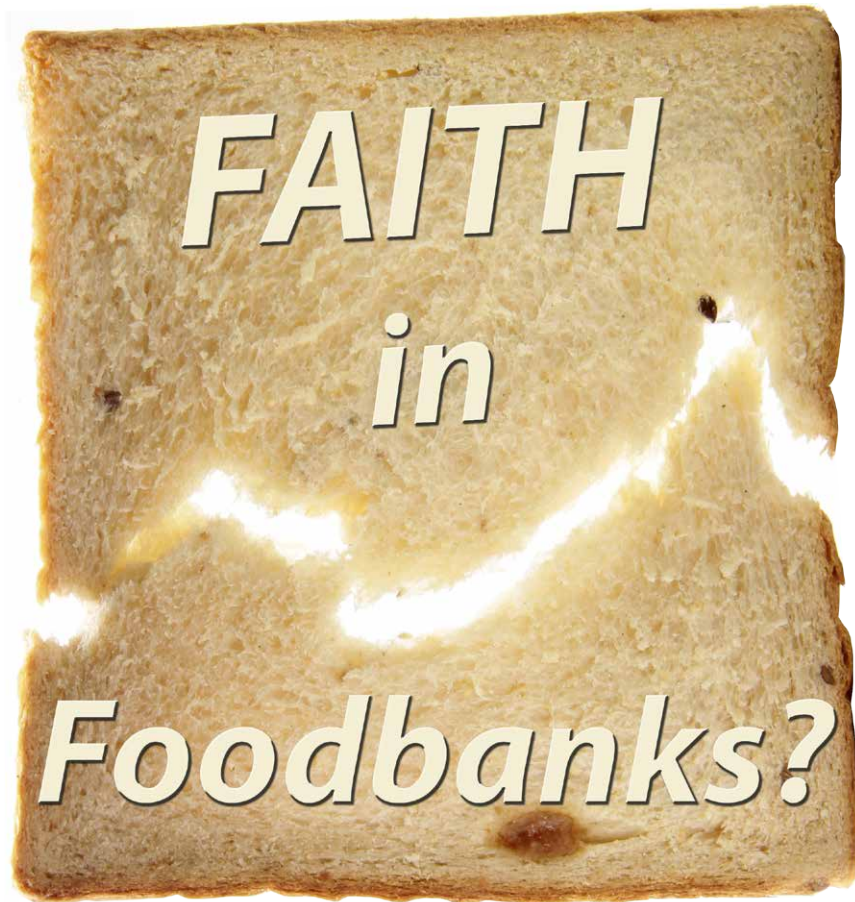


A resource from  
the Baptist Union of Great Britain,  
the Methodist Church,  
the United Reformed Church  
and Church Action on Poverty



# Resources for Churches



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Our thanks are expressed to Gateshead Foodbank for sharing their photographs.

# Foreword

For the past year I served as the President of the Methodist Conference. This gave me the opportunity to meet and talk to people all around Britain. From Cornwall to Shetland, from Lancashire to Lincolnshire, in urban and rural areas, I met Christians who are collecting for foodbanks, or working in foodbanks.

In every area I asked the same two questions:

»» Do you have a foodbank here?

»» Have you seen an increased need for it?

Wherever I travelled the answers to both questions was 'yes'.

I wasn't hearing about small increases in need; rather I was hearing about huge leaps in demand and foodbanks that were struggling to keep up.

I was hearing about generosity of giving in terms of time and food.

I was hearing about, and talking with, people who were falling into unmanageable debt for the first time in their lives.

I have heard many stories about people in crisis. For example, in Clacton-on-Sea I heard about the young man who had been sanctioned, and had his benefits removed, because he was late to his appointment when the bus broke down. He couldn't phone to let them know because he had no credit on his mobile phone. He was told he should have used a phone box but the bus fare had used up all his money, so he had no food.

Although I have engaged mostly with Methodists, very similar stories and experiences are emerging through other denominations and networks, where in many cases Christians are running foodbanks in ecumenical partnership. When Christians hear stories like this, we are bound to respond and to obey Jesus' command to love our neighbour and supporting foodbanks is one way of doing this. Many Christians have also recognised that the need will continue to increase unless we tackle the underlying causes of food poverty. People are asking why new foodbanks are opening across the country every few days when this is one of the wealthiest nations in the world.



The situation is complex, and few of us will feel equipped to fully engage in the debates that emerge. But we have stories to share, and some of those stories are extremely powerful. When presented with honesty and integrity they have the power to challenge all of us, to change hearts and minds. They most definitely have the power to change the policies and attitudes of those who do have the direct power to make a difference.

Telling stories to anyone who will listen, be it to friends and colleagues, family and church family or to press and politicians, is important in helping people understand why hunger in the UK is increasing and what we, together, can do to end it.

The Methodist Church, Baptists and the United Reformed Church, together with Church Action on Poverty, have put these excellent resources together to help us to ask questions, to tell stories and to work together for a fair and just society. I urge you to use this resource pack and to work together to make life better for the most vulnerable people in our society.

**Revd Ruth Gee**  
**President of the Methodist Conference**  
**2013-14**

# Introduction

Across the United Kingdom, in towns, cities and rural communities, there has emerged a rapidly growing network of foodbanks. Some are relatively small 'community larders' while others operate on an almost industrial scale. Local churches and congregations have often played a key role in their establishment.

Church cellars are being transformed by storage bins and shelves full of tinned goods and non-perishables; armies of volunteers are busily sorting and storing daily consignments taking careful note of the all-important sell-by date; Christians are coming together and new friendships and partnerships are being forged as the foodbank movement grows and develops. Hardly a supermarket exists now where we cannot find a collection point, forging new and significant relationships between people of faith, major retailers and the wider community.

Through foodbanks, Christians are able to express key Gospel values and declare something of the faith that defines us. In real and practical ways we are sharing our bread with one another, welcoming the stranger, loving our neighbour and acting as stewards of God's creation and provision. We might argue that this is a return to an age-old tradition; the tithe-barn was a prominent feature of community life in our nation for centuries – a place where food was stored and shared for the common good, inspired and directed by the teachings of the Old Testament.



