

A visit to Larne Food Bank: faith and deeds being acted out wholeheartedly.

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It may well be the most breath-taking, awe-inspiring view on the island of Ireland as your eye casts its gaze northwards over the mouth of the Belfast Lough to the island of Jura. If that is somewhat of an exaggeration as there are many scenic views on this lovely island, then it may well be one of the most breath-taking, awe-inspiring views from a Methodist Church kitchen window. But it is a view that not many people see. And that is deliberate. As you approach the left-hand side of the church from what was a very busy car park when I parked there – indeed, for a second you could be confused by thinking that you had arrived at the local supermarket as there were people carrying boxes and bags of food to and from their cars (I counted over 20) – you observe a sign pointing leftwards to the side of the church indicating the path to the Food Bank. Is it to conceal the reality of poverty in their midst as if church members are too embarrassed? Most definitely not! Rather, the reverse; it was a conscious decision to provide discretion to those who in the moment of need may feel humiliated or stigmatised and deserve dignity through privacy.

Even before entering the church building, I was also very conscious of a recent investment installed by the congregation – a stand-alone, fit for purpose warehouse. I wondered as I approached was it full of extra tables and chairs, materials for Sunday School and Youth organisations, may be even the lawnmower and other maintenance equipment? Not so, rather as the door was open, I could see that Willie Hunter, Warehouse Manager, was stacking food onto shelves. I realised it had another purpose altogether. Was this the much-vaunted Food Bank? As impressive as it was, I wondered whether this was the sum total? However, once I stepped into the church premises through the back door, I could see that the warehouse was the external order to what appeared to be internal chaos. The corridors were full of boxes, parcels and bags of food stacked in any order it seemed although there were signs on the walls and certain gaps between the bundles of food. The gaps were rapidly filled with upwards of 20 volunteers coming and going, lifting and laying, weighing and recording, checking for use-by dates or damage, busying themselves like ants, knowing where to go – be it the warehouse, large hall or into other smaller store rooms. I need to correct an observation: chaos, what chaos? When I left after 90 minutes of discussion with some members the local Food Bank Committee all was cleared and clean; order had returned. A potential health and safety issue resolved! Clearly, a well-organised routine has been established over the years and finely tuned by Catherine Lynas, Food Bank Manager. But hold on, was all of this frenetic activity actually necessary? I mean weighing and recording? Answer: of course. If you want to measure or record the increase or decrease in need, if you want to campaign and back up your claims, you need evidence. So, here is a press release by the Trussell Trust which seeks to inform and to campaign.

FACT: New figures released today reveal food banks in the Trussell Trust's network in Northern Ireland provided 61,500 parcels to people facing financial hardship across the region, from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. This represents a 36% increase compared to the same period in 2019/20 – before the height of the pandemic – as more and more people are unable to afford the absolute essentials that we all need to eat, stay warm, dry and clean. This represents the largest increase in support provided when compared to the England, Scotland and Wales.

That's for Northern Ireland as an entity but Larne Food Bank provided emergency food supplies for some 2059 people in crisis in 2020. And, if you are interested to know some 21.515 tonnes of food was donated in past year. Now I realised why the donated food was weighed!

So, what appears to be an additional, time-consuming task actually becomes a necessity if we wish to challenge government, society and, perhaps, ourselves into recognising the extent of poverty that presently pertains rather than turning a blind eye.

As I drove up to Craighill, the flags and some graffiti portrayed the political demography of, at least, two communities. Poverty, of course, doesn't recognise one's religion. Other than these "cultural symbols", the road weaved its way from Antiville at the bottom to the top basically through one large, rather well-looked after, housing estate. Poverty, of course, doesn't recognise different identities nor increasingly does it distinguish between the unemployed and low-income families, especially with two or more children. And to highlight the impact on children – let's call it as it is, child poverty, another excerpt from the Trussell Trust press release:

FACT: *Alarmingly, more than 26,000 parcels were provided for children, this represents a 39% increase from 2019/20 when almost 19,000 were provided. Food bank managers are also now warning of an accelerating crisis across the region following the cut to Universal Credit, as the cost of living continues to soar.*

That's for Northern Ireland as an entity but Larne Food Bank and the second Food Bank in East Antrim provided emergency food supplies for some 1838 children. Whilst families might be dispersed throughout any locality, what happens when children come together as they enter the school gates in the morning? What happens if a child or any group of children come to school with an empty stomach? Answer: lethargy, poor concentration, behavioural issues, getting behind. Hence, the need for Breakfast Clubs. Larne Food Bank supports and services the local St Anthony's Primary School. Elsewhere, refreshments are provided for Moyle Sports Day. A model for other congregations? Indeed, the fact that Larne Food Bank is a partnership of local churches may also be a pointer to build up a sufficient bank of volunteers.

