Christmas Day. The thought of people being isolated on Christmas Day is what has led us to host a Christmas Day lunch this year. I could not bear to eat Christmas lunch with my family in the vicarage knowing that a few metres away people were alone.'

The food pantry and lunch club received support from Church Urban Fund.

Liz Bloomer, churchwarden of St Michael and All Angels Church in Stourport, Worcestershire, will coordinate a communal lunch in the Parish room for the third year this Christmas.

"We are expecting around 40 guests and probably as many volunteers. This year we opened a dementia café in the church and some of the people who attend together with their carers will be coming along too for the Christmas lunch. We have at least two people who live on their own and are housebound so we will be taking them Christmas dinner at home. The local supermarkets are donating food and people living in the area are offering their services including providing lifts, welcoming guests as they arrive and serving guests. The lunch really captures the imagination of people in the community and volunteers come from all round the town. The hardest part, for us, is making contact with people who may need us, but as this is now becoming a tradition at our church, the word is quickly spreading. We are trying to make it as much like a family Christmas as we can. This year, for the first time, we have musicians coming to entertain us."

St James' Church in Devizes will be providing Christmas lunch for more than 40 people for the second year running in its parish centre this Christmas. Lifts are provided for people to come either before or after the church service on Christmas Day. The food is provided through donations from the congregation or from local supermarkets followed by entertainments including carol singing, games and a magic show from a magician who is a member of the congregation. Those attending including people from The Noise project, set up by the church where volunteers work in the community on schemes such as garden clearance and cleaning.





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