Christians should be involved in foodbanks because it is a simple, practical response to the imperative of the Gospel.  
[Peter, Durham]

Through foodbanks, we connect with the lives of other people, hear and tell our different stories and provide a place where not only immediate needs can be met, but broader issues considered. Many churches and groups have found creative and helpful ways of building on the work of their foodbank, reaching into the lives of fellow human beings. But as stories are shared and needs are addressed, we cannot help but find ourselves also asking questions.

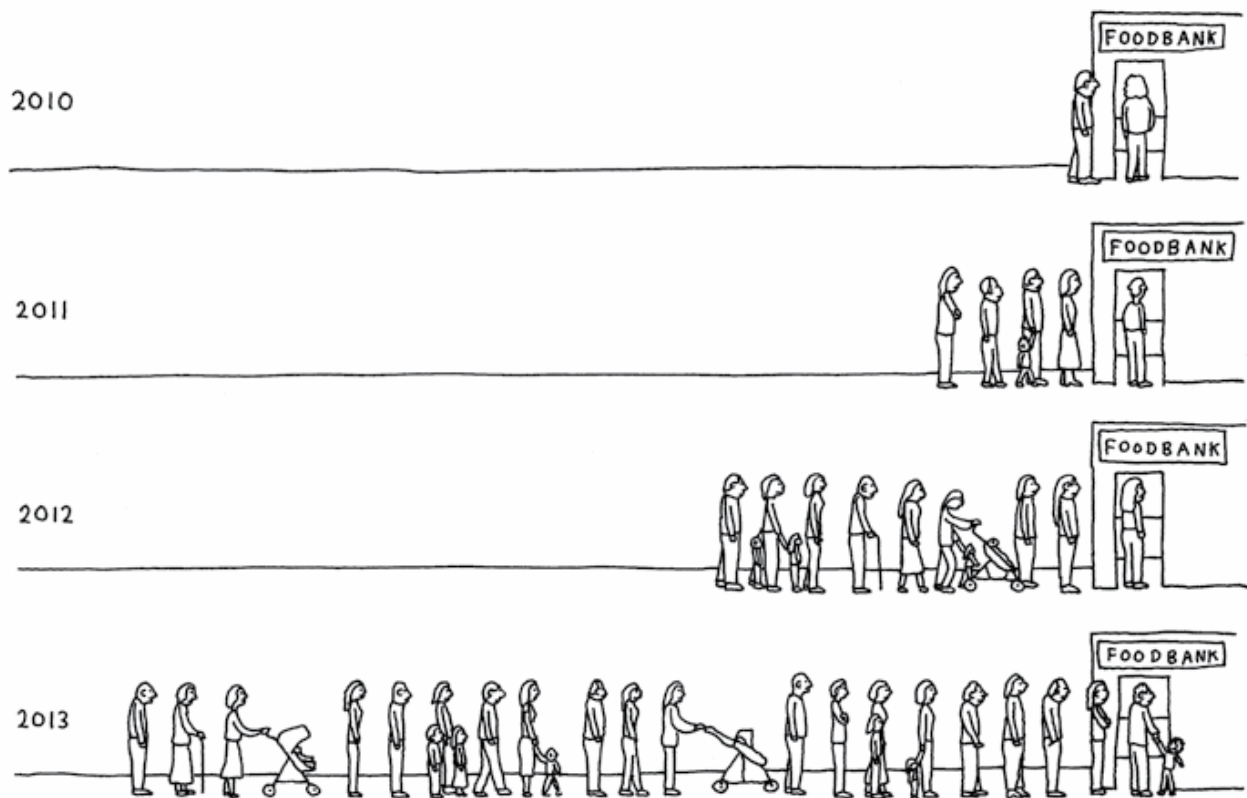
Why is it that we are one of the wealthiest nations in the world, yet an increasing number of our population are reliant on foodbanks to sustain their families? How is it that some of our key producers of food struggle to maintain a basic livelihood while some food retailers and distributors announce enormous profits? Is it right that something which began as a way of providing an 'occasional stop-gap in an emergency' is becoming more of an ongoing necessity for some? Are foodbanks, and churches, becoming unofficially part of the welfare state?

Jesus invited his followers to pray that they might be given their daily bread. Foodbanks remind us that the provision and distribution of food lies at the very heart of God's engagement with Creation. As Christians, we cannot ignore these deeper questions – to do so would be to overlook God's concern for this most central of physical needs.

These materials have been put together to help churches explore this further, and to make connections between our life, our worship and the work of our local foodbank. As we make these connections we discover and affirm God's sense of justice for those who are vulnerable in society. As we learn what it means to be God's people and to build God's kingdom here on earth, we must ask the questions of justice that inevitably emerge through the existence and ministry of the foodbank movement. By asking these questions ourselves, Christians can become equipped to address them to those in our society who have the power and influence to affect the wealth and well-being of those who are most in need.



# THE FOODBANK



PERHAPS WE NEED TO ASK WHY THIS IS HAPPENING

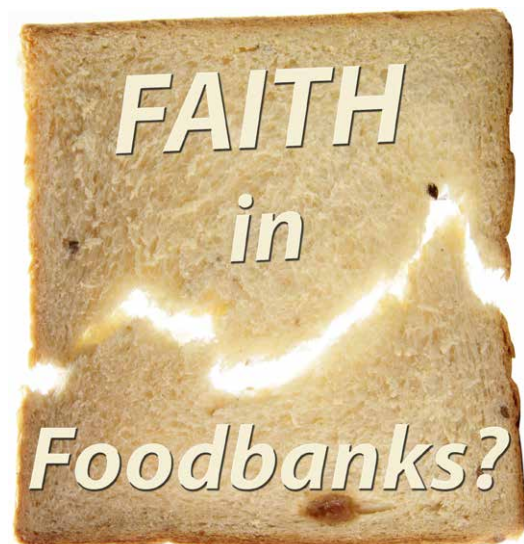
Dave Walker, used with kind permission [www.davewalker.cc/the-foodbank](http://www.davewalker.cc/the-foodbank)

## Faith in Foodbanks: Resources for Churches

In this resource you can:

- » Find out about why there has been a rise in the number of people needing foodbanks
- » Learn about the fact and fiction of foodbanks
- » Read the stories of some of the people living in food poverty
- » Find out what you can do
- » Explore foodbanks and the challenges they raise through six bible studies
- » Pray! Explore a range of materials for worship and prayer

You can also find additional resources at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources)



We hope this resource will encourage you in your ministry with foodbanks, and that it will also inspire you to explore the deeper issues that cause food poverty in this country.

