

Church Action
on Poverty
Sunday 2024 – see page 4

spark

news from Church Action on Poverty
autumn 2023

**“It feels like
they’ve flown”**

Self-Reliant Groups -
page 6

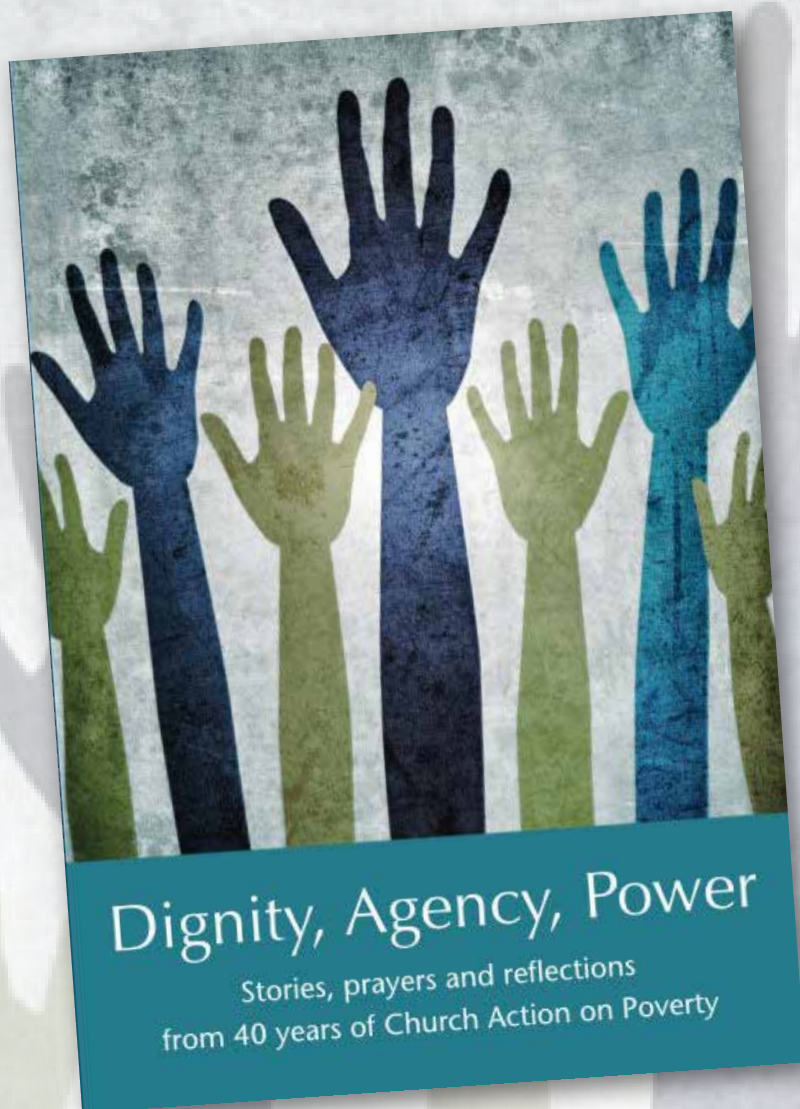
Tackling poverty via
radio and art
page 10

“We love the Pantry

and all the lovely volunteers”



As the 100th Pantry opens and we launch our new social impact report,
read about how Local Pantries are doing so much more
in communities across the UK – see page 8



“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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**40 years of
Church Action
on Poverty**

Let's End Poverty together



Our Chief Executive **Niall Cooper** is imagining a future where poverty in the UK is no longer allowed to keep anyone down.

The next General Election should mark the beginning of the end for poverty in the UK. There doesn't have to be poverty in our society – it's a solvable, avoidable problem – and continuing to avoid solving it is a deliberate political choice. Tackling poverty has to become a priority for anyone with ambitions to be in government.

