

Liberation and Entrapment Project Mission and Food Banks

Version: 01

Last updated: 29 November 2017

Author: Anne Richards and the Mission Theology Advisory Group

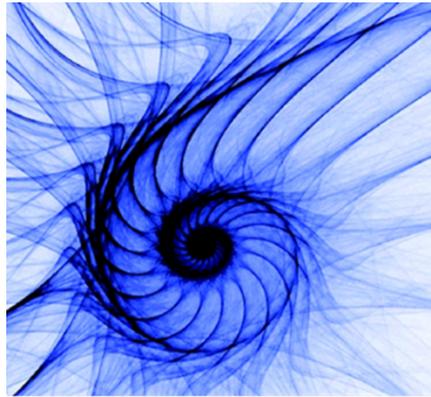


THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

Table of Contents

Food banks – a theological reflection	4
<i>'Rosie's' story</i>	4
<i>The context</i>	5
<i>What are food banks?</i>	6
<i>One local picture: Thurrock</i>	8
<i>Beginning a theological approach to food banks</i>	9
<i>Mission</i>	12
<i>Hunger</i>	15
<i>Anticipation and Stewardship</i>	19
<i>Almsgiving</i>	21
<i>Feeding</i>	22
<i>Eucharist</i>	24
<i>Power and powerlessness</i>	25
<i>Gift and Trade</i>	26
<i>Some questions surrounding food banks</i>	29
<i>Conclusion</i>	35
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	38
<i>References</i>	38
<i>Resources</i>	40

The Mission Theology Advisory Group is an
ecumenical group formed in partnership between
Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and the
Church of England



We provide resources in the areas of Spirituality,
Theology, Reconciliation, Evangelism and Mission

This resource belongs to our Theology series.
Please print and share.

Food banks – a theological reflection

'Rosie's' story¹

My husband was lucky, I thought. When he lost his job as an office worker, he got another one almost straight away at a store that was opening up. But then the store started to cut his hours until he was only working about half the week. Before long, he wasn't making enough money for us to cover the bills, and my part time job was not making up the shortfall. After a few months of tightening our belts, we realised that we would have to cut drastically if we were going to be able to pay our rent on our flat. At that point, we started to think we would have to start choosing between eating, heating our flat or paying the rent and other bills. We had to put the children first and soon we were giving them what we could afford in food and eating whatever they left, which was often nothing. We felt miserable all the time and ashamed that we could no longer pay our way. Family and neighbours were kind to us, but we still couldn't make ends meet.

I got depressed and went to the doctor, where I just sat and cried, I felt so hopeless. How could we both be working but not able to pay our way or look after our children? I was terrified they might be taken into care. The doctor gave me vouchers for the food bank and said I wasn't to be ashamed as loads of people were in exactly the same position.

So I went to the food bank and a lady gave me three days food: sugar, biscuits, pasta, tinned meals, that sort of thing – and also they had some nappies and baby wipes. I was so relieved. When we sat down and had our first filling meal for weeks, we were so grateful. But the worry and embarrassment is still there. We still feel like we failed, when we never wanted hand-outs from anybody. What will happen to us in the future?

¹ The identity of the person who entrusted us with this story has been changed. 'Rosie' was helped by one of the Thurrock food bank centres (see below).

The context

In 2013, the New Policy Institute, an independent UK think-tank, reported that in 2011-2012, 13 million people in the UK were living in poverty. Significantly, more than half of these people lived in a working family.² The research suggested that increasing numbers of people were not able to sustain themselves adequately, even if, like Rosie's family, they were in work and receiving income, but instead sinking into poverty and getting trapped there.³ The economic and social factors contributing to this issue are complex, but broadly, the rising cost of living, coupled with changes to the benefit system and a delay in receiving benefits, has meant that the safety net of the welfare system, intended to assist the UK's poorest people, seems to have developed more and more holes through which people now fall into extreme difficulty. People like Rosie, who expected to live adequately within their means, now find themselves struggling with mounting debt or inability to pay bills.

Inevitably, this political issue has generated news of scandal, blame and denial, with much dispute about the accuracy of data, about the causes of the problems, and about the solutions. In February 2014, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, told the *Telegraph* newspaper that 'the basic safety net, that was there to guarantee that people would not be left in hunger or in destitution, has actually been torn apart.'⁴ Following this, 27 Anglican bishops and a significant number of other signatories from Methodist and United Reformed Churches and the Quakers wrote a letter to the *Daily Mirror*,⁵ arguing that 'there is an acute moral imperative to act'

² Macinnes, T., *et al.*, (2013) *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2013*, New Policy Institute (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation) p.26.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10639015/New-Cardinal-Vincent-Nichols-welfare-cuts-frankly-a-disgrace.html>

⁵ Online at: www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/27-bishops-slam-david-camerons-3164033

and 'a national crisis', calling on the government to act and for support for a campaign called End Hunger Fast,⁶ linked to the season of Lent.

Yet what are we to make of this intervention by religious leaders to show solidarity with those who are suffering? In the midst of the political arguments and counter-arguments about how welfare and poverty are related, there is still Rosie, working, bringing up a family, trying to make ends meet, but failing. What actual difference can our contribution make to her situation right now? As citizens we have rights at the ballot box and the ability to act within our own communities, but in addition where should we place our anger, our bewilderment, our frustration and our despair? And if we are comfortably off, reading about Rosie, feeling sorry for her, but still a long way from experiencing her depression and anxiety, does our anger and despair really mean anything? Does Christian faith require us to write to the *Daily Mirror*, or do our theological tools equip us for other kinds of speech and action? How are we, as Christians, to respond to Rosie's question 'What will happen to us in the future?'

This paper concentrates on the small oasis in Rosie's difficulties, the food bank, in order to try and find where God exists in absence: the absence of food, the absence of hope, and in the shame, misery and perplexity felt by people like Rosie, our neighbour.

What are food banks?

The New Policy Institute said in its report that 'The cost of food and the number of people using food banks has become one of the most powerful stories of the current period of austerity'.⁷ It was a food bank which gave Rosie her small lifeline, but what are food banks, how do they work, and how are they powerful stories?

⁶ www.endhungerfast.co.uk/

⁷ Macinnes, T., *et al.*, (2013) *op.cit.*, p. 22.

Food banks are charitable ventures which collect and supply essential, non-perishable consumables through an outlet to people in need and they are often run by volunteers. Many churches and charities have started up foodbanks but more than 300 are operated by a charity called the Trussell Trust, which aims eventually to place a food bank in every town in the UK.⁸ Some food banks are connected to large supermarkets which make available items of food which would otherwise be binned. Food is also collected and donated by members of the community, including through schemes where people buy one or two small extra items for their local food bank when they go to the supermarket.

Food banks are typically staffed by volunteers from the local area who sort, pack and distribute the food. Many of these volunteers are Christians, since Christian charities have a significant place in food bank provision but food banks draw volunteers from all faiths and all kinds of people of good will, working alongside each other. In fact perhaps one of the ways food banks create 'powerful stories' is in the way people of many faiths have come together, sharing their time, effort and experiences, getting to know one another and serving others together.