## Kate's Story

'Kate' (not her real name) works at a community centre in Salford. Despite receiving tax credits to top up her salary, she is finding it increasingly difficult to feed herself and her son:

"[At work] if I'm here all day sometimes I might go almost all day without something to eat, and at home I never have a lot of stock food in. If I go shopping at one of the cheaper places, and I buy bulk vegetables and salads, they go off really quick but they're a lot cheaper than going to one of the higher brand shops. So I tend to buy cheaper, but I end up wasting a lot as well, unfortunately ...

"Just in general, over the last three years specifically, I've noticed that my income hasn't

changed but my expenses have soared, so I've found myself going deeper and deeper into the red every month, and that's just from my basics – I seldom go out, I don't drink, I buy from charity shops, I never go to high street shops ... I don't know where to shop any more.

"Everything is about budget and the cheapest places to shop, from food right down to hygiene. I'll go to the budget pound shops, but I'm still finding myself overdrawn more and more, increasingly over the last three years."

From *Walking the Breadline*<sup>1</sup>, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty 2013

1 [www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile)



Christians should be involved in providing food for the hungry, as the Gospel states that 'when I was hungry you fed me'.

It is also about social justice.

We need to stand up for people who are caught up in a draconian system that abuses power.

[Dawn, Durham]

# The rise of foodbanks

Sadly we have always lived in a society where people are hungry. But the figures show that hunger is an increasing reality in the UK. In the last five years, the scale of need for foodbanks has grown exponentially.

The Trussell Trust is a Christian charity which runs the UK's largest network of foodbanks. These fed over 300,000 people in 2012-13. By 2013-14 this number had increased to over 900,000 people including over 300,000 children. The Trussell Trust runs over 400 foodbanks which is around four out of every ten in the UK. It keeps comprehensive data on the number of people using its foodbanks and their reasons for needing help<sup>2</sup>. It is important to realise that the 900,000 number does not include the visitors to the other six out of every ten foodbanks that are not part of the Trussell Trust. The total number of people helped by all foodbanks in 2013-14 was certainly well over a million.

It is a great testimony that so many people have given up time and money to meet this need. It is a great tragedy that so many families find themselves in such circumstances.

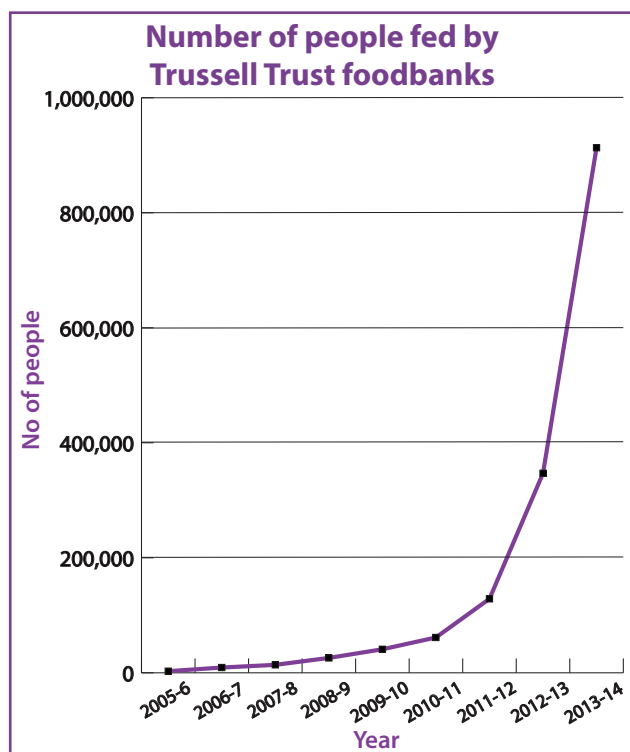


## Why are more people hungry and going to foodbanks?

Previously people who were hungry in the UK were, in the main, those in exceptional circumstances – people facing an extraordinary crisis in their lives or people other groups found difficult to reach. These people still remain however it appears other groups are increasingly in need of emergency food supplies.

One of the valuable things that foodbanks provide is the opportunity for a visitor to tell their story and for it to be heard with respect. For people who have often struggled quietly not telling friends or colleagues of their difficulties, being able to talk openly and know that they are valued can be as important a service as the food parcel itself. From conversations we know no two paths to a foodbank are identical but many of the stories share common themes, themes which may be familiar reflected in your own story or that of other people in your church, house group or family.