That's why on 14 October, we're coming together with people and partners across the UK for our first Let's End Poverty Assembly to organise and plan how we can stand together for a future free from poverty (see page 5). Together, we know what it's like to live in poverty. We understand what causes it. We can help to solve it. But we can't do it on our own. We're asking our political leaders to step up and take urgent, coordinated action to break poverty's grip.

Change comes, not from looking and seeing – but from taking action. For Church Action on Poverty, this kind of true

change will only come through building a powerful grassroots movement. Your Local Pantry is a remarkable demonstration of what local communities can achieve together. In July, the first ever Pantry turned 10 years old, whilst in Kent, we celebrated the opening of the 100th Pantry. Today, more than 33,000 households are members, and over the past 10 years the total is more than 90,000. More and more communities have seen what Pantries can do for their neighbourhoods – and what neighbourhoods can do for each other.

And that's why you can also read in these pages the stories of Jo, Mary and Esther. Three women from Bootle, York and Southwark making change happen in their own communities. "It's the voices of the people that are meant to be heard, but from my own experience, it doesn't happen most of the time. But we can make a change, and that's why we're here."

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give

**Hold a service on Church
Action on Poverty
Sunday**
See page 4

act

**Prepare for the Lets End
Poverty campaign**
See page 5

pray

**Poems from the
Pilgrimage on the
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news

Changes in the team

This summer we were pleased to welcome a new member to the Church Action on Poverty staff team. Lindsey Hall (below) joins us as our People, Partnerships and Learning Manager.

We're also about to say a sad farewell to John Dale, who has been chair of our Council of Management since 2020. We're working to recruit a new chair by the autumn.



Crafting stories for a more just and equal world

You may recall that last year, we worked with *The Guardian*, Feeding Liverpool and Kensington Fields Community Association on a wonderful film about the community and local people's hopes and aspirations.

The Guardian Foundation recently completed a report into the impact of that film, and of others in its *Made In Britain* series.

The report made happy reading – the researchers found evidence of improved confidence and skills among participants, raised pride and agency among communities, new partnerships, renewed hope of change, and a profound shift in journalism, with potential for future collaborations.

It said: "Crafting stories that were positive brought a sense of being heard, and a sense of pride, which connected contributors' personal journeys with their community. After films were launched to positive feedback, contributors spoke with pride about the response, and how it further bolstered their sense of achievement and self-confidence."

It added: "*Made In Britain*, with all of its challenges, became one small but important galvanising step in a far wider set of intersecting regional, national, and global movements advocating for a more just and equal world."



You can watch the film we worked on by searching on YouTube for 'Made In Liverpool'

events



Challenge Poverty Week Scotland: 2–8 October 2023 England and Wales: 16–22 October 2023

Let's call for policies 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 that are already coming together to uphold people's dignity.

Sign up now at
www.challengepoverty.co.uk



Church Action on Poverty Sunday 11 February 2024

Join with other churches across the UK in giving, action and prayer. Celebrate the transformational possibilities of people coming together. Use our free worship resources to reflect and pray for change, and raise funds to enable people in poverty to speak truth to power. **Sign up using the enclosed leaflet or at www.church-poverty.org.uk/sunday**

Let's End Poverty



Church Action on Poverty is proud to be part of this new campaign. Hannah Fremont-Brown, from our allies at the Joint Public Issues Team, explains how you can join a growing movement working to get poverty on the agenda at the next election.

Imagine a future where poverty in the UK is no longer allowed to keep anyone down. Where everyone has enough to eat and has a good quality of life. Where everyone is supported through hard times, without needing to rely on food banks, clothes banks or warm hubs. Where all of us are able to wake up in the morning with hope, opportunities and options for living a fulfilling life – to feel optimism and pride that our communities can thrive.

There doesn't have to be poverty in the UK, but our society has been built in a way that traps people in hardship and keeps them there. The rising cost of living is pulling more people into poverty, and whilst there's an incredible network of support across the UK in food banks and warm spaces, we need our political leaders to take notice and take responsibility.