So, who did I meet and what did I learn about this well-thought-out and efficient logistical operation which has compassion and genuine concern for the most vulnerable whoever they are in the local community? Indeed, those words "whoever they are" is a sense of pride for the volunteers at Larne Food Bank as it is for the Craighill Methodist congregation. I also discerned a sense of pride in the association with Trussell Trust and also Christians Against Poverty which offers debt advice on presently one day in the week. Larne Food Bank is an ecumenical activity, started in 2013, by Revd Tommy Stevenson with 8 local churches, as it serves anyone no matter circumstance, post code or creed.

I was welcomed by Catherine Lynas, the Manager, who works as a Larne Food Bank employee for approx. 30 hours per week along with some longstanding volunteers and Committee members Alex Munro and Alan Turner as well as recently retired Joan Hegarty. We were joined by Revd Chris Skillen. That the membership of the Committee was ecumenical was also noticeable. The Committee is chaired by Joan Erwin. It is the task of the committee to run the Food Bank and to report regularly to the Trustees (founding churches) 5 of which are elected by volunteers (approx. 65) and 5 appointed from the founding churches. What I heard from them was a detailed logistical exercise in supply and demand. But it was much more than a business model of operation; it was a humanitarian response initially to the after effects of the 2008 crash and subsequent recession compounded by the austerity measures of the last decade and more recently the significant impact of Covid on wages and livelihoods.

So in terms of supply, a local network of over 40 churches and organisations make regular donations. Individuals, of course, can make their own donations via the ASDA trolley or at other collection points

throughout Larne. The Food Bank posts weekly on Facebook as to the priority requests for certain food items; at least one car load arrives every Monday from one family loaded with those particular items!

Demand is the other side of the equation. And just for context:

FACT: *Need for food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland has accelerated throughout the past six months: January to February 2022 saw a 57% increase in comparison to the same period in 2020. As inflation continues to increase and rising bills are putting pressure on families across the region, the Trussell Trust says its network expects need for emergency food to rise further still, over the coming months and beyond.*

The Food Bank deals with around 50 referrals each week. Nearly half of those referrals could be seen several times a week given the prolific nature of their need. Referrals are made primarily from a quartet of sources: Mid and East Antrim Community Advice Services, CAP, Advice NI and the Salvation Army. For what its worth, there are few referrals from churches which the Committee personnel put down to either the stigma associated or that in general terms the church(es) has / have lost contact with the working class. These two issues were brought up in a Conference debate on poverty and they are worthy of serious consideration.

There is no doubt that Covid increased the need for food on an emergency basis yet at the same time made it more difficult to collect supplies or receive donations and then distribute to those in need. Some Food Banks were unable to operate although this was not the case in Larne.

I was interested to ascertain the motivation behind or sustaining volunteer involvement. A range of responses was apparent from Christian outreach in the local community, straightforward humanitarian cum compassionate concern, something to do in retirement whilst doing something good for others to the overtly more political. Indeed, Amos 5 was mentioned in regard to the immorality of abundance and the necessity to love good and maintain justice. However, all stood clear in their desire to end the need for food banks.

It was right to be challenged by the prophetic words of Amos. It is also right to be challenged by James 2: 17-19. It was very clear that as individuals or as members of local congregations, “faith and deeds” go hand in hand. More than that, my deep impression was that “faith and deeds” were being acted out wholeheartedly. There was a quiet and understandable pride in what they were doing balanced with a determination to do more; firstly, to be a congregation in the community and secondly, to close the door of the Food Bank for good because there should be no need for Food Banks in the first place even if it meant no longer seeing that majestic view from the kitchen window.

FACT: *The Trussell Trust welcomes requests from Methodist congregations to arrange a visit to a local Food Bank, particularly during mid-September. For further information please contact Jonny Currie: jonny.currie@trusselltrust.org or by calling 07909 110313. Contact details and exact locations of Trussell Trust Food Banks can be found at www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-foodbank/*

Photo 1: 3 ladies -from left to right Kay Aicken, Margaret Crossan & Lynne Milligan

Photo 2: Food Bank Committee – from left to right Joan Hegarty, Catherine Lynas (Manager), Alex Munro, Revd Chris Skillen and Alan Thompson