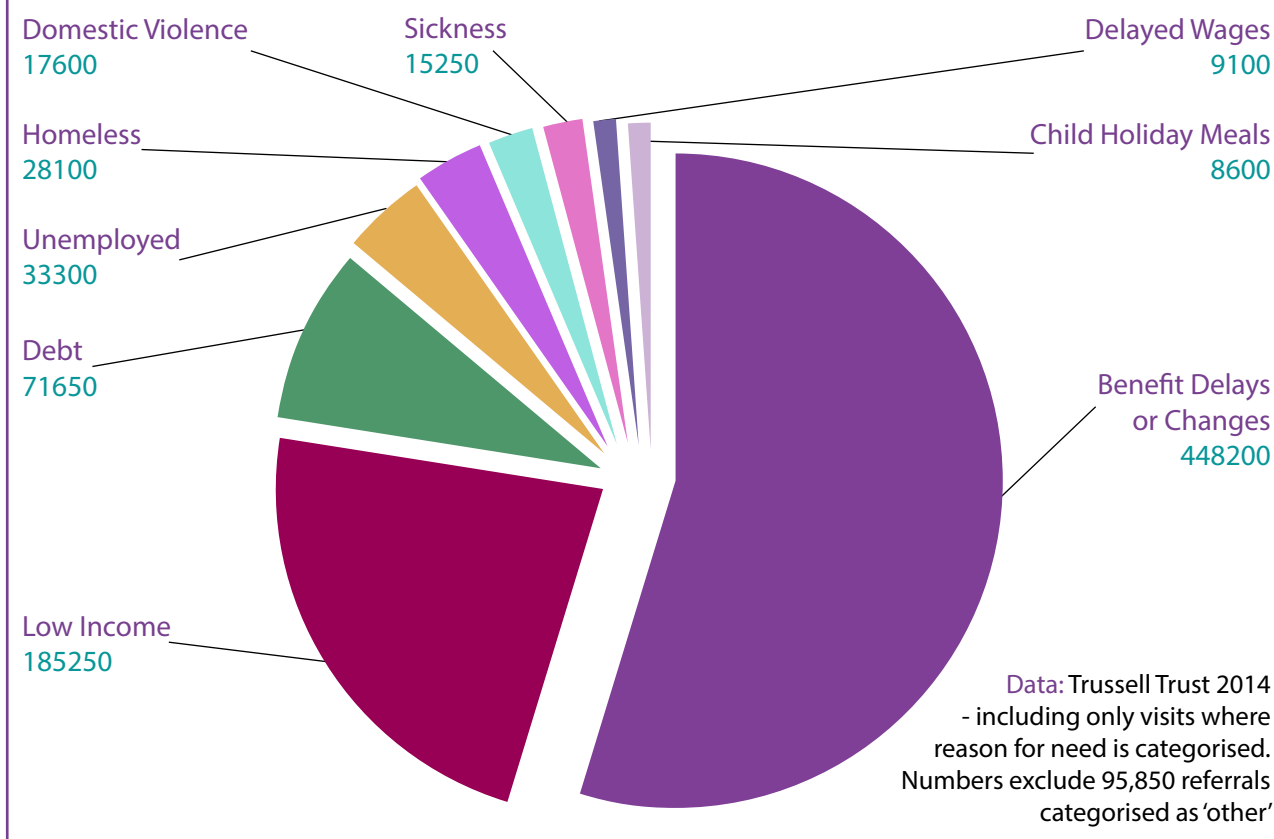
These themes can also be seen in the information that the Trussell Trust collects from its visitors, and academic research that examines the reasons why more people need foodbanks.



<sup>2</sup> For information on numbers using Trussell Trust foodbanks see [www.trusselltrust.org/stats](http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats)



### Primary Reason for Referral to Trussell Trust foodbanks 2013-14



This chart shows that the main reason people go to foodbanks is because they are having problems with the benefits system. This does not mean they are unemployed. Only around 1 in 20 families receiving benefits are unemployed - it is much more common to receive payments because of low pay or disability. The problems are mainly around delays in payment, changes to the system and, increasingly, sanctions.

A benefit sanction involves stopping some or all of a person's benefits because they are judged not to be fulfilling some of the Jobcentre's requirements. Last year over a million people were sanctioned. The rate of sanctioning has increased massively. For the unemployed it has doubled for people receiving the main disability benefit ESA it has more than trebled. The severity of sanctions has also been greatly increased.

The process creates fear and uncertainty. Less than half of those initially accused are sanctioned – even then almost half of these penalties are overturned if appealed. Last year 150,000 had their punishment overturned but only after living for over a month with no income. This is an environment that encourages foodbanks and high interest lenders to flourish.

Research by DWP and Citizen's Advice Bureau<sup>3</sup> indicates that many people do not even know why they were sanctioned. For those who did know why, failure to attend an appointment on time was a common reason given. Examples include not attending a Jobcentre interview because the person was at a job interview, in hospital, or simply had not been told about the appointment to begin with.

Sanctions are often applied to vulnerable people: for example in the year to June 2013 around 100,000 people with a disability were punished in this way. When so few of the decisions stand up to scrutiny, serious questions need to be asked about this process, and particularly when the impact on vulnerable people can be so damaging<sup>4</sup>. Low pay and debt are also significant reasons for

3 <https://onedrive.live.com/view.aspx?resid=CB5ED957FE0B849F!350&app=WordPdf&authkey=!AJTbB-gzwsSCayQ>

4 Sanctions Statistics: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobseekers-allowance-and-employment-and-support-allowance-sanctions-decisions-made-to-june-2013](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobseekers-allowance-and-employment-and-support-allowance-sanctions-decisions-made-to-june-2013). Readable summary is here [www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nick-stephenson/45-rise-in-sanctions-leav\\_b\\_4225089.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nick-stephenson/45-rise-in-sanctions-leav_b_4225089.html)



needing a foodbank. Unemployment in the UK is typically short but frequent. This is the so-called 'low-pay/no-pay cycle', with people moving between insecure low-paid employment and benefits. Problems with budgeting and debt are consequences of this.

We might reasonably expect that most people come to foodbanks because of extraordinary circumstances such as fleeing from domestic violence, but the stories and statistics tell us that for many people, their simple, ordinary, often working, life can leave them needing help.



Many people in churches identify with the need for 'daily bread' and 'loving neighbour' and respond to well-known scripture passages such as in Matthew 25 "when I was hungry and you fed me". Many churches respond with charity, but amongst such respondents are those who ask the 'justice' issues, and why people are hungry in what is a relatively wealthy nation.  
[David, Leeds]



# What people say about foodbanks – fact or fiction?

In 2013, the Joint Public Issues Team published a report called *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty*<sup>5</sup>. The report challenged the misleading statistics and stories that have led to those in poverty to be stigmatised and blamed for their situation and the benefit system to be blamed for promoting moral failings such as laziness, fecklessness and addiction.

