

Dignity conference,  
10 June – page 5



# spark

news from Church Action on Poverty  
summer 2023

Hope in tough times  
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Digging deeper in our  
response to poverty  
page 14



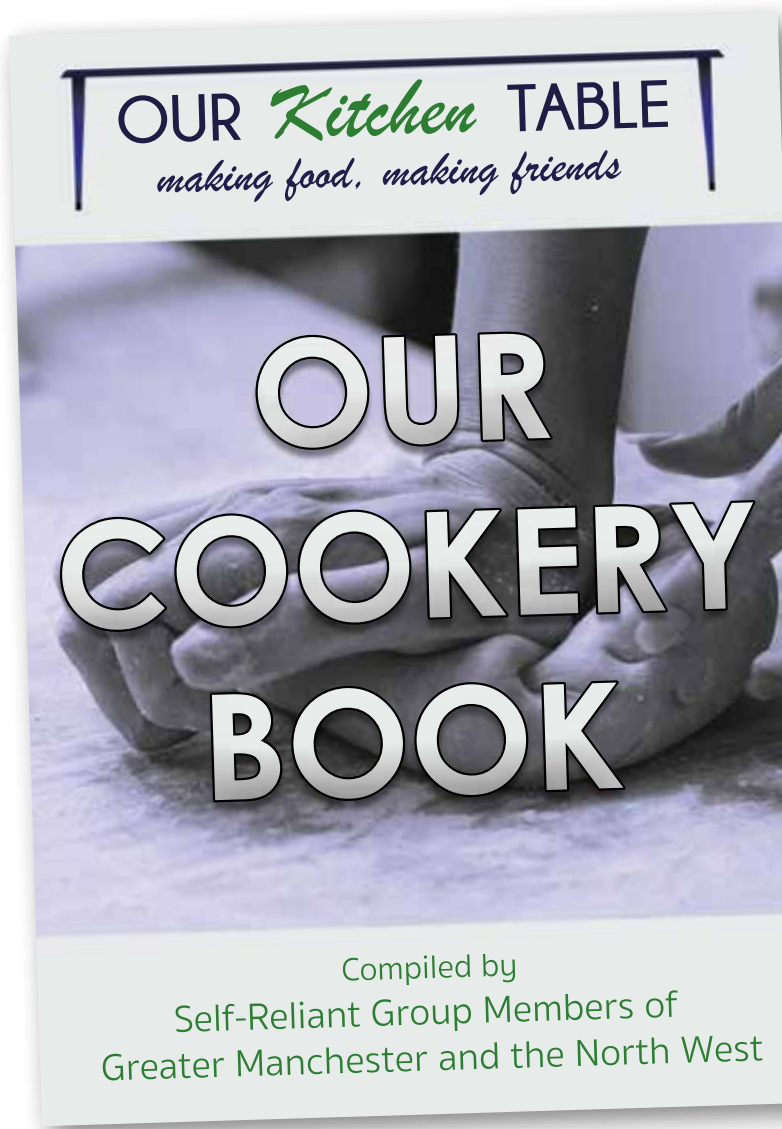
**“Every kind of poverty is linked**

**and every kind of injustice is linked”**

Gemma Athanasius-Coleman on her journey  
from food poverty to social justice activism

# Making food, Making friends

Cookbook compiled by Self-Reliant Groups



OUR *Kitchen* TABLE  
*making food, making friends*

OUR  
COOKERY  
BOOK

Compiled by  
Self-Reliant Group Members of  
Greater Manchester and the North West

**Church Action on Poverty is delighted to sell copies of *Our Kitchen Table*, an inspirational cookbook compiled by members of the Self-Reliant Groups we support in the North West.**

**SRG members share favourite recipes, together with stories about what cooking and sharing the food has meant to them in their lives. All proceeds support Self-Reliant Groups to continue their work.**



con salsa de quesos  
(with cheese sauce)

- Ingredients**
- 1/2 cup mince
  - 1/2 cup cornmeal
  - white or yellow
  - For the cheese sauce:
    - 1 cup cheddar cheese
    - 1 cup milk
    - 1/2 cup salted butter



Katchumbali (spicy cabbage)

- Ingredients**
- 1/2 white cabbage
  - 1 large red onion
  - 1/2 cup tomatoes
  - 1/2 cup red and yellow chilis
  - Juice of 1 lime
  - 1/2 teaspoon salt



**Instructions**

1. Slice finely the cabbage, onion and tomatoes.
2. Chop the chili, prepare into tiny pieces.
3. Mix well together.
4. Squeeze over the lime juice and sprinkle the salt then mix very well and leave for an hour for the flavors to mix and the cabbage to soften.
5. Green red or yellow peppers can be finely sliced and added to make a fuller salad.