How people receive food varies. Most (though not necessarily all) have some form of referral system, although every effort is usually made to help people who arrive directly through hardship. With Trussell Trust food banks, doctors and social workers may identify people in need and issue them with vouchers which can be exchanged at the food bank for three days emergency supply of food.⁹

The Trussell Trust reports that in 2012-2013 it fed 346,992 people.¹⁰

However, when thinking about food banks, it is worth becoming acquainted with the Trussell Trust, and with the personality and vision of its founders. The Trussell Trust is informed by its vision,

⁸ [http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/Press/TrussellTrustFood banksMay2013Small.pdf](http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/Press/TrussellTrustFood%20banksMay2013Small.pdf)

⁹ However, in some places, so many people are booking appointments with doctors to ask for vouchers that this is placing pressure on healthcare provision. The way access to food banks is controlled creates stress on all parts of the social care infrastructure. See, for example, Mirror news online 27th January 2014 at www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/food-banks-hungry-families-pleading-3065044#.UufbKBBFDcs

¹⁰ www.trusselltrust.org/foodbank-projects

passion and its beginnings in a determination to help ‘forgotten people’. Building on Matthew 25.35-36, the Trust claims ‘to believe that everyone has the right to have food on their plate, dignity, skills, a chance to work and hope for the future’. So the Trussell Trust may now be identified with *food*, but its essential vision is wider, not just about Rosie’s family dinner today, but about her ability to care for her family in the future.¹¹ One question we might immediately ask is whether the focus on food banks and food-need in fact has eclipsed some of that much wider, holistic vision, a future for Rosie which realises everything she and her husband have worked for and still want for their family.

In order to answer that question we can look further into Rosie’s community, Thurrock, a borough in South-West Essex, on the river Thames, east of London. Here, we discover that Rosie’s story is not unique, but just one human face of a slew of numbers.

One local picture: Thurrock¹²

In 2012, Thurrock’s first food bank was set up, overseen by the Trussell Trust. Initially, three distribution centres, in Corringham, Tilbury and Purfleet were opened, but since then, the number has increased to eleven centres. In the first year 1,209 people were helped, but between April and December last year a further 2,905 (1,669 adults and 1,236 children) needed food from the food bank, cashing 1,136 vouchers.

The main reasons for need were delayed benefit (880 people), changes to benefits (392 people) and low incomes (748 people, including Rosie and her family). Vouchers are distributed not just by doctors and social workers but also by the local Citizens Advice Bureau. 439 vouchers went to single

¹¹ See www.trusselltrust.org/mission-and-vision.

¹² The information and statistics in this section are drawn from an article by Matt Abbott, ‘Thousands of crisis-hit Thurrock residents turn to food banks’ *Thurrock Gazette*, 24th January 2014. Also online at http://www.thurrockgazette.co.uk/news/10955814.Thousands_of_crisis_hit_Thurrock_residents_turn_to_food_banks/

people; 270 for single parents; 222 vouchers for families, 118 vouchers for couples and 87 'other'. Yet more and more people are being referred.

Local people have responded generously to the need of Thurrock's poorest residents, and organisations such as Grays Rotary Club have made sizeable donations enabling the volunteers to buy a van to transport food from the warehouse to the eleven distribution centres across the borough. With increased awareness, collections of donated food have increased, including 2.6 tonnes donated in two days outside a Tesco Extra.

4,114 people have been helped so far since 2012, but more needy people are continuing to arrive.

The problem with these statistics is that they both illustrate a serious issue and obfuscate it. In the case of food banks, one argument is that the provision of food banks itself generates more users. In the bishops and faith leaders' letter, the claim that 5,500 people were admitted to hospital for malnutrition has started an argument about what malnutrition really is and whether it cannot be avoided in some people.¹³ Sadly, once an issue of this kind becomes politicised it can take up so much energy that even less is done to alleviate people's hunger.

Beginning a theological approach to food banks

Rosie's question about her future cuts deep into our faith. What are we supposed to do and say to answer her and on what basis should we do so? Food banks represent a significant face of social action, but what does it take to get beyond arguments about equity and give Rosie social *justice*?¹⁴

For Christians, food banks are perplexingly ambiguous: they represent pools of generosity and co-operation, meeting human need and enabling the release of stories we urgently need to hear. Yet at

¹³ https://fullfact.org/factchecks/malnutrition_on_rise_economic_crisis_blame-29275

¹⁴ See for example, Castle, B., (2012) 'Justice is what the UK needs, not Fairness' *Church Times*, 20th February 2012, <http://www.briancastle.org/content/justice-what-uk-needs-not-fairness> and Kilpin, J., (2014) 'What can "Christians on the Left" hope to achieve' online at <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/20250>.

the same time we need to work for a world *where food banks are not needed*. We want food banks to disappear. Consequently, the need for food banks in our society reaches deep into our theology to ask harder and more difficult questions about the nature of our society and its governance. We therefore offer some approaches to the issues which food banks pose for us and further ask: what action must we take to address these issues? In the next part of this paper, we will try to dig down into our faith to find the sharpest tools for theological understanding, reflection and action.

First, a desire to respond to the needs to others stems from our common humanity. In this sense, recognising and empathising with people in need is part of being human, living together in community and caring about others. We do not need a theological rationale to help people or to feel a sense of social responsibility. On the other hand, seeking social and distributive justice is not just a good in itself, but a good which is vital to our own growth as Christians. As Cardinal Basil Hume said in the preface to *The Common Good*, 'In virtue simply of our shared humanity, we must surely respect and honour one another'. He also wrote that 'Discipleship involves seeking God in this world, as well as preparing to meet Him in the next. The Gospel imperative to love our neighbour entails not only that we should help those in need, but also address the causes of destitution and poverty. The deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbour, and thus with social action'.¹⁵

Cardinal Hume therefore suggests something extremely disturbing – that to call ourselves Christian and to follow Jesus Christ means not just helping, but also trying to understand and indeed do something about, the processes in our society that force people to cry for that help. Unless we do that, we put our own Christian flourishing at risk. How Rosie's future turns out also determines *our*

¹⁵ Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (1996) *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching* online at <http://justice-and-peace.org.uk/documents/TheCommonGood.pdf> p.2

future.¹⁶ It is not surprising then that the Trussell Trust's key biblical text is Matthew 25.35-36 underlying Cardinal Hume's point that we must seek God in this world: 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me...'

Cardinal Hume also highlights how the issue of flourishing human futures are linked, for Christians, to discipleship. So Rosie's question, 'what will happen to us?' requires us to look more closely at what it means to be Christ's disciples and discover some deeply uncomfortable things about the new way of being Jesus instituted in calling disciples to him. For example, John Baxter-Brown writes that in calling disciples into fellowship with him (Luke 5.1-11), a 'radical vocation' begins in which the economic norms of the time are destroyed and remade.¹⁷ The fishermen, who will never get rich or even out of the cycle of debt necessitated by the repair and upkeep of their boats, are given a miraculous draft of fish, a lottery win of possibility. Yet what does this mean, what *future* is involved? As Baxter-Brown puts it 'the fish are gutted and eaten: they die. Luke, however, is saying that Peter's future purpose is to catch in order to give life'.¹⁸ Peter's request for forgiveness pivots the passage into a new frame of reference: it matters what kind of future we offer to others, not just one which is bought with spare money, but one which puts us on the front line, impassioned and imperilled by the Holy Spirit. Discipleship requires both the subsistence worker and the tax collector to unite in that extreme future:

'Jesus instituted a new community, a life-giving and life-sharing community, in which the accepted norms of social and economic relationships were turned upside down. In this community power is

¹⁶ So in Luke 16.19-31, 'the rich man and Lazarus' Jesus tells a parable about how the eternal destiny of a rich man who ignored the beggar at his gate is affected adversely by his behaviour. The rich man asks if he can send back a warning to others and is told that believers who do not already put their faith into practice will not be changed even by one who returns from the dead.