Foodbanks have attracted the same sorts of unpleasant stories. Foodbank visitors are wrongly portrayed in the role of scrounger. Foodbank providers are accused of being well-intentioned enablers of bad behaviour. None of these stories stand up to scrutiny but they do have the effect of allowing people to feel more comfortable living in a society where hundreds of thousands of people go hungry.

Living in a country where large numbers go hungry should make people feel uncomfortable. The remedy however is not to deny the facts or insult the hungry. The remedy is to make sure those in need get emergency food today and don't need emergency food tomorrow.



5 [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandliesaboutpoverty](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandliesaboutpoverty)

Christians should be involved in foodbanks because there are people in immediate need not least as a result of government policy and slow bureaucratic processes.  
[Derek, Evesham]

Here are a few such statements taken from prominent journalists and politicians:

- » “People don't need foodbanks – they just come because they offer something for free”  
People cannot just turn up at most foodbanks and ask for food. Instead they are referred by a qualified professional – for example, a doctor, social worker, or advice worker – who assesses them to be in immediate need. Foodbanks believe referrals from other agencies are important as they are an indication that people are receiving assistance to help them move beyond needing emergency help to a more sustainable situation. The stories shared in this resource pack are just a few of many that reflect the genuine and difficult circumstances that lead people to visit a foodbank. Foodbank food is also not ‘free’ – it is costly to admit that you can't feed yourself or your family, and many foodbank users and volunteers speak of the stigma felt when first approaching a foodbank.
- » “More foodbanks opening leads to more foodbank users”  
The Government has commissioned a single piece of research on foodbanks. Its main conclusion agrees with foodbank providers' assessment that the rise in demand for food banks is not ‘supply driven’<sup>6</sup>. There are not more foodbank users simply because there are more foodbanks. Increasing need is driving foodbank numbers. The evidence suggests that families are becoming more vulnerable due to welfare changes including increasing sanctions and the removal of emergency support such as Crisis Loans occurring alongside an increase in prices of essentials such as food<sup>7</sup>.

6 DEFRA Report Feb 2014 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/283071/household-food-security-uk-140219.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/283071/household-food-security-uk-140219.pdf)

7 Kelloggs/Trussell Trust 2013: Hard to Swallow the Facts about food Poverty <http://pressoffice.kelloggs.co.uk/?s=20295&item=122399>



- » “Foodbanks create dependency”  
Foodbanks provide help in a crisis and allow time for a family to move to a more sustainable system of support. Most foodbanks have systems in place to limit the number of visits any individual can make – not because they are ungenerous but precisely to avoid the situation where their emergency support becomes relied upon long-term.

The dependency problem that is most concerning is that the welfare state may become dependent on foodbanks to support the people it chooses to withdraw support from.

- » “People need foodbanks because they are unemployed and work-shy”  
You don’t need to be unemployed to get benefits – old age, low pay, sickness and disability are all more common reasons for needing benefits. All these groups can have problems with benefit system and, with the exception of pensioners, all these groups are experiencing substantial changes and reductions in support.

While benefits problems are the major cause of foodbank use, there are many other reasons – and many users are in work<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, some foodbanks report that people are visiting them in their lunch-hour. It seems particularly important to ask why people in work can no longer earn enough to feed themselves and their families, while others enjoy extravagant remuneration and bonus packages.



- » “Only people who have made poor decisions need a foodbank”  
As Christians we recognise we all make poor decisions at times. We also recognise that visitors to foodbanks need to eat regardless of why they are hungry. It is however simply wishful thinking to suggest that good personal choices will end the mass hunger we are seeing today. Moreover this explanation begs the simple question of whether we are really experiencing an epidemic of poor decisions?

Some of us are shielded from the consequences of our poor decisions by savings, earnings or family support. People who end up at foodbanks have often exhausted these ‘cushions’. Blaming the choices of the foodbank visitors may make people feel comfortable that others’ hunger is as deserved as our own lack of hunger, but it is simply not credible.



Christ was unequivocal about how our attitudes and behaviour to those around us in need is a reflection of our relationship to him. Apart from the simple command to feed the hungry, our church was founded in 1835 by a group of men who looked around and saw ‘poverty, ignorance and vice’ and resolved to respond with Christ’s practical love - we are still here following their vision!  
[Eryl, Bradford]

# 10 ideas for things to do now...

These stories and statistics highlight the important ministry that foodbanks offer, both to those who are part of our Christian family, and within the wider communities that we serve. They also highlight the deeper issues that they uncover – and indeed some of the debates and arguments that emerge as a result.

You may have experienced food poverty yourself, or perhaps you've worked as a volunteer and talked with people needing help from your foodbank. Perhaps your church has been collecting food and you want to know why people in the UK are hungry. Maybe you have been moved by some of the stories you have read in this resource. We all have stories to tell and questions to ask. Also as Christians we have an understanding that each person is made in the image of God and is infinitely precious.

Here are some ideas for sharing stories, taking action and reflecting further. Don't try to do them all at once! Just pick the approach that is likely to be the most helpful in your particular situation, or which suits the particular opportunities that are open to you. Please let us know at [enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk) about these or other things that you have done.



## 1. Follow the food

Whilst some people may volunteer at their local foodbank, the closest others get is putting food in a box at the back of their church. If this is the case for your church, then follow the food. Build a relationship with the food box – for example, find out more about the foodbank you are supporting. How many people is it helping? Why are people coming to the foodbank? Are there other things your church could do to help? Could a volunteer from the foodbank come and speak at a service (you could use some of the worship suggestions in this resource pack, and even hold a Food Poverty Sunday).

If you are more closely connected with your foodbank, then follow the food in the other direction. Offer to speak to churches and other places which collect food for you. Tell them the stories about why people need foodbanks. Help them to understand the causes of food poverty, and what their food box is doing to help individuals and families affected.

## 2. Write to your MP

Writing to your Member of Parliament is an effective way of letting them know of your concern and telling or reminding them about the work your foodbank is doing. While some may feel comfortable talking in a political language, asking for particular policies, others will be happier sharing stories or experiences that should inform the thinking of the people who make our laws. You might do this as a local church, or perhaps a Churches Together group that is running a foodbank. If you are writing as a larger body, be sure to make it clear how many people you represent.