**Story**

This salad is eaten with beans, meat and rice with off cuts bread of sorghum and vegetables or with a pale rice meal. It is a side salad with our traditional bread. I lived with my family in Tanzania in East Africa for many years and this spicy cabbage salad is a staple food for us. My children grew up loving to eat this salad and now I love to eat it. I have been making this salad for many years and I love to share it with my friends. I have been making this salad for many years and I love to share it with my friends.



Cheese and onion pies



- Ingredients**
- 1/2 pack of ready rolled puff pastry
  - 1/2 cup cheddar cheese
  - 1/2 cup milk
  - 1/2 cup salted butter

**Instructions**

1. Cut a round that fits the bottom of the pie dish.
2. Lightly grease the dish.
3. Bake for 10 minutes on gas mark 1.
4. Cover the bottom of an 8" pie with 1/2 cup of milk.
5. Put on top of the pastry bottom that's left. Put a strip of milk in a saucer and with your fingers dab it all over the pie top.
6. Put in the oven for 10 minutes or longer if you want it more golden.



**Story**

I chose this recipe as I remember my mum used to buy this for the first time as it was easy and quick when she came back from work. I tend to add recipes and like to have pastry at the bottom of a pie.

OUR *Kitchen* TABLE

**Order your copy – and find out more about how Self-Reliant Groups uphold people's dignity, agency and power – at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/srg](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/srg)**

# Hope and optimism in spite of present difficulties



Our Chief Executive **Niall Cooper** finds hope in the inspiring stories of the community activists we work with.

**W**here do we find hope and optimism in the face of a cost of living crisis, sweeping increasing numbers of people into poverty across the UK?

For me, the answer is always to look to the example of people who are themselves struggling against poverty. In this edition of *Spark*, we feature the stories of Gemma from Cornwall and Sue from Merseyside. Both are participants in our Speaking Truth to Power programme. Gemma's journey to activism (page 8) has meant finding the courage to speak out: "At times I feel so nervous saying I have been in poverty, but I want to break that stigma and encourage people to tell stories because that's how things change." For Sue (page 10), the motivation comes from her deep roots in her local community: "It is a strain. I am supposed to work 24 hours a week, but this week, by Wednesday, I have worked 30 hours already. I do it because

I love being here and I love the people, but for things to change we need the Government or funders to change."

These stories are testimony to the hope, optimism and resilience to be found in countless communities up and down the country, in spite of present difficulties. So too are the stories of people working together to set up Local Pantries (page 6) and Self-Reliant Groups (page 12), through which they are able to reclaim dignity, agency and power together.

For those of us who call ourselves Christian, as Greg Smith reminds us (page 14), the challenge is to go beyond charitable responses, to build honest and long-term relationships of trust, mutuality and solidarity – and to rediscover a prophetic anger about why we are even in this situation in the first place. Only then can we truly say that we have responded to Pope Francis' challenge ten years ago to become "a poor church that is of and for the poor".

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## give

Buy a **book**  
See page 2 or 16

## act

Join us for the **Dignity conference**  
See page 5

## pray

Help to build a **poor church that is for the poor**  
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# news

## All change in the staff team!

The last few months have seen a lot of changes in the Church Action on Poverty office. We were sad to say goodbye to Programme Manager Kathryn Cheetham, to Speaking Truth to Power Coordinator Anna Hamill, and to Self-Reliant Groups Worker Joyce Kay, who goes on to work with our partner Purple Shoots (see page 12).

We are pleased to welcome Kate Simcock as our new Office Manager, Karen Wilson as Finance Manager, and Lyndsey Hall as People, Partnerships and Learning Manager. Meanwhile, existing team members moved into exciting new roles: Felicity Guite is now supporting our Speaking Truth to Power programme, and Rachel Brown is now Model Development Coordinator for Your Local Pantry.



Kate Simcock,  
Office Manager



Karen Wilson,  
Finance Manager



Felicity Guite,  
STTP Coordinator



Rachel Brown, YLP  
Model Coordinator

## Budget: some good news but too much 'us and them'

On 15 March, members of our Speaking Truth to Power programme gathered on Zoom to watch the Budget announcement and discuss with a national journalist what it means for people experiencing poverty.