¹⁷ Baxter-Brown, J.,(2012) 'Evangelism Through the Eyes of Jesus in Luke 5.1-11 and Holistic Evangelism for the 21st Century: Towards Life, Justice and Equality...but not as we know it' *St Francis Magazine* Vol 8, No 6, December 2012 pp 732-748. Online at www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/SFMDec2012-Evangelism-JohnBaxter.pdf p.733.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.742.

redefined so that the least will be the greatest (9:48), the first will be the last and the last, first (13:30) and those who humble themselves will be exalted (14:11). Characteristics of this community include the welcoming of “sinners and tax collectors”, generosity to the poor, compassion for the sick, concern for the lost, commitment to truth and obedience, among many others. Justice and equality are understood in relation to Jesus.¹⁹

If we are to flourish and grow as Christ’s disciples in this kind of community, what exactly *is* the future God wants for Rosie and for all of us and how can we find out? It is a prophetic question and it is not new. The biblical prophets themselves ask it through profound and intense lament at the injustice and suffering of the world, but also through a vision of the world as it should be, the world God is calling us to create. That vision of a realised social justice in a creation that is conformed to God’s will and desire is explained to us by mission theology. Within mission theology, Rosie’s question about her future is entangled with the future of all of us.

Mission

A central focus of modern mission theology is that all our mission is God’s mission, the *missio Dei*. God’s love overflows into the creation, sustaining and renewing our world, patiently remaking and restoring the mess we have made of our beautiful planet. God calls us to help with this act of love and not to hinder it by destroying God’s reconciling action. The *missio Dei* includes human beings in this act of love, calling us to help create a world in which God’s vision and purpose for human beings can be realised right now. For the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures the sinfulness and destructiveness of human behaviour means that world is exceptionally difficult to bring into being and to keep in being, but it also makes means that the prophetic vocation is to articulate what God’s

¹⁹ Ibid. p.746.

future would be like. One of the best examples of this prophetic vocation is Isaiah 65.19-25 in which the writer sets out what Raymond Fung calls the Isaiah agenda:²⁰

*I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labour in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,*

²⁰ Fung, R., (1992) *The Isaiah Vision*, (WCC: Geneva)

*the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the Lord.*

The features of this vision are good health and long productive lives, shelter, food, work that benefits the worker, and peace. No one will have power over another in such a way that the less powerful are deprived. This is settled, creative and fulfilled community, and as such, people are released from struggle to focus better on their spiritual lives and their devotion to God. It follows then, that disease, poverty, hunger, homelessness, work which only benefits others, abuse of power, war and corruption are not just social evils but things which work against God's vision and desire for human beings, creating a drag on the *missio Dei* and making it more difficult for people to respond to God's call. This means that mission, social action and social justice not only go together, but are integral to one another. In the matter of food banks, the third 'mark' of mission: 'to respond to human need by loving service' is particularly critical, but it is important that we understand that in this response there lies God's own desire for the Isaiah vision; that is the contribution we make to God's purposes. From a small act of local volunteering, perhaps just packing a few tins into a box, we sustain and advance a global, cosmic vision of God's desire for us, a God who is waiting at the empty plate on Rosie's table for us to re-imagine the world and act transformatively upon it.

Walter Brueggeman puts it like this: 'This waiting God is the one who called the world into being, who worked an impossibility for Sarah and her ilk, who overwhelmed pharaoh on behalf of emancipation, who sent meat, water and bread from who knows where; this God spoke ten times at

Sinai and summoned Israel in covenant to an either/or of life or death, blessing or curse'.²¹ God waits for us in the absence of food, in the lives of those who are in desperate need, in the corners of our communities, and challenges us to decide where discipleship is calling us: to life or death; to blessing or curse.

So Rosie's question prompts us to consider the radical demands of our own Christian discipleship coloured with both prophetic lament and fierce desire for prophetic vision. She also reminds us that we are not called to join in God's mission blindly or without question. We now need to go back to her experience of the food bank and become aware that one of the things the growth of food banks does in this country is to invite us to reflect on what we are doing and what such work on behalf of others means. Two important questions come to mind: how does the experience of people, who are both working and receiving food from food banks, expose other deep problems and needs within our society which challenge our commitment to be Christ's disciples? And does the existence of food banks cover up other issues about our society which require prophetic lament and address by Christians? To get at some answers we explore some more theological themes to highlight the complexity of this challenge.

Hunger

In the book of Genesis, God creates human beings to be embodied persons. We are living things, and, like plants, animals, fish, birds, insects and all the varied species of our planet, we must consume food in order to survive and grow. It follows then, that in the creation stories of Genesis, food is a necessary part of the sustaining of life on earth, including the new humans: 'God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of

²¹ Brueggeman, W., (2012) *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Fortress Press) ch 2, np.

the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food' (Genesis 1. 29-30). The humans of the Garden of Eden are to have nourishment and will be enabled to flourish and God approves and delights in this provision. It is 'good' (v.31). Yet, after the humans are expelled from this paradise, their lives are very different. If they need food, they will have to work for it, and if they are unsuccessful, they will experience hunger. They are now living in a world fractured by human behaviour which is not as God wants it. The fact of hunger tells us that the Isaiah vision is far off and we must continue our efforts in mission to offer loving service to those in need.

The story of the Fall also tells us that physical hunger is symptomatic of a world that has something seriously wrong with it and it points to the sinful damage we ourselves have wrought on it. But we have to be clear what we are talking about in a country where, in January 2014, the biggest-selling books were diet books while at the same time many people were searching for something to eat.

This reframes divisions in our society as not just who has a great of money and who does not, but who is in a position to over-consume and over-indulge and who is trying to survive on what they can get. Advertising presses us towards indulgence and so we forget that in Christian tradition, gluttony is a sin *for a reason*. Gluttony does us physical damage, but it also does us spiritual damage because it inspires in us selfish, individualised desires which shut out the needs of others. Further, choice and opportunity in relation to what we eat, including the opportunity to binge into shamed dieting says a great deal about the construction of affluent identity in our society. That means that every meal we consume, from Sunday night takeaway to lunchtime sandwich actually reflects on Rosie's future. So does solidarity with Rosie entail giving up, changing how we eat, or how we view food entirely?²²

²² It is worth noting in Luke 7.34, Jesus reports that his eating and drinking with 'tax collectors and sinners' is sneered at as gluttony. But the way Jesus takes meals with others is significant, linking hospitality and shared food with spiritual growth and re-orientation to God. It is not about self-indulgence and luxury, but shared thanksgiving, as in the feast prepared for the Prodigal.