Find out the name of your MP at [findyourmp.parliament.uk](http://findyourmp.parliament.uk) or at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources)

You can, of course, write directly to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and/or their Ministers, but writing to your own local MP and asking them to contact the Secretary of State is actually more likely to get you a response – because your MP should forward your letter to the relevant Minister (even if they disagree with its contents) and there



is a Parliamentary convention obliging Ministers to reply to MPs' letters. Writing to your MP will also inform them about the issue and possibly persuade them to take further action themselves.

If possible try to write a letter that is unique to your context: if it is crafted with passion and commitment, this will show! While mass-produced letters that follow a template can make an impact, especially when they arrive in numbers, MPs are also aware that these take only a few seconds to despatch and are not necessarily representative of the priorities of all of their constituents.

How you word your letter is a matter for you, but the key thing you may want to get across is that, while foodbanks are providing for a vital need, you have concerns about why that need is growing. You might encourage your MP to find out more, and to support a thorough investigation into the issues and causes behind people needing foodbanks.

If you don't have time to write a unique letter, then you can find a short letter which you can personalise and email at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources)

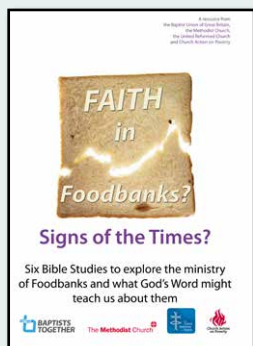


### 3. Contact other key influencers and policy makers

Once you start writing letters, there are a lot of other people you can write to! For example the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger and Food Poverty launched an inquiry. The terms of reference include understanding the circumstances behind, and the rise in, the number of foodbanks; who is running them; examining alternative sources of food aid provision; examining how adequately food aid providers are meeting immediate and long term needs. You could write to members of the APPG with evidence, details can be found at [www.foodpovertyinquiry.org/the-inquiry-team](http://www.foodpovertyinquiry.org/the-inquiry-team)

### Signs of the Times?

is a series of Bible Studies that can be used individually or with a small group, for example the volunteer team at your foodbank. They could form part of your church home group programme. These studies seek to explore some of the Biblical foundations for involvement in the ministry of foodbanks, and also offer a Christian perspective on some of the more challenging issues that are emerging. The format for the studies also connects them to the Worship Ideas also contained in this resource pack.



### 4. Develop a relationship with your MP, local councillors, MSP or AM

Why not think about inviting your Member of Parliament/Assembly and local councillors to visit your foodbank and see things for themselves? (Such an invitation could be included if you write to them as suggested above.) A visit is a chance to allow elected representatives to ground their views in the reality of the stories you share.

Foodbank visitors may not wish to talk with MPs and should certainly be given the choice not to take part. If they are willing to talk about their experiences, it is important to make sure that they feel well prepared and supported, perhaps by having a 'buddy' who will work with them. Set out clearly the terms of the invitation when you make it (you may want to stress that it should not be used as a 'photo opportunity'). Importantly, make sure that guests using the foodbank will not be embarrassed by any visit, and that they are not included in any photographs that may be taken against their will. Make sure that any foodbank workers and volunteers who will meet the visitors are well-briefed and have questions ready.

At the end of the visit thank your visitors for making the time to come and say that you will keep them informed about your foodbank. Mention that you will be looking with interest to see what they say about the issues you have discussed, and will invite them for another visit in due course.

## 5. Set up a Blog

Why not encourage your foodbank to run a blog, highlighting its work and providing regular updates about its activities?

One way to let people know what's going on would be to write about the last visitor to the foodbank each day. You will need to ensure that the anonymity of the person is fully preserved and that they are happy for their story to be told. This will present a balanced picture and not just be the most heart-wrenching story of the day.

Look at the West Cheshire foodbank blog for ideas - [www.westcheshire.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.westcheshire.blogspot.co.uk) You can find guidance to setting up a blog, including a template form for getting stories at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources)

Remember to post links to the stories on Facebook and Twitter, which are a great way to share stories further.

## 6. Engage with local media

Keep your local newspaper, radio and TV stations informed about your foodbank. Research the local/regional media outlets serving your local community – look at the kind of stories they include and, if it seems appropriate, contact them about your foodbank. All local BBC radio stations will have a Sunday morning 'religious' programme and they may well be interested in hearing about the work the foodbank is doing – think about an angle and send them a short email with brief details about the work. Tell them the number of people you are helping, and how this is may be rising month on month, and try to interest them in your growing concerns about what might be driving this increased demand for your foodbank's services.

Offer the media people who are happy to be interviewed about their work with the foodbank. Make sure potential interviewees are well-briefed and able to answer questions from journalists

and presenters. A 'template' foodbank news release is among resources available at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources)

## 7. Organise a Question Time event

One way to raise awareness locally about increased foodbank use is to stage a 'Question Time' style event. Where these have been held they have been extremely well-attended and done much to stimulate discussion about the wider issues behind foodbank use.

Invite a panel made up of, for example, the local MP, a local church leader, a journalist, an expert in benefits, and someone involved in running the foodbank, and chaired by someone who is authoritative and impartial. Invite questions from the audience (perhaps in advance) and get a debate going. The most successful events are those where a couple of guests who use the foodbank have been prepared to read out statements explaining why they have needed it, or have been interviewed by someone who has helped them to prepare. This needs careful handling, but personal stories are always the most powerful part of the event.

Church Action on Poverty has produced a very helpful document explaining how Question Time events can be arranged. This can be found at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/act/questiontime/guide](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/act/questiontime/guide), and Church Action on Poverty will also support you in publicising your event.



Christians should be involved in foodbanks because we have a duty of care for the world, both abroad and within our own communities. "In as much as you did it for the least of my brethren you did it for me".  
[Jacky, Cannock]



## 8. Set up a Foodbank Action Group

Forming an action or task group could be an effective way of co-ordinating and planning any action you choose to undertake around the service your foodbank provides.