The Speaking Truth to Power panel (composed of experts by experience of poverty from across the UK) had wanted the Chancellor to offer a Budget driven by a desire to create a just society, which truly listens to and heeds people in poverty and on the margins, and which works to support people being swept into deepest difficulty. In particular, they had hoped to see: extended support for energy bills; more accessible and affordable childcare; opportunities for young people; the removal of flaws and cliff-edge thresholds in systems such as the carer's allowance; serious investment in new social housing; and an increase in the minimum wage.

There was some good news, such as the extension of free childcare, and the removal of excess charges for people on prepayment utility meters (see below).

But there was great concern and upset at news that: the unemployment support system will become even more punishing and inflexible; the charity sector will have to plug even more gaps in vital public services; and pension reforms are likely to benefit the already wealthy rather than wider society. One panel member commented:

**"They are reinforcing a political ideology on to poor people. It's a harsher world, to get you into any form of work at all."**

# Fair prices on fuel at last!



One piece of good news in March's Budget (see above) was the announcement of £200 million to bring energy charges for prepayment meters (PPMs) in line with prices for customers paying by direct debit. This will mean that around 4 million low-income households will no longer be forced to pay more for their energy than wealthier households do. The unjustly high rates charged by prepayment meters have long been a key part of the Poverty Premium that traps many people in poverty in the UK.

Church Action on Poverty has been calling for action to tackle this injustice for many years – fair prices for fuel were one of the demands of our 'Close the Gap' campaign in 2011–16. Our 2014 report *Let Us Switch!* highlighted how people with PPMs were not just forced to pay higher rates, but prevented from switching to more affordable tariffs with other companies. We arranged a roundtable where people affected by the issue met with the energy regulator Ofgem.

**We're delighted that our campaigning has paid off. Many thanks to all the Church Action on Poverty supporters who helped to make it happen!**

events

# DIGNITY FOR ALL

## Come together to end UK poverty

Saturday 10 June, 10am–4pm | Gateway Church, central Leeds

**Come together with us to strengthen the movement to end UK poverty. An event led by the real experts – people with experience of poverty.**

At this day-long conference, we'll come together to build new relationships, listen and learn from each other about how we can end poverty in the UK. Then, we'll plan how we can take action together to reclaim dignity, agency and power.

Our aim is to particularly build links between activists who are based in churches and other organisations, and campaigners with lived experience of poverty. By working together, we can do so much more to move towards a UK where everyone can thrive.

Join us for panel discussions, workshops and networking with a range of organisations and campaigns.

The conference is being planned and promoted by the APLE Collective, Church Action on Poverty, and the Joint Public Issues Team. Many other partners will present workshops and lead discussions.

**Book your place using the enclosed leaflet, or visit [www.church-poverty.org.uk/dignityconference](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/dignityconference). Free places are available for anyone who needs one.**



## Dignity for all – a more hopeful future

16–22 October 2023

**We all want to live with dignity and to participate fully and freely in our communities. And we know we can make that future a reality.**

Recent polling shows that almost 90% of people across the UK say it's important that more is done to tackle poverty. That overwhelming demand for action and change needs to be heard and heeded by people in power.

The dignity of people on low incomes is threatened by some powerful employers and politicians who don't pay people enough to live on, and who choose to keep benefits low. They choose not to listen to people who live in poverty, who know how we could unleash the untapped positive power of communities.

With elections for Parliament and regional mayors approaching in 2024, let's make sure all our voices are heard. Let's call for policies and plans that ensure the

dignity of everyone in our communities. Let's speak out for a more hopeful future, and show how we can get there. And let's celebrate the work of people, organisations and communities across England and Wales that are already coming together to uphold people's dignity.

### Be part of Challenge Poverty Week

You could support campaign actions... organise an event in your church or project... or even work with others to organise a regional event where people in poverty speak out. To find out more and start planning, join us for an online workshop or download free resources this summer. Sign up now at [www.challengepoverty.co.uk](http://www.challengepoverty.co.uk)

# 10 years, 100 Pantries, and a chicken



**James Henderson** has recently taken over as the Your Local Pantry Team Leader, so we caught up with him to see what is happening in the network.

## How's things?

It has been amazing to see how the network has grown since I joined in December 2021. It has been wonderful to visit a number of our Pantries across the UK and meet many more of our coordinators and volunteers at our conference and on our online trainings.

## What have you enjoyed most about the role so far?

The role is really varied and I love working with the team and our Pantries across the UK. We are blessed to have a great team and its such a privilege serving the network.