Most of us in the western world will experience hunger if we miss a meal or are trying to lose weight, but this is a different matter from *going hungry* or becoming physically ill from lack of food or malnutrition. Since so few of us really understand what debilitating hunger is, it can be difficult to begin to grasp what is happening to those in our own prosperous society who are experiencing it.²³ We tend to associate hunger with famine and starvation in developing countries and not with our neighbour whose children are not going to school because the family is ashamed that they now have no money for their lunch.²⁴ Similarly, there are reports that shoplifting food has increased, as people do not want to have the 'shame' of being seen asking for help at a food bank.²⁵ It is also perhaps significant that further reports on the rise in shoplifting through self-service tills, show that 'Fruit, vegetables and bakery items are the most frequently pocketed but sweets and toiletries are also particularly popular'.²⁶

Yet eating and feeding are so vital to our sense of self and to our bodies that hunger has other effects as well. Rosie's story shows us that going hungry can make us feel that we have failed at the task of living, that we have failed to provide for those who depend on us. Hunger without hope of respite saps not only our physical vitality, but our dignity as human beings, our mental resources and psychological wellbeing. To be hungry is to be empty, and emptied. People who are dying no longer need to eat; to not be able to eat if we need to says that we are not alive. Clearly this is not what God wants for human beings. Jesus makes this clear when he offers pictures of the kingdom reality as being invited to a communal feast no matter what a person's status.²⁷ Similarly, not to be able to provide for those we love and for whom we care, strips us of our competence and need to nurture. It

²³ So Mary's magnificat (Luke 1.53) makes this point 'he has filled the hungry with good things; the rich he has sent away empty'.

²⁴ See the examples given at <http://www.trusselltrust.org/real-stories>

²⁵ *Metro*, 23rd September 2013, 'Hungry turn to Shoplifting to avoid food bank shame' online at www.metro.co.uk/2013/09/23/hungry-turn-to-shoplifting-to-avoid-food-bank-shame-4094149/

²⁶ *Metro*, 29th January 2014, 'Self-service tills turn us into thieves: Scanners blamed for £1.7bn losses' online at <http://metro.co.uk/2014/01/29/self-service-tills-turn-us-into-thieves-4282776/> See also the *Retail Crime Survey 2013* available from the British Retail Consortium at www.brc.org.uk.

²⁷ Luke 14:15-24;

is not enough to provide food where food is lacking; people need to means to provide and care for those they love as part of their intrinsic sense of worth and dignity (see our comments on choice, below).²⁸

It is of course possible for humans to fast and to control intake of food and drink for greater wellbeing and spiritual enrichment. But we should not be misled into thinking that fasting places us in some equal solidarity with Rosie's situation. Fasting can make us more aware of what it is like to be hungry and it can release money savings that can be donated elsewhere. But for those of us who can expect to remain reasonably affluent, Rosie's food future and our food future are always going to be different. And, to be truly starving to physical detriment and to live without hope of future proper nourishment is to enter a state of dehumanisation. Our physical needs are related to our personhood, to our sense of dignity, and also to the sense of ourselves as spiritual beings. It is significant indeed that Jesus teaches us to pray for daily bread.

Rosie also shows us that hunger can be equated with shame when our ability to deal with ordinary human need is compromised. The Trussell Trust reports stories of people who resort to stealing food against their better natures and being deeply ashamed at engaging in criminal acts.²⁹ And, in God's economy, that shame extends to all of us who do nothing about it while one hungry person remains. Thus, as we have seen, Jesus equates care for the hungry with relationship with himself (Matthew 25:35-40). Jesus also knew what he was talking about, having at the start of his ministry undertaken a prolonged period of fasting so that he was starving (Matthew 4.1). What he discovers, is that God is there, waiting with him in that absence and ready to recover him.

The season of Lent recalls the time of Jesus' testing in the desert and so fasting is still an important tradition of the Church (and in other faiths): fasting in times of abstinence preparing for major feasts

²⁸ See Church Urban Fund, (2013) *Hungry for More: how churches can address the root causes of food poverty*, pp. 11-20, online at [http://www.cuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/Research/Hungry for More CUF 2013.pdf](http://www.cuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/Research/Hungry%20for%20More_CUF_2013.pdf)

²⁹ See the examples given at <http://www.trusselltrust.org/real-stories>

such as Easter, but also fasting before Communion. Fasting makes you aware that you are empty or hungry and so make you appreciate the gift of food afterwards. Yet for many Christians today the Lenten fast tends to be more a token 'giving up' of something, and while we might miss chocolate or alcohol or the occasional meal, it is not likely to make us really appreciate what it means to be fed or the gift of food, or what it would be like to be perpetually worried about where the next meal is coming from.³⁰

To be fed, then, is to be restored, psychologically, physically, morally and spiritually. It is worth reflecting that food has no intrinsic worth for the wellbeing of human beings, unless it is both edible and consumed. Food banks only work if people consume the goods that are available and are released from their hunger. In many cases they are a stop gap, getting people a bit further forward but not solving the issue of what it means to be fed, not able to give Rosie and her family a future.

Anticipation and Stewardship

There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do."

So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.

Genesis 41. 54-57

There are 'food banks' even in Scripture. In the narrative about Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph warns Pharaoh about the need for good stewardship of resources against times of

³⁰ More in-depth material on the relationship between food and fasting with reflections from Alison Webster and Angela Tilby can be found at: www.foodmatters.org.uk/fasting-resource

famine. When the famine arrives, there is stored grain for bread, making Egypt the source of food for many, even beyond its borders. The story shows some important features: good governance requires foresight and stewardship of precious resources so that everyone can share when times are difficult; Joseph warns against squandering resources or becoming complacent about the good times; people look to those in power for help; times of scarcity affect everyone and leaders are judged by how they respond to economic crisis and natural disaster; when governments fail, the prophetic understanding of need and survival should be both heeded and acted on; we, as God's people and God's prophets, following the promptings of the *missio Dei*, need to charge our rulers with their lack of understanding and foresight, not just to critique their short-sightedness but to offer effective long-term solutions.

In our current situation, many of these features are the same. Times are hard for the very poorest and economic conditions for those who are reliant on the government are difficult. In such times, people look to those in power to help them and discover that not enough provision has been made.

We may argue that the establishment of food banks represents a prophetic act indicting the authorities for lack of foresight and provision, since those food banks are not stocked by our government but by the donations of ordinary people. Joseph is still at work but Pharaoh is not listening and learning; the prophetic word is not heard. It is also worth noting that in the Joseph story the famine remained so great that even the Egyptians themselves became enslaved by their dependence on Joseph's stores. This tells us that foresight and provision have to go alongside action which enables people to climb out of their need and get help for them to be self-sufficient. The Egyptians' future was also limited by continued lack of resources and the loss of their livestock and land.³¹

We expect our governments to be able to make long-term plans because so much political rhetoric seems to imply that this is within their power, but when in government, that language turns to blame

³¹ Genesis 47.13-26.

for inherited mess which needs to be rectified before the 'luxury' of proper stewardship can begin.³² Yet we ourselves can be just as bad at appropriate stewardship because we think of ourselves and the needs of our immediate families rather than the possible needs of our neighbours. In Acts 4.32 we see a Christian community sharing things in common and thereby modelling a different way of being together than hierarchical systems of have and have-nots, but those different ways of being together as an inclusive and mutually supporting church are not reflected in some of our current congregations. There are, of course, some really excellent initiatives and projects around which reflect the fact that churches, embedded as they are within communities, are very well placed to hear, share and respond to the stories of those in need. To take just one example, Living Well, run by Holy Trinity church, Beckenham, in partnership with other churches, gives vulnerable people a cooked lunch on Fridays and enables access to 'a listening ear, advice, prayer, sign posting, making telephone calls to access services, and arranging appointments. Lunch is sometimes accompanied by a member playing music on the keyboard, or music on guitar, and is sometimes followed by a creative activity..... sessions on anxiety, stress and anger management, and ... benefits and social care advice'.³³

Almsgiving

If we have become theologically detached from Christian teaching and tradition around gluttony and fasting, we have also become more detached from the deeply important tradition of almsgiving which was always so prominent in Christian community (and in other faiths). The giving of alms isn't just about helping poorer people, but about helping those in need for Christ's sake. It is a matter of love not duty.