That's why the next General Election should mark the beginning of the end for poverty in the UK. There doesn't have to be poverty in our society, and continuing to avoid solving it is a deliberate political choice. Tackling poverty has to become a priority for anyone with ambitions to be in government. The pandemic has shown how much people in this country care for others and want to support and protect each other. Our leaders have to show the same spirit.

We want our political leaders to commit to urgent, coordinated action on poverty and everything that locks people in it – inequalities in education, health and access to support, an inadequate social security system, and the lack of affordable, decent-quality homes, to name just a few. The human cost of neglecting these challenges is too big and too damaging to ignore. We've reached the limit, and we know that across the UK public there's a clear desire for action – 88% of people say more should be done to tackle poverty.

That's why we're coming together, as a growing group of people who have experienced or witnessed poverty, united by a vision for a UK free from poverty. We know what it's like to live in poverty. We understand what causes it. We can help to solve it. But we can't do it on our own. We're asking



our political leaders to step up and take urgent, coordinated action to break poverty's grip.

By building a movement of people who take action to push poverty higher up the agenda at the next general election, we want to send the message loud and clear that the next generation has to be free from the appalling injustice of poverty – to find it unthinkable that poverty was allowed to go on for so long. For this to be a reality, we need our leaders to commit to structural change and political action.

An effective movement is going to take all of us to bring our experience, expertise and networks together to say that we don't and won't accept a society where poverty persists. By working together across diverse communities, we can build energy and action that shows political leaders what we're calling for. Together, we can open up the invitation to our leaders to work with us to end poverty in the UK for good.

5,000 people watched former Prime Minister Gordon Brown launch the new campaign at the Greenbelt festival this summer

Ready to join the movement?

Join us on Saturday 14 October for our first Let's End Poverty Assembly. We're gathering across the UK to organise and plan how we can stand together for a future free from poverty.

Visit www.church-poverty.org.uk/letsendpoverty to find out more.



It feels like they've **flown**



We've been hearing of remarkable progress among a small group on Merseyside.

We all need a fresh start sometimes. A new idea, or a new opportunity. New friendships perhaps or a new routine. Maybe just fresh impetus and new hope. A group of women in Bootle, near Liverpool, have been enjoying all of that newness, and more, since becoming involved in the Self-Reliant Group movement. The women became involved only in late 2022, but are already reporting greater positivity, new friendships and new excitement about what lies ahead.

The pictures on these pages show some of the creative group members at work in Bootle. Members say the Self-Reliant Group has helped them greatly.

How Self-Reliant Groups work

Self-Reliant Groups bring people together. Members support each other and meet regularly, share skills, learn together, and typically save small amounts together each week, to explore new ideas and opportunities. Groups are independent and make their own decisions, so don't have to tick anyone else's boxes. Church Action on Poverty has supported the expansion of groups across North West England, and was introduced to the group in Bootle through local community

project, St Leonard's. Jo Seddon, who runs the group, says:

"It feels like they've flown. I do think the sessions we had kickstarted a different train of thought. There's a new confidence, a new self-belief. People are saying, 'You know what?... we can do it!'"

Self-Reliant Groups: a journey in Bootle

St Leonard's had set up a women's space in a local shopping area, and people were introduced via other local projects or through word of mouth. Bootle is an area with many difficulties: a lack of job opportunities, severe under-investment, challenges around health and education, and significant poverty. But as everywhere, there is community pride, tenacity, and a determination to make things better. Jo says:

"We set up a craft hub and had a sewing tutor, and we ended up having a fabulous group of people who were interested. We were then introduced to Joyce and Felicity from Church Action on Poverty, and it has been amazing. It has been a small group (three women and one man) but we have had

Find out more about Self-Reliant Groups at www.church-poverty.org.uk/srg



some really nice sessions, and it has opened up people's thinking about what they are all capable of. It has shown what talents people have and has helped improve their own sense of value."

Two of the women had been lacking confidence and struggling with anxiety, and one was also grieving following a family bereavement when the group began.