## What excites you about the Your Local Pantry network?

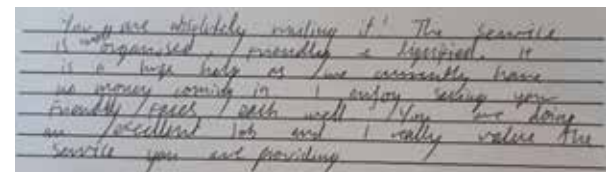
We have some really high quality partners joining the Your Local Pantry network who really embrace the values of the network. I love hearing stories of these new Pantries flourishing and the impact that this is having on members.

Just the other day, a colleague was sharing about the visit they had to Ebbw Vale in Wales, where they were going to visit the new EVI Pantry. It was Easter time and they were greeted by a wonderful staff member in a chicken suit giving out free chocolate to the members, which really made their day.

Members had a lovely area to chat with each other over a free cuppa and a biscuit, before they went into the Pantry, which is in a converted bar – a first we think for the network! The space worked so well and they

had an amazing choice of food, with some brilliant bargains and even some Easter hampers that members could enter a free raffle to win.

Members are really at the heart of this Pantry, as they are across the Your Local Pantry network, and EVI Pantry were doing a survey of members to see what they could do to improve and what days they could expand their openings to. Reading the feedback comments was truly emotional and gave a real glimpse of the difference volunteers and Coordinators are making in the Pantries across the network.



**“You are absolutely nailing it! The service is well organised, friendly and dignified. It is a huge help as we currently have no money coming in. I enjoy seeing your friendly faces each Wed. You are doing an excellent job and I really value the service you are providing.”**

## What are you looking forward to in the coming months?

It's a really exciting time in the network as we prepare to celebrate with our key partner Stockport Homes Group the 10th anniversary of the first Pantry, which was set up in May 2013. We're also working with our partners at the Co-op to plan the celebration for the 100th Pantry, which will be a huge milestone and it's very moving to see how it has progressed so quickly with the hard work of so many members, volunteers and staff.





# What I want to **change**



Campaigner and Church Action on Poverty trustee **Gemma Athanasius-Coleman** shares how a chance conversation at just the right time set her on the road to social justice activism.

**G**emma was volunteering at Newquay Orchard in Cornwall (one of Church Action on Poverty's partners), when one of the team mentioned a new project looking at food experiences during the pandemic. She joined, gained a broader and deeper understanding of the systemic causes of poverty, and is now vocal and active in campaigning for a better, more just society.

## Every kind of poverty is linked

"I lived near Newquay Orchard and was volunteering there at the time. I had come out of full-time work to care for my daughter, and was telling Andrew at the Orchard about having become a single parent and struggling financially. So he sent me an email about the Food Experiences project and it sounded right up my street.

"I had been a little involved before in some environmental stuff, and had been toying with studying around the environment.

"The Orchard got me into sustainability and social justice, and then the Food Experiences project really opened my eyes to how a lot of issues are interlinked.

"Every kind of poverty is linked and every kind of injustice is linked. That work got me interested in all those links, and what can be done to change things.

"Learning is a form of activism for me. It's not the type that involves marching to Parliament with a placard. For me, studying and learning and trying to apply that knowledge is my activism."



Read the findings and recommendations of the Food Experiences project at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/navigatingstorms](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/navigatingstorms)



Gemma at Newquay Community Orchard

## A nationwide view of poverty

Gemma grew up in Bradford, and went to university in Leeds, then moved to Cornwall in 2010 – so she has direct insight into the varying challenges facing communities in the North and South of England, and in urban and rural areas.

She also recently completed a Masters in Sustainable Development, gaining a profound understanding of the way social injustices past and present connect.

"Everything is so different here. Up north, rent was a lot cheaper, and food availability is a lot easier in cities than it is here. I didn't have a car, so experiencing rural isolation was a shock to the system at first.

"Before, I had a 24-hour Asda five minutes from where I lived, but here everything is further away and shuts earlier. A lot of areas here are very rural, and that has its own costs and challenges (although online shopping has made that easier).



“Bus and train journeys are expensive and slow. My nearest city is Truro, which would be a 40 minutes away by car, but which takes 90 minutes by bus.

“There is a lot of tourism here, and a lot of talk about second home owners taking properties and pushing the market up. Rents are very high. I’m in social housing, but private rents are very high and housing insecurity is a big issue.”