³² For example, '...for many decades Britain has borrowed too much and saved too little... We had the biggest deficit since the war..... Britain needs to run an absolute surplus in good years. We will fix the roof when the sun is shining – to protect Britain from future storms' Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, Budget Speech 19th March 2014 online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-george-osbornes-budget-2014-speech>

³³ <http://www.holytrinitybeckenham.org.uk/whats-on/living-well.aspx>

Further, churches have become similarly detached from shared assets which benefited the entire community. For example, Eamon Duffy has written about how churches would often own a few animals which parishioners grazed and cared for on behalf of the church along with any other animals of their own. The meat and wool from sheep was sold by the church and the money used to support the community. Church and congregation together created a distributed food bank in which each person who participated in some way was simultaneously donor and recipient. Everyone was invested in the profit-sharing enterprise, but not as donation of money, rather in addition of a small amount of shared stewardship in a labour which would happen anyway, not an extra burden on top of everything else as so many fund-raising events are today.³⁴ Perhaps we see an echo of this in those people who buy a couple of extra items for their local food bank every time they go shopping.

Around us, we can easily identify today's Pharaohs, but at the same time many Christians are throwing Joseph the dream-interpreter into the pit and ignoring his advice. We believe that Jesus will give us the miraculous draft of fish when we need it, without seeing beyond this provision to the different kind of kingdom he offers us. So it is a powerful sign that the resurrection of Jesus changes the possibilities for all human beings for ever when, returned to his disciples after death, they again experience a miraculous catch of fish while Jesus calls to them to eat the new fish of the new reality with him, - 'Come and have breakfast'.³⁵

If Rosie is to have a meaningful future it is not the miraculous draft of the food bank she needs but the new start for the Isaiah agenda, the kingdom reality. If we are Christians, then Jesus calls us to do this in his name: 'feed my lambs'.³⁶

Feeding

³⁴ Duffy, E., (2001) *The Voices of Morebath*, (Yale University Press) p 27

³⁵ John 21.12

³⁶ John 21.15.

The Joseph and Pharaoh story is just one example of a powerful theme in Scripture about the need to recognise hunger and to feed the hungry and about how power and control of resources affect people's fate. Such feeding is also deeply wedded to welcome, hospitality and reciprocal sharing, in which the divine is also entangled (eg Genesis 18. 1-8). This tells us that the needs of the body are intertwined with social and spiritual relationships and the building up of harmonious communities in which friends, neighbours and strangers are taken care of, their needs met. So when the ancient Israelites complained to their leaders that they were starving, they were miraculously fed quails and manna (Exodus 16.1-36) but such feeding was tied to understanding God's will, trusting in and obeying God's will for them. Going outside this vision, by over-gathering or hoarding, led to the food rotting and loss of the resources. God provides, but it is up to human beings to learn how to deal equitably and unselfishly with food, especially when they never knew when time of scarcity would hit them. Similarly, when Elijah prophesies a famine he is miraculously fed by ravens, but set within this is an intimate story of a foreign widow, a victim of the famine, who expects to die but is sustained by a drop of oil and a jar of meal which through the presence of the prophet and the grace of God, never runs out (1 Kings 17.1-16). The message of unselfishness, sharing, care for others, even those who are 'other' to us, lights up the Isaiah vision and creates a context for God's abundance to be witnessed. In Jesus' feeding miracles, we also see the same process at work, whereby a small amount shared leads to a situation where everyone is satisfied and God's purposes and love for all is better understood (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:10-17; John 6:5-15; Mark 8:1-9; Matthew 15:32-39).

The Hebrew Scriptures also record laws which gave rights to poorer people to glean left-over grain for the fields: 'When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God' (Leviticus 23.22) There were also rules about sharing with your neighbour if your household was too small to afford or use a whole animal for sacrifice (Exodus 12.4).

It is against this religious background of miracle, hospitality and sharing that Jesus teaches about feeding within his own ministry. Feeding, and healing go together and this restoration of the human person permits spiritual nourishment as body, mind and spirit are fed together. Jesus is found explaining God's love for human beings in the context of meals and festivities, with attendance at a meal a sign of God's love and forgiveness and vision of heavenly reconciliation as being like a feast held in the recovered person's honour (Luke 5:11-32). The provision of daily bread is both what we need and what links us not just to the business of staying alive, but to an eschatological vision of satisfaction:

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

my whole life long.

Psalm 23. 5-6.

Eucharist

Everything discussed so far is shot through and illuminated by the central sacrament of the Christian faith: the Eucharist. At the Last Supper, and the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus feeds the disciples with bread and wine as his own body and blood, giving himself over to them in acts of eating and drinking. We might argue then, that when Christians feed people in need, either through food banks or other welfare provision, this is in itself a Eucharistic act, showing forth our solidarity and Christ's sacrifice through making sacrificial provisions for the needs of others. Jesus at all times made sure his

disciples were fed physically and spiritually; breaking bread with them came with its act of blessing, asking God's love to be with them. If we care about mission and evangelism then those acts of feeding, sharing, serving and blessing must also be included in our loving service to others.

It can be difficult for some Christians to see that the Eucharist, as thanksgiving to God, is not just something which happens in church for our own private spiritual enrichment and holy communion with God but transformative everywhere. In the miraculous feeding miracles recounted in the gospels, the small amount of food initially gathered becomes more than enough to make sure that every single person is satisfied.³⁷ That miracle is not just about Jesus magically making something happen but after blessing the bread and giving thanks to God he requires the disciples to *distribute* it. As the people eat and are satisfied, so their futures are directly engaged with God's desire for them to live as the Isaiah agenda promises. We are not told what those people who came to hear Jesus went away and did with their lives, but we can imagine that each person with whom we engage in the attempt to gain justice for them, should be similarly linked to a positive and fulfilled future.

Our understanding of the Eucharist therefore lies at the heart of our attitude to, and engagement with food banks.

Power and powerlessness

One of the most important results of the establishment of food banks is that it has put hidden poverty in plain sight and the need for action on the agenda. In this sense, the presence of food banks among us, even in the most affluent areas of the UK, opens the eyes of people to need and to the vulnerability and poverty of others in their midst. The fact that churches are responding to the challenge through opening and supporting food banks, shows that the 'marks' of mission are being put into action, loving and serving people without judging them, and challenging our unjust

³⁷ The feeding of the 5000, Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:5-15; the feeding of the 4000, Mark 8:1-9 and Matthew 15:32-39.

structures by being good and efficient at addressing social injustice. In this sense, food banks are subversive instruments which challenge everyone, including we who are comfortable Christians, to start to think about the possibility that our assumption that 'that could never happen to me' could move to 'that could be me next week'.