You could give the group a catchy name to reflect your concern that, in themselves, foodbanks are not a long-term solution to the problem of food poverty. Such a group could look out for opportunities to raise awareness about food poverty and ask the 'why' question; be a point of contact for media people interested in discussing that question; and seek to link-up with other foodbanks in your area to increase the impact and reach of your campaign.



## 9. Could your foodbank do other things to tackle food poverty?

Many foodbanks already go the extra mile. Foodbanks do not see themselves as benefit agencies, but places of human compassion and mutuality, offering the chance of a cup of tea and an opportunity to be heard. Much will depend on the attitude of volunteers; the Bible Studies in this resource might be one way of reminding everyone involved that whatever their circumstances, Jesus recognised the value and worth of everyone he met. Perhaps your foodbank is already finding additional ways of helping people. These are some things which foodbanks around the country are doing. Maybe they will give you some ideas!

- » **Providing support and advice** on family budgeting or dealing with debt. This can be done in conjunction with an existing agency or by training foodbank volunteers.
- » **Running a community café** where people can enjoy affordable meals together. Some foodbanks ensure that such cafes run simultaneously with the foodbank to ensure the people attending for food parcels do not feel stigmatised.
- » **Growing your own food**, organising allotment collectives, making locally-produced food available. Do you have any spare ground round your church which you could turn into an allotment?
- » **Establishing a community kitchen** where people can learn to prepare budget meals and share recipe ideas, or publishing and distributing a low-budget family recipe book.
- » **Asking people with experience** of business, HR or training to offer support with literacy, CV writing and job applications



## 10. Pray

As with every aspect of our work and witness as Christians and churches, we are called to be a people of prayer. Prayer isn't last in this list as an afterthought; rather prayer should underpin everything that we do. Let the stories you hear and share inform your prayers, perhaps seeking wisdom as to how you might respond. Think about coming together as a church or group of local churches to pray over the various projects and tasks you take on in connection with your foodbank work, and also think about ways in which it can inform the intercessory prayer in your regular worship.

Remember to include the foodbank, the guests, the volunteers, and the donors in your personal prayers. Pray for justice for people facing unjust, unfair and frightening situations. Pray for politicians and decision-makers and for those who have the power to influence the long-term causes of food poverty. Encourage prayer groups to include the foodbank and food poverty in their devotions, and try to ensure that your church prays regularly and in an informed way for those who need the foodbank, those who support it, and the situations which cause it.

### **Worship Ideas**

includes a variety of materials that could be used to celebrate and highlight the work of your local foodbank during one of your regular worship services. The various components could be used as 'stand-alone' elements in a more general worship service or you could use the 'Signs of the Times' structure as the basis of a whole service that focuses on foodbanks.



We hope that this resource will encourage you in your work with foodbanks and inspire you to ask some of the deeper questions about what is causing food poverty today.

We would love to hear your stories – about what your foodbank is doing, how your church is (or isn't) supporting you, why you believe Christians need to be involved in this work, and what you have done – or want to do – to look at the reasons why the need for foodbanks is rising. And we would love to hear and share your ideas for how churches can be involved in helping people in need and calling for justice.

**Please contact us** using the contact details on the back page.



# Signs of the Times? Bible Studies

## Foodbanks are a sign that the world is not as God intended it to be

When people are hungry while food is wasted, something is wrong. This study seeks to connect these realities, revealed through the work of foodbanks, with our underlying understanding of creation and fall.



## Foodbanks are a sign that God's people are called to transform our world

We can sometimes imagine that there is a divide between what some would call 'spiritual' and 'material'. This study helps us realise how God sees the two as deeply intertwined. This helps us to see the work of foodbanks as a 'spiritual' act as well as material provision.



## Foodbanks are a sign that we have a vision of a world that is better

If our world is not as God intended, as a 'new creation' we are called to be different. This study will explore how God has called his people to this ministry through history.



## Foodbanks are a sign that the Gospel is expressed in practical reality

At the heart of our understanding of what it means to be Christian, is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This study helps recognise that this Gospel has implications for the here and now, as well as the hereafter.



## Foodbanks are a sign of deeper questions that we need to ask

God's word helps us connect the work of a foodbank with our call to be a generous and sharing people. This study helps us recognise that while affirming these actions, it also asks us some deeper questions.



## Foodbanks are a sign that we share a common humanity

God's people are not the only ones who seek to bring help, support and relief to those in need. This study helps us recognise that how we treat others is a vital expression of our Christian identity, and needs to affect how and not just why we engage in the work of foodbanks.



# Using these Studies

**Signs of the Times?** is a series of Bible Studies that can be used individually or with a small group, perhaps as part of your church home group programme or for the volunteer team in your foodbank. They seek to explore some of the biblical foundations for being involved in the ministry of foodbanks and also offer a Christian perspective on some of the more challenging issues that are emerging. The format for the studies also connects to the Worship Ideas in this resource pack.

If you are using them in a group setting, how much of each study is used will depend upon the time and format available. There are also some additional ideas that you can add to any particular session, including 'real-life story' discussions, and some ideas for using food in a creative way. These are included below.

## Real-life stories

Each Bible study contains a 'real-life' story which can be used to help you think about how the scriptures you have been looking at connect with our world and society. If you are using the Bible studies as a group you may like to ask yourselves some questions in the light of these stories:

- » **How does this story relate to the Scripture passages you have been reading?**
- » **What do you imagine God's Word might say if it was being written directly into the context of this story and others like it?**
- » **Who are the different characters behind each story – what do the Scriptures we have been studying say to each of them?**
- » **How do you think God expects his people to respond to stories like this one?**
- » **What is God's Word saying to society at large in the light of stories like this one and the passages you have read together?**





# Sharing Food Together

Food is often a key element in a small group (even if it's just tea and biscuits). Here are some ideas to explore our understanding of food as a way into looking at foodbanks and actions that people can take:

## WEEK 1 – special food

Begin the series by offering something a bit 'special'. This does not have to be over-the-top but perhaps buy a nice cake, bring some good nibbles, 'go the extra mile'... Talk about God's goodness and bounty, but also stop to ask questions of ourselves and justice – is it right that we can enjoy this when many in our world cannot?