### People don’t speak up enough

“To an outsider, Newquay just looks amazing. You come on holiday and it is just stunning. It is like the California of England. A lot of people move here because it is like this is the dream.

“The reality when you get here is there is a lot of deprivation. There is not enough work, it is mostly seasonal, and minimum wage, and the cost of living is really high.

“Here has more community than where I grew up, because it is a smaller population. You can feel very isolated, but the community pulls together and it really did pull together in lockdown.

“I campaign because I think I quite enjoy being a voice for people, if that makes sense. I don’t think everybody speaks up enough about what goes on. I just feel like if I can highlight that and something can change, then that would be my ultimate goal, really. Just make a difference in my local area.

“I would say I am like 80% activist and campaigner. I find it hard, knowing there are injustices and doing nothing about it.

“It is all about fairness and equality. Everyone has a right to live a certain standard of living. There shouldn’t be such a gap between rich and poor.

“At the moment, I’m working alongside Cornwall Independent Poverty Forum on a project looking at food and schools, and what difference it makes to children to have breakfast every day and I’m hoping to start my own Social Enterprise tackling these systemic issues.

“I’m also part of the Speaking Truth To Power project, which should build confidence in speaking up about issues. At times I feel so nervous saying I have been in poverty, but I want to break that stigma and encourage people to tell stories because that’s how things change.”

### What I want to change...

“There are a couple of issues I really want to address... I had a real bee in my bonnet when I did my masters and took out a loan to cover the fees. I rang the benefits people to tell them, and they stopped my income support of £45 a week. It was penalising me for doing something. The system penalises single parents for studying and I would love that to change.

“I wrote a report on it: ‘Reducing UK poverty by addressing the barriers preventing female single parent carers from entering higher education.’

“The other issue is around carers’ allowance. I can earn up to £132 a week, and receive a carers’ allowance of £70 a week. But if I go to, say, £160 a week in earnings then I lose the whole carers’ allowance.

“So if I’m earning more than £132, but less than £200, I lose out. If I was Prime Minister, the first thing I would do is knock that on the head. I am a single person who’s given the choice of staying on a low income, or being penalised when trying to get to a higher income. I do not understand how they do not encourage people to learn. It’s not good enough at all.”

### How to be a force for change

“There was a time when I felt I needed to get into politics because they seem to be the people pulling the strings.

“But in the end, I looked into studying again, and got my masters degree. That work focused on the UN Sustainable Development Goals and it was really interesting to see how all those goals are linked and to understand the history of how everything works, and of colonialism, and how it all links together – and also of ways to change it.

“It is easy to get bogged down by everything, but remember you can do your bit – you can only do what you yourself can do as an individual. You can’t fix every issue – but you can make a difference. I remember to focus and do what I can do.”

Gemma with her children



# New hope amid the tough times



Our Media and Storytelling Coordinator **Gavin Aitchison** caught up with Sue Robinson, a community champion in Liverpool – and heard of new grounds for optimism.



If you've not seen *Made In Liverpool*, or want to refresh your memory, you can watch it at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/kenny-fields-revisited](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/kenny-fields-revisited)

**L**ast spring, tens of thousands of people heard from people in a Liverpool neighbourhood, thanks to a powerful piece of community storytelling. The *Made In Liverpool* film was a fantastic collaboration between Kensington Fields Community Association, *The Guardian*, Feeding Liverpool and Church Action on Poverty.

## Community voices

The film looked at issues around community development, local land ownership, food access and voice. So far, the film has been watched more than 70,000 times online, and has also been screened at Bolton Film Festival and as part of Challenge Poverty Week.

Now, eight months on, we wanted to catch up with one of the central storytellers, to see what had changed. Sue Robinson (on the right in the photo opposite) runs the community centre where most of the film was shot. She says:

“The film was absolutely brilliant. Once people knew about it, they were all watching it and asking if there was anything they could do. We had lots of people coming over and wanting to volunteer at the Pantry and we’ve been asking some people to help with other things.”

## Cost of living: new responses

In recent months, local people have been dragged deeper and deeper into financial difficulty, as the cost of living has risen to perilous levels. Inevitably, the community centre has been doing what it can to keep people afloat.

“Demand for the Pantry now is off the scale. We try to keep to 150 members, but it’s hard and we have a waiting list now of about 35, and we’re also handing out a lot of emergency food support.

“The other new thing we are doing is slow cookery classes. Everyone says the slow cookers are amazing – it’s cheaper than using the oven or microwave, so

people can do a meal for much less. So we are doing classes and supplying slow cookers, and as soon as one course ends there are people wanting to join the next one.