The matter of power dynamics between people is also highlighted by food banks. A potential problem is that 'charity' creates a stigma which attaches to the users, who can become unhelpfully labelled as powerless, poor or incompetent. One way in which Christian action through food banks can challenge the emergence of such stigma is by changing the language surrounding what goes on through them. For example, in Iffley, Oxford, the food bank is called the 'community cupboard' and people are issued invitations, not referrals, so that they can come and choose what they need from what is available on any particular day. This language of choice, invitation and community enables more chatting and conversations between users and volunteers, as the users are not passive recipients but active participants, receiving power through choice, rather than just being 'done to'.

Gift and Trade

The ambiguous nature of the food bank, which relies on gifts of food from others, challenges Christians as to whether, living in a trade economy dependent on markets, as we do, we have forgotten or simply overlooked the significance of gift. In western societies, we tend to think of property or commodities as things, but in gifting, it is the relationship between people that is paramount, rather than the 'thing' itself and its commercial value. For example, a child's home-made birthday card might mean more to us than an expensive piece of art. Anthropologists debate over the nature and procedures of actual gift economies, if any such really exist in a pure form, but we can learn from the discussions about them that gift-giving and exchange of gifts generates positive relationship between givers and enables a release of generosity through the 'spirit' of the

gift.³⁸ We should also note Parry's concerns about the 'poisonous' gift in which gifts may carry the shame or sin of the giver and transfer them to recipients, especially where such gifts cannot ever be reciprocated.³⁹ Part of Rosie's feelings of shame and concern for her future stem from her use of the food bank as necessity but also perhaps the fear that she cannot give back to society in the way she would like. In her current state, she cannot thank others for their generosity or reflect back to others her desire to be a provider and a carer. It is unsurprising that food bank users often become volunteers in their turn. If we bear in mind that the fourth mark of mission, which has recently been updated by the Anglican Consultative Council to read 'to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation'⁴⁰ then our attempts to secure social justice for Rosie and her family must also attend to the need to create reconciling possibilities for her own sense of contribution and worth, not just leave her as the recipient of 'charity'.

In our society, food exists simultaneously in both trade and gift economies. It is after all, part of our culture to give food and offer meals, as part of family life, neighbourliness and community involvement. Yet at the same time, we all go to the shops to buy the food we need to do this.

In his theory of gift, Lewis Hyde discusses these two economies.⁴¹ All societies need both, but they have very different characteristics. The trade economy is about keeping things neutral or in balance, such that the boundaries between people are maintained. But in the gift economy those boundaries are dissolved. In receiving a gift, the boundary between one person and another is breached, and connection strengthened. Also, a gift must always be passed on, keeping a momentum going. And gifts always gravitate to those most in need.

³⁸ Mauss, M., (1970). *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. (London: Cohen & West);

³⁹ Parry, J., (1986) 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift"' *Man* 21 (3): 463–67.

⁴⁰ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>

⁴¹ Hyde, L., (1983/2006) *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (Edinburgh:Canongate)

Food banks bring to the surface the way the gift economy and the trade economy work both together and against each other, and food banks can be subversive instruments when they have to turn commodity and necessity into gifts. This makes sense to Christians because the notion of gift stands firmly at the heart of our faith. As we have seen in the examples of miraculous feeding, grace is the gift of God to God's people. That grace is often referred to and imaged as 'bread' - symbolic of all food. Our daily bread is also the goodness that God gives to us. By freely distributing what people need, food banks challenge a society in which everything comes with a price and which denies people who cannot afford those prices. Every food bank then, provides service, but also challenge, undermining the usual rules by which our society is run, turning the unkind epithet of 'scroungers' back into what they really are: people in need, whose stories need to be heard.

It could also be argued that Christians get involved in social action in order to pass on the gift of grace that they have received from God. But in the process, in terms of food banks, food can be taken out of the trade economy as the existing functions of the market become beyond people's reach, thus setting up a subversive momentum for positive change. It is important however that the gift economy does not replace the trade economy, but through the food bank, the gift economy could work towards making the trade economy function more effectively and in everyone's interests, especially those who live in poverty.

We see this in Scripture when Jesus himself points to the hypocrisy within the religious leaders of his own day, congratulating themselves on giving alms while ignoring the real needs of the people and the causes of their need. Jesus points to the widow and her tiny donation as being one who not only gives, but empathises and shows forth the need for which the donation is given (Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4) subverting the rules of the powerful. She is a symbol of what loving service means: having nothing, she gives all. Jesus says that rather than look down on the widow and her mite for the pittance of her donation, we should learn from her what it means to be poor. Consequently we have an opportunity to see the people who come to food banks as also gifts to us. Their stories teach us

something about being human and provide examples of resistance. Indeed one of the wonderful things about this movement is that many food bank clients volunteer for food banks when they are back on their feet because they feel the imperative to pass on the gift they have received.

Some questions surrounding food banks

Solving hunger needs

Although, we can be glad that food banks are challenging the injustices now so prevalent in our own society, we have to acknowledge that there are also problems. One difficulty with the provision of food through food banks is that helping people in this fashion may serve to cover up underlying issues which also need address. The establishment of food banks may be a prophetic act, but such an act also exposes a host of other matters. These problems can be social – unemployment, problems with benefits, loans and debts, homelessness, immigration status issues, health problems; they can also reflect a variety of psychological states -loneliness, mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, shame, damaged pride, fear. Yet if food banks appear to be ‘solving’ the problem of those who are not getting sufficient food, then these issues can also be masked, as well as the wider political questions about whether or not such people are the victims of poor governance and bad policy.

Economic models

Yet another difficulty is whether the very act of setting up and co-ordinating food banks requires us to buy into a business model of providing food outlets which mimics the very economic conditions which have created the problem. A food bank ‘industry’ might be efficient at delivering services, but it might also become self-perpetuating and end up masking the underlying drivers of food poverty. Trusts cannot operate without capital; organisation cannot happen without an infrastructure. To be efficient and to realise an ambition to set up a food bank in every town requires business acumen and a national oversight which, of its very nature, draws people away from local people responding to

their neighbours' need. Local, volunteer driven food banks drawn from and oriented to individual communities might prevent this model from becoming too prevalent, but at the same time it might also not be as effective at meeting need.

We might draw inspiration from the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, where immediate need is noticed by Jesus, acted upon by the disciples and satisfies the community, effectively and indeed superabundantly. In many places, in fact, such quiet miracles have taken place. Yet for many people to hope for such a response may indeed seem too miraculous to be true, so that some form of structure and process must be necessary to guarantee response to need. As Christians we need to be acutely aware of the ambivalent nature of the food bank, which both provides relief to the poorest but also may relieve the government of its responsibilities. For example the Trussell Trust helps people by running courses on how to live on a small budget. But if we all learn to live within our reduced means, this does not challenge the policy decisions which led to those reduced means in the first place.

Means testing

Another problem is that while some food banks offer assistance to anyone, most cannot and do not feed all-comers. Need has to be tested, hence the voucher system. But even this means that people fall through the cracks. While many people who come to the food banks are affected by benefit delay, more are now coming forward who have been hit by more recent benefit sanctions. Inevitably, need can be demonstrated by some, while for others, such as illegal immigrants or the homeless, their exclusion can keep them even from ready sources of help. As demand grows on food banks, so need is assessed ever more stringently, but this goes up against a theological vision of the need to feed whoever asks for food: 'no one gives his son a stone when he asks for bread' (Matthew 7.9). Yet we do this all the time.