Self-Reliant Groups: the impact for members

Jo said:

"One of the women, Ann, has had some difficult issues but she makes amazing things and has started helping the tutor and she is going from strength to strength and has really benefited from Joyce and Felicity's sessions.

Another of the women, Claire, makes wonderful blankets. She has health difficulties and was feeling down, but what has come out of the sessions is belief. People started feeling they could make stuff for our shop at St Leonard's, but we said to go beyond that – see what they could do independently of us. So now they have hired tables at craft fairs for this autumn and Christmas at an old church in Waterloo near where they live, and they will be selling things they have made.

People have become friends. There's another woman, Deirdre, who makes bags, and people are becoming friends and sharing skills. I cannot believe it's the same people who I knew before. It's just amazing seeing them looking ahead and planning things and talking about products they are going to make.

I've seen people walking through our doors anxious and not knowing anybody, and where we are now is lovely to see. Joyce and Felicity were so lovely. I have been working in charity for 40 years, and I know what it means to talk about independence. But these sessions have really brought it home for the people involved."

What Church Action on Poverty did

Joyce and Felicity had spent several mornings with the group, talking through the possibility that some of them could form a group, who would meet regularly to support each other, learn to share their skills and learn from each other, and who would collect a small amount of money so that eventually they might launch a small enterprise or business.

When they began, the idea such an enterprise would have seemed far-fetched and something of a pipe dream but today, less than six months on, it is already a reality.

The group initially met at Claire's house because of her health, and as it was hard for her to get out but they soon involved others. Ann had been inspired by and learned quilting from her late mother and was a fantastic quilter. Deirdre made bags, and was a talented sewer. They pooled their talents and shared their knowledge. The answer to the question "What can we do?" was that they could make things. And they did.

The group organised themselves and supported each other. The table rental of around £15 a session came from the funds they had collected, and the new friends are all making things for the fairs. A local woodworker and carpenter, John, who makes things but has had no outlet to sell them, has also joined the group and is joining in the preparations and production.

What the group has accomplished already is a triumph – but if the fairs go well, that could be the icing on the cake.

The people mentioned in this article have made incredible progress, but do not yet want to be named widely. Jo is using her real name, but the other names have been changed.



So much **more!**



Read about how your church or community project could forge community and save people £21 a week.

Across the UK, more than 90,000 people have now enjoyed the wide-ranging benefits of Your Local Pantry membership. The first Pantry has just turned 10 years old, and in July, in Kent, the 100th Pantry opened.

But how did the network grow so far and so fast? We want to share some learnings and lessons that could help your own work. Particularly, if you are active in your church, we want to show how a Your Local Pantry could help your church to bring people together around food in a dignified and hope-filled way.

So Much More: the Pantry story

This summer we launched *So Much More*, our new report looking at the impact Pantries are having across the UK. It made for positive reading. Pantry members now save £21 on groceries, each time they use the Pantry, meaning regular members can save more than £1,000 a year. But as the title says, Pantries are doing so much more than helping members save money.

- They are bringing people together around food.
- They are strengthening community cohesion.
- They are reducing isolation and improving physical and mental health.
- They are creating opportunities and hope, and loosening the grip of poverty in people's lives.

Pantries are a remarkable nationwide success story, but the idea began very modestly, in just one neighbourhood, in one town, in the North West of England. Anna Jones remembers the early days well. She was working for Stockport Homes, and many residents were in the midst of crisis. The controversial 'bedroom tax' was forcing people to move or be penalised, and there were not enough smaller homes available.

"We noticed a real increase in food bank use at that time, and Stockport Homes was really worried how residents would make ends meet. We started looking into different food schemes. There were lots of different ideas – free food distribution, or a food hall serving meals for instance – but we decided the most impactful thing would be to do a volunteer-led community food store, where people contributed towards it."

"Thanks to the Pantry I have an advocate to help me manage my debts"

So Much More: a seed that has grown

That store opened in May 2013 as Penny Lane Pantry, the first Your Local Pantry in the country. Stockport Homes opened further Your Local Pantries around the town – and in 2017, Pantries went national.