“We are still doing our lunch club as well, and we are doing two days a week as a warm hub, for people to come here and be able to save on turning the heating on at home.

“We always ask people what they want us to do at the centre, and at the moment people all want activities around the cost of living, so we try to meet those needs. We’re still doing work with children in the evenings and holidays as well, and a food element comes into everything now. Everything relates to food and energy.

“It is a strain. I am supposed to work 24 hours a week, but this week, by Wednesday, I have worked 30 hours already. I do it because I love being here and I love the people, but for things to change we need the Government or funders to change.”

## Where change starts

Bringing about change like that is not easy. But speaking up is a vital beginning. Sue and others locally are part of the new Speaking Truth To Power programme, backed by Church Action on Poverty, which will support people with experience of poverty and marginalisation as they campaign for systemic change, social justice and more inclusive, dignified systems.

And already, locally, there are glimmers of hope...

One of the big themes identified in last year’s film was the uncertainty around the community centre’s future. For years, Sue and the team have been asking the council to help them secure the lease on the building, or to secure new premises if they do need to move.

Now, after much persistence and tenacity, talks are finally taking place. Watch this space.

**I do it because I love being here and I love the people,**

**but for things to change**

**we need the Government or funders to change**



Myra and Sue in front of the 'Kensington' mural outside the Kensington Fields community centre

# Self-Reliant Groups and churches

Self-Reliant  
Groups

**An exciting new partnership offers a new way for churches to be part of our work with Self-Reliant Groups.**

**W**e have been working closely with our partner organisations to improve our offering to Self-Reliant Groups (SRGs).

Last November, we came together with partner SRG organisations Purple Shoots, Trust Leeds and WeMove (Rotterdam) to look at how our four organisations could collaborate to make the most of our respective strengths and experience to expand the SRG movement.

One exciting new development is the extension of Self-Reliant Brew – the online get-together on the second Thursday of every month, which was started by Church Action on Poverty during lockdown. This is now open to all SRG members and anyone interested in SRGs UK-wide.

In February 2023, after 12 years with Church Action on Poverty, Joyce Kay, our Self-Reliant Groups Coordinator, moved on to a role as Self-Reliant Developer with our partners Purple Shoots.

This was goodbye but not farewell, as Joyce and Purple Shoots will still be working with us in a partnership role.

Purple Shoots is an ethical lending charity, operating with a Christian ethos and with values closely aligned to those of Church Action on Poverty. They are based in South Wales but also operate in parts of England, and have been hugely successful in tackling poverty through providing ethical loans for entrepreneurs turned down by traditional lenders, as well as supporting people taking the first step back to independence through Self-Reliant Groups. Their aim is to tackle poverty by giving people the power to change their own lives inside and out.





## How churches can get involved in the SRG movement

Purple Shoots are now developing a programme to work with churches who want to start Self-Reliant Groups within their communities. Depending on your church's needs and resources, they can engage with you, your congregation and your local community at different levels.

You will need to provide a cost-free space to meet and one or two volunteers who are willing to be trained in the principles of SRGs and how to start groups locally. Purple Shoots will discuss with church leadership, exchange ideas and help to develop a plan tailored to the needs of the local community. This could be anything from a simple course that develops practical skills and spiritual growth, to a gardening group, craft group or training on how to start a community café – whatever you think would help your community. The plan is that these courses develop into a Self-Reliant Group (SRG) of people trying out enterprising ideas and supporting each other.

Once the groups are established, there is ongoing mentoring and opportunities to network with other groups within the wider SRG movement.

With a little more support, Purple Shoots can help you to develop a small network of these groups meeting local needs, run by local people, where your church is at the heart of their community. If your church has current or retired business people, they can help you to offer advice and support to groups or individuals starting enterprises, making a strong base for your local community to grow together.

Being in an SRG means

I am part of something worthwhile.

Something that gives me hope

that my life can get better

### Find out more or get involved

- Read more about SRGs, and order a brilliant cookbook produced by SRG members, at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/srg](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/srg)
- Join Purple Shoots for an online introduction to Self-Reliant Groups for churches this June: [www.church-poverty.org.uk/churchesandsrgs](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/churchesandsrgs)



# We have to **dig deeper** in our response to poverty



Theologian **Greg Smith** challenges churches to find their prophetic anger. (This article first appeared on the 'Grace and Truth' blog and is reproduced by permission.)