Choice

Yet another difficulty is that food banks take away from people the basic ability to choose what they feed themselves and their families. Food parcels can only contain dry and unperishable foods and remove from the recipient's choice about how to prepare meals and what to put in them. Yet such choice is at the heart of family life and cements love and mutuality within the family through the giving and receiving of food which family members enjoy. Food banks cannot solve the loss of a deep satisfaction which comes from cooking and preparing food that everyone looks forward to and which advertisements and cookery programmes suggest are our right. The fact of poverty and powerlessness is only underlined when people have to eat things they don't like or cannot enjoy.

Dependency

An issue which now arises with the provision of food banks is whether they create dependency. In the Joseph story, as we have seen above, the relationship between the famine and the food stores means that the Egyptians themselves end up becoming dependent to the point of entering slavery in order to be kept alive. To some extent, this fear leads to the limits for emergency food, but at the same time, such limits often need to be extended (as in the case of ongoing benefit delay or sanction). The One Can Trust in High Wycombe has shown that most users only visit the food bank between one and three times, although this kind of research also discovers some high dependency families which require more structured support. In response to this, the food bank in Wycombe is setting up One Can Hope to address these further needs, by linking Wycombe to professional resources in surrounding villages.

Angela Shier-Jones⁴² writes that there is an important relationship between dependence and grace which is often overlooked.⁴³ That all human beings are dependent ultimately on God means that we

⁴² MTAG members would like to acknowledge the important contribution Angela Shier-Jones made to MTAG thinking as part of MTAG's network of friends and correspondents, and we mourn her loss and remember her with gratitude. Angela was a Methodist minister and theologian, and editor of the *Epworth Review*.

⁴³ Shier-Jones, A., (2010) 'Grace' in (Richards, A., and Privett P., eds) *Through the Eyes of a Child*, (London: Church House Publishing) pp.165-184).

recognise ourselves, whoever we are and whatever our circumstances, as recipients of grace: 'there but for the grace of God go I'). As a consequence, we are called to form an inter-dependent and altruistic community of grace which shows generosity and selflessness towards others. It is perhaps not surprising then, that we find people who have been helped by food banks returning to volunteer to help others in their turn.

We can therefore say that to be dependent is only a problem when such dependency becomes detached from its relationship to grace. Angela Shier-Jones writes of a struggle to understand grace if a person grows up in an environment of selfishness, retribution and punishment at the hands of others. She retells a story of a child who went to a store to buy pizza and who gave some of it to a homeless person who indicated he was hungry. The child was surprised at the suggestion that his parents would be angry that he did this, replying "'God told us, Share!'".⁴⁴ For some people then, generosity and reciprocity within our families, churches and communities can be damaged by the reactions of others, and that damage within a selfish and individualised society carries a destructive power greater than the 'problem' of dependency. Some people, of course, are not able to recognise grace and find its provisions challenging.

The Isaiah vision sets out what a community of grace looks like. We are dependent on God, but also gifted and graced to live meaningfully in interdependent relationships on and with one another. It is not shameful to fall on hard times or to ask for help. What matters is that those who are helped are able to find ways to respond, as individuals loved by God, within the community of grace.

Advocacy

One of the important potentials of the community of grace, is that the need for and provision of food banks gives us the opportunity to highlight the things which are going wrong in our society. A

⁴⁴ Kozol, J., (1995), 'Poverty's Children: growing up in the South Bronx', *The Progressive*, 59.10 October 1995, pp 22f, quoted in Shier-Jones, op.cit. p, 173.

difficulty however, is that food banks have needs which may conflict with advocacy: they need funds and donations. Fundraising requires a different kind of discourse, since it needs to result in donated funds and therefore may be shaped along the lines of what potential donors want to hear. Advocacy, on the other hand, requires a robust discourse in which people are told things they may not want to hear (especially about our complicity in creating the conditions which require foodbanks). Advocacy carries with it a prophetic edge which can include lament, anger and powerful critique of a world which is far from God's intention. Yet the potential for such advocacy may be undermined by the need to keep others engaged.

To this extent, food banks highlight a tension between the third and fourth marks of mission. The desire to challenge unjust structures can become problematic when the need to offer loving service is a priority. This may mean that while food banks need to highlight the presenting issues and the reasons why they are there, the underlying themes may have to be suppressed in order to attract and to keep attracting donations and volunteers. One consequence of this might be that the stories of users may not emerge as powerfully as the prophetic narrative it could be, making food banks more about working 'for' people than 'with' them. We can argue that with the Isaiah vision in mind, a mission focus for food banks means looking for more opportunities to tell those stories and enable the voices of users to be heard.

In this sense, food banks provide an important mission opportunity. While we may be unhappy that food banks are needed in today's society, we can also see that they provide opportunities to break down barriers, dispel myths about poverty, and begin to build solidarity between wealthier people and poorer people. Potentially, volunteers might be well placed to go on a journey from helping poorer people to speaking out on behalf of, and with, those same people, moving from charity to solidarity. Friendship and the sharing of stories have powerful mission potential, as all parties can be challenged and changed by the encounter. This suggests that the setting is important: those food banks where users and volunteers are able to talk and build relationship, perhaps making it possible

for everyone to sit down over tea and biscuits or share a meal, offers a great deal of potential for building empathy and advocacy. Settings where barriers are created between 'us' and 'them' are less likely to enable sharing and relationship.

Struggle

It may well be the imbalance of power which gets in the way of new, fruitful relationships. The need for food banks in our society emerges from serious inequalities between rich and poor, and a failure by the powerful to address the needs of the powerless who look to them. However, we can also become complicit in this imbalance of power. Food banks are wonderfully served by volunteers and supported by the generosity of local communities, but we can all then become part of a web of power and decision making which defines 'us' and reduces the users of food banks to becoming 'them'.

So it is not enough just to advocate sharing and relationship building; it also takes intention. Ann Morisy argues that Christians have a responsibility to engage in *struggle*, in solidarity with those who suffer, who are vulnerable and who are powerless. We need to learn from the experiences of food bank users because they are vulnerable people who are experiencing our society from its underside. In this sense food banks create an important opportunity for understanding and defining the struggle against unjust structures of society, the fourth 'mark' of mission: 'People's participation and commitment is a priceless resource(and they should) journey out and embrace a struggle for the peaceful, shalom future of God's creation'.⁴⁵ In a debt-dependent society where all of us are potentially economically precarious, a lost job away from being unable to pay our own bills, then we have a common humanity and experience with food bank users which needs to be articulated to our decision-makers in government. For each person who comes to a food bank, there is a mirror of our own potential situation. We all need to be both fed and healed. Yet too often, there is the

⁴⁵ Morisy, A., (2004) *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission*, (London: Continuum) p. 231.

assumption that somehow the needy have got themselves into this situation: they can't manage their resources; they can't cook properly; they are somehow deserving of their reduced status because of their habits, social behaviour or because they have too many children. Yet the hypocritical behaviour and profligacy of richer people are not addressed. This is something which Jesus points to in the gospels and which brings down the wrath and consternation of the powerful authorities upon him. Faced with the needs of those who are poor and disadvantaged, he says the unsayable. We are called to follow him in this.