Dave Nicholson was working for Church Action on Poverty, tasked with finding community initiatives that mitigated against the 'poverty premium' – the unjust pricing structures that make life more expensive for people on low incomes. Dave went to visit the first Pantries, and was immediately impressed, and the national journey had begun.

So Much More than a handout

Dave recalls:

"I was impressed that it was a member-based approach, so there was a much greater degree of agency for the people involved. It's not just charity and handouts, which is what food



banks tend to be. Also, it had potential to be more sustainable in terms of food and easing the poverty premium.

“Church Action on Poverty started looking at the model and got some people to help, and then in 2017 we launched the Your Local Pantry network as a franchise model.

“It has been great to see my autistic son’s mental health improve in coming here. He doesn’t usually want contact with anyone, but he has taken to some of the volunteers really well – even walking round holding their hands”

So Much More to be proud of

Today, Anna too says she feels a real sense of achievement in the way the first Pantries fostered a community togetherness, and at the way it has grown further than anyone could have imagined.

“It’s incredible how it has grown from that first Pantry. I still keep in touch with Fiona, who also worked on the Pantries, and we say when we’ve seen where the latest Pantry is.”

Today, more than 33,000 people are benefiting, and over the past 10 years the total is more than 90,000. More and more communities have seen what Pantries can do for their neighbourhoods – and what neighbourhoods can do for each other.

So Much More: a call to the country

Communities have shown us that there is so much more they can do when they come together, and when they are entrusted with resources and support. Yet we know they cannot do everything on their own. Pantries operate within a difficult wider context, and they are sometimes hindered rather than helped by systems beyond their control.

Many members, volunteers and Pantries tell of the acute damage being wrought by soaring living costs. Many Pantries are also now having to spend significant sums on food, topping up their stocks, as the FareShare distribution network struggles to meet soaring need.

This should be a wake-up call to the whole country, and one that rings loudly at Westminster above all. Community organisations have long warned that charity is not the long-term answer to food insecurity. Government must now step up. Everyone should have access to good food, and that means all incomes need to keep pace with rising living costs, so people are not swept deeper into poverty.



“I was able to save up to buy a bike for my son so he can get to college. I am saving towards us having a short family holiday this year, which we’ve never had before.”

Pantries offer so much more than food - including community, friendship and support

Why ‘So Much More’?

- Because Pantries are doing so much more than anyone could ever have imagined when the first one opened. Every single Pantry now offers something more than food. The 100 Pantries (and their 2,000 volunteers) are working wonders.
- Because Pantries remind us that communities can be - and do - so much more by coming together, cooperating and collaborating. None of us can achieve much on our own. By forging local partnerships and building relationships where we live, so much more is possible.
- Because, notwithstanding that incredible work, there is still so much more the country as a whole needs to do. Many Pantries and members are at the sharp end of the cost of living emergency. We need the Government to do so much more to ensure incomes keep pace with living costs, and to prevent people being swept into poverty.

Over to you...

Could you start a Pantry in your church or community? Setting up a Pantry is relatively low-cost if you have a venue, volunteers and a good supply of food. Pantries can cover most of their operating costs from weekly membership payments. Our team have experience in helping to set up and support 100 Pantries around the UK. Find out so much more about the benefits of Pantry membership, and enquire about setting one up, at www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk

So Much More:
read the full
report at [www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/
social-impact-
reports](http://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/social-impact-reports)



Tackling poverty via **radio**, **art** and a newfound **resolve**

We hear from artist and activist **Mary Passeri**.