**A** recent article by Jo Moore at <https://gracetruth.blog> highlighted a significant issue: that unconditional generosity can so easily lead to dependency for the recipient. Those of us who have been active in this kind of work recognise the sense of entitlement which easily develops in response to whatever welfare provision or charity that is offered.

Christian professionals and campaigners in the poverty and development industry have long recognised that generosity is not enough. The arguments are well rehearsed in the context of international aid in Corbet and Finkett's book *When Helping Hurts*.

## Is first aid enough?

But Jo's article also provoked a strong reaction in me. My own church, alongside other faith and community groups and our council, is deeply involved in this ministry. Personally I spend many hours in supporting and organising such work.

We are one example of the hundreds of churches, mosques and community groups who have been eager to respond to the urgent needs of people struggling with poverty and a precarious life. In recent years, over 2,500 food banks have been established. And now, in response to the current cost of living crisis, thousands of 'warm welcome centres' have opened too. While these initiatives provide essential first aid to people in crisis, and may even save lives, they remain problematic.

## Digging deeper

Jo is right to dig deeper in trying to find out what kind of help can make a significant and real difference to people's lives, so that they can move beyond the crisis of an empty larder.

So in her (as in most other) food banks, customers are asked some questions, and attempts are made to address underlying issues. If the questions are asked sensitively and if there are good referral pathways

to other agencies who can help with issues such as employment, debt, addictions and domestic violence, much good can be done. However, the key to success is building long-term relationships of trust. Mutuality always trumps charity.

Sadly, the model of the food bank industry is fundamentally a welfare-client transaction conditional on a referral from an organisation that holds power. This is simply not well fitted to building relationships of solidarity and providing personal dignity. Improved models of delivering food aid are emerging, such as food co-operatives, pay-as-you-feel markets, and Local Pantries.

But there is also a strong case that anti-poverty work is most effective if located, not so much in projects and para-church organisations, but in the gospel and local churches that are deeply rooted in the life of economically struggling local communities. Here it is that deep, honest and life-transforming relationships can best be built. The case is well and passionately argued in Mez McConnell's *The Least, The Last and the Lost*.

## Structural injustice

Jo's questioning of people who visit the food bank seems to place a great burden on the individual, and to locate the causes of poverty firmly in personal behaviour and attitudes. A survey for The Evangelical Alliance in 2015 demonstrated that this interpretation of UK poverty is almost universal among Christians. In my view this is misguided and can become a dangerous form of victim blaming.

We need to have more understanding and sympathy for the complex factors which underlie the struggles people face as they confront economic disadvantage. These include family and social class background, where they live, educational disadvantage, poor housing, health and disability issues, trauma from violence and abuse, and powerlessness against the system. Structural injustice and growing inequality are problems around the globe which cannot be ignored.

The key to success is building long-term relationships of trust. Mutuality always trumps charity

## Going upstream

Therefore we need to go upstream, to investigate underlying causes of poverty and injustice to bring prophetic words and campaign for political change. We need holistic analysis and a programme of action on multiple fronts.

We can take inspiration from my friend Bob Holman, who combined Christian integrity, compassionate community work and a structural and political analysis of poverty. His approach shows how Christians really can be good news to individuals, our communities and our country.

This does not mean we can deny individual agency and personal responsibility, for that is central to the human condition. People created by God and

placed in society are moral beings. It is often right to challenge people with a word of 'tough love'. Darren McGarvey, an expert in the field by lived experience, has explored this brilliantly in his books such as *Poverty Safari* and his recent Reith Lecture.

In short, Christians need to go beyond the charity of food banks. We need to build honest relationships in community and work alongside people who come presenting a need. But we also need to raise our voice to change the inequality and injustice that has led to the rapid rise of so many services providing for basic needs. We need a prophetic anger about why we are even in this situation in the first place.

We need to go upstream, investigate causes of poverty and injustice to bring prophetic words

# A poor church that is for the poor?

Pope Francis' words 10 years ago challenged and changed us – can they change the church?

**T**en years ago this March, Pope Francis announced that he wanted "a church that is poor, and for the poor". Those words, issued during his first address to the media after his election as Pope, were a challenge to denominations and church leaders all around the world – and also to us, here at Church Action on Poverty.

What would a poor church, for the poor, look like? What would it mean for the way our churches operate? How might it change our understanding of church, faith and community? These words and this challenge became an ever-present context for our work here at Church Action on Poverty.

## Church on the Margins

We began discussing the issue more and more widely. and by 2016 we published our first report, bringing together wisdom, insight and opinion from across the churches: *Church of the poor? A call to action*.