So feeding the hungry must also be a political act, demonstrating the inadequacy of the status quo. When Jesus is challenged by the religious authorities because the disciples are eating grain on the Sabbath he challenges them to think about what this infringement means (Mark 2.23). It is more important to save and nurture human life than to create human need by law or sanction and particularly if such sanction draws people away from the Isaiah vision. What God wants matters more than pleasing the paymasters. Food banks, their volunteers and their users highlight this for us. This is mission.

Conclusion

Rosie asks what will happen to her and to her family in the future and the answer to that question is entangled with our future also. The mission of God's love to the world contains within it a vision of a world in which every person has enough to eat and benefits directly from the work they do to sustain themselves and their families. In such a world, all people live peaceably and hospitably with one another. The fact of food banks for hungry people in a developed western society shows that this vision is hopelessly far off. A commitment to mission requires that Christians engage in active struggle to turn this situation around and restore processes which will make the Isaiah vision more

possible. Consequently, the 'marks' of mission include both loving service towards others but also challenge to unjust structures.

Food banks are not just solutions to a crisis of need, since those who give towards them and work within them become increasingly exposed to poverty beneath the poverty, including issues of health, unemployment, low incomes, immigration status and old age. As these difficulties rise to the surface, driven by impossible choices about eating or heating, or paying rent, so they place more pressure on services for social care. Suddenly, food banks are not just about feeding those who need emergency food, but those whose lives are blighted by their vulnerability and powerlessness. As such, food bank users are open to hostility and abuse about their situation, while the contribution of wealthier people towards their exclusion and situation remains untested and unchallenged.

To this extent, food bank users hold up a mirror to us all and offer us their stories and experiences in which Christ is discovered alongside them, continuing to ask why we do not respond to his need in them. Each story has spiritual significance and challenges us to hold our political authorities to account against the Isaiah vision. We must learn from the food banks in our local communities even as we hope they need only be temporary. We are learning about the release of generosity, gifts and care for neighbour from neighbour; we are learning about the precariousness of the life we treasure; we are learning about power and struggle. Jesus asked his disciples to feed his lambs. Today, in our own towns and villages, those lambs are coming to be fed.

Some activities:

- Visit any food bank local to you and talk to some of the people there or volunteer to help with food packing and distribution
- Organise a local initiative through your church or in your community
- Find out and contribute to campaigns such as End Hunger Fast

- Set aside time to befriend or to pray for people who are struggling to make ends meet in your community.
- Make a list of resolutions about how you can change the way you live to increase your own awareness of those who struggle.

Some questions:

- What would you say to Rosie and her family about what might happen to them in the future?
- What part of this paper do you find most challenging or difficult?
- What do you think Christians can do to make the Isaiah agenda a reality?

Acknowledgements

The Mission Theology Advisory Group is especially grateful to one of its members, Alison Webster, for research, comments and suggestions which went into this paper. We are also grateful to Tom Sefton, Economics and Social Policy Adviser for the Church of England, for conversations which offered us important suggestions, questions and ideas. The substantial body of the paper was developed through conversations and contributions between members of the group and written by Anne Richards, to whom correspondence should be addressed: anne.richards@churchofengland.org.

References

Abbott, M., 'Thousands of crisis-hit Thurrock residents turn to food banks' *Thurrock Gazette*, 24th January 2014. Also online at www.thurrockgazette.co.uk/news/10955814.Thousands_of_crisis_hit_Thurrock_residents_turn_to_food_banks/ accessed 19/01/2014

Anglican Consultative Council, Five Marks of Mission
www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm

Baxter-Brown, J., (2012) 'Evangelism Through the Eyes of Jesus in Luke 5.1-11 and Holistic Evangelism for the 21st Century: Towards Life, Justice and Equality...but not as we know it' *St Francis Magazine* Vol 8, No 6, December 2012 pp 732-748. Online at www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/SFMDec2012-Evangelism-JohnBaxter.pdf accessed 10/03/14.

Brueggeman, W., (2012) *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press)

Castle, B., (2012) 'Justice is what the UK needs, not Fairness' *Church Times*, 20th February 2012, online at www.briancastle.org/content/justice-what-uk-needs-not-fairness accessed 10/03/14

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (1996) *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching* online at <http://justice-and-eace.org.uk/documents/TheCommonGood.pdf>

Church Urban Fund (2013), *Hungry for More: how churches can address the root causes of food poverty*, online at www.cuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/Research/Hungry_for_More_CUF_2013.pdf accessed 18/02/2014.

Duffy, E., (2001) *The Voices of Morebath*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press)

Fung, R., (1992) *The Isaiah Vision*, (WCC: Geneva)

Hyde, L., (1983/2006) *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (Edinburgh: Canongate)

Kilpin, J., (2014) 'What can "Christians on the Left" hope to achieve' online at <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/20250>.

Kozol, J., (1995), 'Poverty's Children: growing up in the South Bronx', *The Progressive*, 59.10 October 1995.

MacInnes, T., Aldridge, H., Bushe, S., Kenway, P., Tinson, A., (2013) *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2013*, New Policy Institute (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation).

Mauss, M., (1970) *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West)

Metro, 23rd September 2013, 'Hungry turn to Shoplifting to avoid food bank shame' online at www.metro.co.uk/2013/09/23/hungry-turn-to-shoplifting-to-avoid-food-bank-shame-4094149/ accessed 30/01/2014

Metro, 29th January 2014, 'Self-service tills turn us into thieves: Scanners blamed for £1.7bn losses' online at <http://metro.co.uk/2014/01/29/self-service-tills-turn-us-into-thieves-4282776/> accessed 30/01/2014

Mirror (2014) '27 bishops slam David Cameron's welfare reforms as creating a national crisis in unprecedented attack' online at www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/27-bishops-slam-david-camersons-3164033#ixzz2vy7ELfnI accessed 11/03/14

Morisy, A., (2004) *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission*, (London: Continuum)

Osborne, G., (2014) Budget Speech 19th March 2014 online at www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-george-osbornes-budget-2014-speech accessed 21/03/14.

Osborne, T., (2008) 'MacIntyre, Thomism and the Contemporary Common Good', *Analyse & Kritik* 30, 2008 (Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius) pp. 75–90.

Parry, J., (1986) 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift"' *Man* 21, 3: pp. 463–67.

Shier-Jones, A., (2010) 'Grace' in Richards, A., and Privett P., eds., *Through the Eyes of a Child*, (London: Church House Publishing) pp.165-184.

Telegraph (2014) 'New Cardinal Vincent Nichols: welfare cuts 'frankly a disgrace' online at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10639015/New-Cardinal-Vincent-Nichols-welfare-cuts-frankly-a-disgrace.html accessed 11/01/14

White, S., (2014) 'Hungry families pleading for food bank vouchers pushing GP surgeries to breaking point' *Mirror* online www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/food-banks-hungry-families-pleading-3065044#ixzz2vy7kaVyD accessed 20/01/14

Resources

End Hunger Fast: <http://endhungerfast.co.uk/>

Information checking on issues surrounding food banks:

https://fullfact.org/factchecks/malnutrition_on_rise_economic_crisis_blame-29275

Living Well www.holytrinitybeckenham.org.uk/whats-on/living-well.aspx

Oxford diocesan resources: www.foodmatters.org.uk/

British Retail Consortium at www.brc.org.uk

Trussell Trust: www.trusselltrust.org