Change comes, not from looking and seeing – but from taking action. And Mary has certainly done lots of that. In the past eight years, Mary has spent time:

- tackling social isolation
- cooking and sharing food
- improving coordination between food banks
- helping journalists improve media coverage of poverty
- speaking up about injustice
- highlighting ways to improve support for carers
- working to make her own city better
- helping politicians understand what went wrong with food systems during the pandemic
- listening widely to people on low incomes
- sharing her own wisdom and first-hand insights
- talking to people in poverty, to politicians, to journalists, to researchers, to church leaders and to an Archbishop
- working with others to carry on addressing injustice

Mary Passeri, at her art studio in York. Photo by David Harrison.



Briefly, among all of that, she paused for a week of vital and rewarding rest and reflection with fellow activists on the Scottish island of Iona as part of Church Action on Poverty's Pilgrimage on the Margins... and came back re-energised more than ever.

A sense of peace and purpose

"It can be really lonely and isolating to speak up on issues, you can feel like you're yapping away. Being on Iona, and meeting people face to face, sharing a laugh together and learning from each other's ideas and mistakes, was amazing. I came back and it had quite a lasting effect on me. For me, it brought peace and purpose. I felt at ease and thought: 'You know what... maybe we can do something more'."

Speaking up matters

Mary is now part of the national Speaking Truth To Power programme, in partnership with Church Action on Poverty, working with others around the UK on a national panel to address big issues.

"I wanted to get into the national stuff with Church Action on Poverty because it had a real focus but was still flexible. It didn't over-promise, but has real targets.

"I took part in the Food Experiences During Covid-19 project, and I loved that. I found it really interesting, and because it was so wide, I was talking to people in Cornwall and Newcastle and hearing people encountering very similar issues in all these different places. "Having done that, I then wanted to do the Speaking Truth To Power work as well. I saw, more than ever, the need for people to be heard. It's too easy to discount voices. I realise I have done it myself, and not always listened to everyone equally, and sometimes have to force myself to listen better, but it's important."

Speak up in the church

Mary was one of the people who took part in the roundtable on tackling poverty, with the Archbishop of York in 2022.

"I am not a church person, and don't like a lot of churches, but the churches have a wide network and a nationwide voice, and I like where churches have put their head above the parapet and said things that need to be said... Church Action on Poverty is about pragmatic responses. It's looking to resolve things, not just looking and seeing them. It supports people to speak up and articulate what you are feeling. When I was working professionally, I was used to running departments and being heard, but after I became ill, after my strokes, I lost all confidence. The sense of being able to use my voice, and being heard, was gone – but through being part of this work with Church Action on Poverty, I will not let that happen again."

Speak up with young people

"There are issues I hope we can highlight through the Speaking Truth To Power work... We are at risk of alienating our young people and we need to create more opportunities... I also think that everything that comes through Parliament now is about scapegoating. They talk about getting people into work, but don't recognise that some people cannot. And everything carries a warning: 'Do this... Or else.' We need to engage people."

Speak up creatively

Mary's recent years of activism began around 2015 really, through a café called Chill In The Community:

"The idea was that ... free groceries might help people to afford to have a coffee and to be in the company of other people, so it was tackling social isolation... After that, I started working with the York 'Food Not Bombs' group, cooking and delivering food, supporting people who were homeless. Soon after that, York Food Poverty Alliance was set up... After a while, it became York Food Justice Alliance...and we said if it was about justice, then we needed to have an activist element, rather than just discussing how to hand out food. That didn't sit well with everyone, but we felt it had to happen."

Speak up in the media

In 2018–19, Mary took part in a York Community Reporters project, where several women made smartphone videos, explaining and showing the realities of food poverty locally. The film was shown at a public event in York, and soon afterwards Mary and Sydnie featured on the national BBC 6 O'Clock News, Radio 5 Live and on BBC Radio York.

She also worked with the NUJ, journalists and other campaign groups, to help produce new guidelines for reporting on poverty. Most recently, Mary has used her artistic skills to lead creative sessions among the Speaking Truth To Power groups, encouraging people to visually capture the nature of poverty and solutions.

Mary was speaking with our Media and Storytelling Coordinator Gavin Aitchison.