In that report, our Chief Executive Niall Cooper said: "It surely can't be left up to what are typically small and struggling churches in poorer neighbourhoods to shoulder the burden of responding to the challenge. What priority does the wider Church give to the task of becoming a Church for the poor? ... For Church Action on Poverty this report is only the start."

## Church of the poor: a lasting work

In 2020 we launched our Church on The Margins programme. From the outset, we were impressed and inspired by the Church of Scotland, whose 'priority areas' work gives clear priority to low-income neighbourhoods. How would other denominations compare?

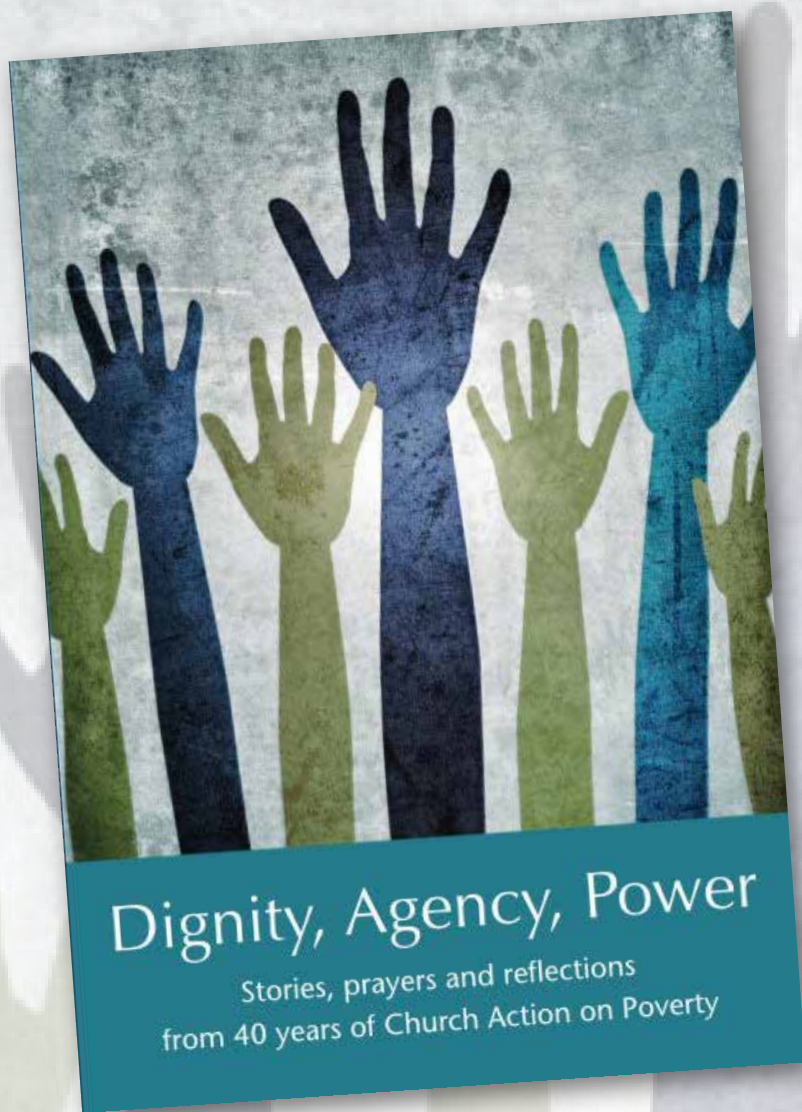
This work recently reached a milestone, when we published two new reports: *What does it mean to be a church on the margins?* and *Is the church losing faith in low-income communities?*

The first report looks at statistics, to see how the biggest English denominations were engaging with low-income neighbourhoods. Worryingly, the research team found that church closures between 2010 and 2020 had disproportionately happened in low-income areas. The second report documents frustrations with barriers around disability, literacy, class, language, leadership and power within mainstream churches. The powerful voices and stories shared combine faith and a desire for action.

Those two reports deepen our collective understanding or what it means to be "a poor church of and for the poor". But they are not the end of the journey either. We are now looking at new ways to engage and challenge churches, at local and national level, to respond in meaningful and tangible ways to the Pope's challenge, ten years ago this year.



Read all three reports, and learn more about Church on the Margins, at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm)



“Here is liturgical resistance in practice. This is a great book of witness.”

Kathy Galloway,  
former Head of Christian Aid Scotland

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