Mary (left) and friend Sydnie Corley, speaking up on BBC 5 Live, about the solutions to poverty



I like working with Church Action on Poverty,

because everything is transparent.

They never make promises they can't keep.

“We can make a change. That’s why we’re here.”

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

We hear how Church Action on Poverty’s ‘Speaking Truth To Power’ programme is progressing in London.

Change happens when people come together and demand it. The exciting new Speaking Truth To Power programme is enabling that to happen. People who know first-hand what causes and sustains poverty in the UK are coming together. Speaking up. Taking action.

The programme consists of a national panel, and two localised groups: one in Liverpool and one in Peckham in Southwark, south London.

Meet the Southwark project

We asked Flora Schweighofer, community engagement officer at Pecan, our partner organisation in Southwark, and Esther, a member of their Voices for Southwark group, to talk to us about how the programme is going so far.

Flora, can you start by telling us a bit about Pecan?

“As a community charity, Pecan offers practical and emotional support to people in Peckham and across Southwark in South East London.

In addition to direct support with food at Southwark Foodbank and Peckham Pantry, our community food projects aim to see a Southwark where everyone has enough money to afford the essentials and emergency food is no longer needed.”

And you’ve started working on the Speaking Truth To Power project. Can you tell us what that involves and why it appealed to Pecan?

“The Speaking Truth to Power project complements our work and vision at Pecan. “Participation and community organising are already a big part of our work at Pecan, and our local organising project at Southwark Foodbank is part of the Trussell Trust’s Organising and Local Mobilisation programme. With this project, we aim to address structural local issues and build campaigns that are led by members of our community who have used our foodbank, Pantry or have lived experience of financial hardship.”

A recent Voices
For Southwark
workshop



How is it going so far?

"It's going well and we've really grown together as a group over the last months.

We've been holding monthly group discussion meetings on local issues in Southwark since September 2022. The aim was to come together to share our experiences with and thoughts on some of the issues that contribute to financial hardship locally.

From our brainstorming and open discussion activities, we have narrowed down our list and decided on one issue to focus on for now.

Our plans for the next months ahead are to continue our regular meetings and further develop our campaign.

We want to be part of more conversations with local government representatives and other decision-makers to share our plans and asks for a Southwark where everyone can afford the essentials."

Esther, you've been part of Pecan's community organising work since the discussion meetings started last year. What are some of the issues that local people are raising and want to address?

"We talked about so many changes that we want to see as a group: cleanliness of our borough, transport that's affordable to all, reducing barriers to getting into employment.

For now, we have decided to focus on easily accessible information and holistic support combining a range of services."

Lastly, Esther, why do you think all this matters – why is it important that people do speak truth to power?

"For the services rendered to be effective and productive, the users' voices have to be heard. Otherwise, it can be a bit pointless. When you're not listening to the people that you serve, it won't really have an impact on their lives.

It's the voices of the people that are meant to be heard, but from my own experience, it doesn't happen most of the time. But we can make a change, and that's why we're here."



Esther is a community organiser at Pecan

**It's the voices of the people
that are meant to be
heard, but from my own
experience, it doesn't
happen most of the time.
But we can make a change**



We visited Pecan as part of Church Action on Poverty's Pilgrimage on the Margins in 2022

Church on the margins

“The way of **Jesus** means taking the side of people who are **oppressed**”

We talk to **Revd Kate Gray** about what our ‘Church on the Margins’ programme meant for her church – and what comes next.

Earlier this year, Church Action on Poverty published its pioneering Church On The Margins reports, after three years of research. Now, just a few months on, there are already signs of at least one positive shift in church direction.

If you missed it, the work was in two strands. There was a statistical analysis, which found that church closures were disproportionately high in low-income neighbourhoods. And there was a reflective and conversational strand, which considered what it actually means to be a church on the margins in our society.

One of the groups that participated extensively in the work and hosted a series of conversations was the Dandelion Community United Reformed Church group in Wythenshawe, just south of Manchester.

Revd Kate Gray, from the church, says the discussions worked well.

“The food helped bring it together and gave it a nice feel. There were sessions that were storytelling from experience, and listening to each other, and it wasn’t just Wythenshawe people who were there; some had ventured over from elsewhere nearby.

There were a variety of approaches in the team, and we used a ‘talking stick’, taking it in turns to share. It was facilitated in a way that was gentle and respectful and that meant the stories flowed.”

Kate says language and atmosphere, as well as the presence of food, were important in making the conversations fruitful.

“It didn’t use language of ‘poor people’ or ‘the poor’. It was clear from the outset it was not that, and that was helpful. It was a group of



Revd Kate Gray is minister at the Dandelion Community

God has lots to say about this,

the Bible has lots to say about this,

so the church should act

people coming to listen alongside, rather than to tell.

Wythenshawe is not in the middle of a city. It's a housing estate and I think there is a sense in which the church has always been on the margins and been marginalised. Sometimes that's been very helpful for us because we've been able to work past very central and dominant ways of working, and so because we've been at the margins we've worked creatively to overcome barriers and issues. The Church on The Margins work used normal language. That was important. It didn't use technical speak and off-putting jargon. It didn't 'other' people – us and them – it assumed wisdom was there already; it assumed God was there already; it assumed knowledge and local community activity and church presence that was small, interesting and creative. It assumed positive things, not just what we haven't got and who we are not."

Following on from the work, Kate advocated for a new region-wide partnership between Church Action on Poverty and the United Reformed Church's North Western Synod. We are now working together on a new strategy with five aims:

1. To advocate cash-first approaches, not aid-first approaches, to poverty.
2. To encourage local URCs to join and support Pantries or equivalent projects.
3. To encourage URCs to engage with their nearest Poverty Truth Commission.
4. To increase engagement in wider action on the cost of living, particularly in local areas.
5. To get churches to communicate what they are doing and why.

A paper will be drawn up by next spring to agree subsequent steps. Kate says:

"It feels very timely. Thinking about elections, and this coming winter, I'd really like the church not to think small – not just 'what about this warm hub or this food bank' but to be more widely involved in campaigning and advocacy centred and led with people who experience poverty, to shift power seriously, to decentre the church.

Last year I went to Iona for Church Action on Poverty's 40th anniversary and during that week there were some really profound experiences and conversations for me. Although our church has worked with and alongside Church Action on Poverty for more than 30 years, I found out that it's a membership organisation and we were not a member.

We wanted to make it easy for all churches in the North West to join. It made no sense to keep all the good news small and untold. So I worked with Niall [Church Action on Poverty's chief executive] and took the proposal to Synod for all 125 URCs in the North West to join. We did. It was easy. It was unanimous and there is really strong support to act together more widely and more locally and to learn, listen, change.

Poverty isn't normal. The Bible is clear that the way of Jesus means taking sides of people who are most oppressed and marginalised, and the church has a responsibility to do all it can do to work towards ending poverty and to listen most attentively to people experiencing poverty. It's not about sympathy or a 'topic' to be solved. This is us, everyday people.

God has lots to say about this, the Bible has lots to say about this. It shouldn't really be big news in the URC. This is our bread and butter. These things are not new to the URC and not new to work on social justice, not new to Christianity, so none of it was rocket science. But I couldn't understand why we hadn't joined Church Action on Poverty before and I wanted us all to join; it seemed to make common sense, so I took a resolution to synod. I am happy to work with any other synod or church who want to do something similar. And I have kept building relationships with a handful of people I was on Iona with. We chat, meet, and let's see what else will come from the pilgrimage together."

Read more

Our two 'Church on the Margins' reports – *Is the Church Losing Faith in Low-income Communities in Greater Manchester?* and *What Does it Mean to be a Church on the Margins?* – include many stories of hope from the Dandelion Community and other churches in marginalised communities. They also highlight worrying signs that churches are withdrawing from the poorest communities, and call on them to take action as Kate Gray has done.

Download and read the reports:
www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm



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