## WEEK 2 – the normal food for the small group

There may well be a reaction to not having the 'specialities' from last time. Invite people to reflect on that, considering how we can take for granted and consider 'usual' what others do not have. Recognise that food is part of God's provision and admit that we often do take our food for granted.

**WEEK 3 – no food** (or perhaps just a jug of water)  
Make the point that actually we don't really need the food and will all survive without it. This reminds us that food is more than 'fuel': sharing food is a social action, it is one way we express our humanity – making a cup of tea when someone comes around is about much more than maintaining their bodily fluid levels. When people are without food, or victims of food injustice, they are deprived of more than 'body fuel' – there are issues of humanity, identity, dignity and belonging associated with the provision and consumption of food. This can introduce the theme of 'deeper questions'.



## WEEK 4 – personal food

Perhaps invite one or two people to bring their 'favourite food' or to do some home-baking, perhaps a special family recipe. Food creates and expresses community – the stories that lie behind our food, or that we share as we eat it together, build relationships and friendships. What we do with our food, whether or not we use food to exploit or to enrich our fellow human beings, are important issues to recognise. By inviting a couple of individuals to share their favourite food we have recognised and celebrated the part they have to play in our gathering – this can introduce the general theme that we are all called to 'get involved'.

## WEEK 5 – international food

Arrange to have food from a particular part of the world – e.g. oriental snacks, Italian antipasti or similar. Remind the group that food has a cultural dimension, what we eat says something about the people we are. We obtain food from all over the world – what we consume, how we consume, produce and procure affects people in other places. We are world citizens and with this comes responsibility. The final two studies have a very strong Gospel theme, which includes not seeing people who are different as 'other'. Sharing food from another place reminds us that difference is something to be celebrated and not shunned.

## WEEK 6 – bread and wine

Jesus introduced the most central act of our worship at a meal table. He used bread and wine to speak to us of his Gospel purpose, to express messages of forgiveness, mercy, thanksgiving and communion. Once again we are confronted by the deep and profound relationship between how we use, experience and share food, and the faith that we profess. Depending on what is appropriate to your tradition, you could share bread and wine, or simply broken bread as an act of commitment to putting into practice some of the things you have studied and learned.

# 1. Foodbanks are a sign that the world is not as God intended it to be

## Discussion Starter:

### What is your favourite food?

Invite people in the group to talk about their favourite dish, snack, etc. Encourage people to be as descriptive as they like, and explain why they enjoy a particular delicacy. Allow the conversation to run for a while, to get everyone relaxed and comfortable with talking to each other.

### Invite someone to read Genesis 1:29-30

*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 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." And it was so.*

### Invite the group to reflect:

Have you ever stopped to recognise that the enjoyment that we receive from food is something that God invented? Our bodies need food, but God could have made us differently, perhaps to draw our energy from absorbing sunlight. Equally, God could have made us to need food, but without taste buds or any sense of pleasure from eating it. Our enjoyment of food is part of God's gift to us. Allow time for people to react and respond.

### Now Read Psalm 63:1-5

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.  
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
beholding your power and glory.  
Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.  
So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.  
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips.*



It is interesting how, so often in the Scriptures, our need of food and the pleasure we derive from it is used as a way of describing our relationship with God. Some of us may practise fasting – doing without food to help us focus and reflect on our need of God and our human frailty. This is something that we choose to do freely as a spiritual exercise.

### Discussion point:

In the light of the above, how might our relationship with God, or our openness to his presence, be affected by having to do without food through circumstances that are not of our choosing?

Our Scriptures often draw parallels between hunger, thirst and being fed and our experience of God's presence and deliverance:

- » When God's people were in slavery, God's promise was a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8)
- » One of the ways that God instructed his people to reflect that they were 'distinct' was by the food they ate. (e.g. Leviticus 11:1ff)
- » When God's people were in exile, future hope was described like thirst and hunger being satisfied (Isaiah 55:1-2)
- » Jesus often spoke of God's coming Kingdom in the language of feasts and celebration (Matthew 22:2)

But is food always good news?



While we can speak so positively about food, this is only half of the story. Invite the group to think about examples of where food hits the headlines for the wrong reasons.

This might come naturally, but could be prompted by:

- » While some people are queuing at foodbanks, leading public health officials are concerned about increasing obesity.
- » Often the food that is cheapest is also the least nutritious – this means that the poorest in our society are those who can find it most difficult to obtain a healthy diet.
- » GM crops have been a source of significant controversy in our world – some speak of them doing good, others are concerned about what they are doing to our environment.
- » Recent scandals have highlighted questions about the content of our food, labelling etc.
- » Some major retailers are announcing vast profits, supplying cheap food, but producers complain that they are not able to obtain a realistic price for their goods.
- » While we can enjoy food from around the world, increasing questions are being asked about the environmental cost of this.
- » Huge amounts of food are reported as wasted in Western nations, while people in other parts of the world remain under-nourished.

These examples remind us that reality can be quite different from the idyllic picture of food that was depicted at the outset of this study. The Bible embraces this reality too – there are many examples where the Scriptures acknowledge hunger, deprivation, food injustice and so on. One example of this is 1 Kings 17-18: Ahab is depicted as a particularly wicked King, and a season of famine is described as God's response to the prevailing state of his people. Through their physical hunger, God invites the nation to recognise their spiritual poverty.

These Old Testament ideas are not always easy to embrace and receive, but there is an underlying principle that would be useful to draw out. Through the disruption of their food supply, God invited his people to ask deeper questions and explore the underlying spiritual issues behind it. When we see things wrong with our own production and distribution of food we might also ask similar questions.

### Invite the Group to read Genesis 3:17-19

*And to the man [Adam] he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it;' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

This story describes what Christian tradition has called 'the fall'. God's word explains to us that our world is damaged – it was through misuse of food that this came about (v17) and its consequence has affected how we produce and gain access to food (v18). Perhaps we should not be surprised, therefore, that our own access to food is not as straightforward as we might prefer.

'Sin' might be an uncomfortable word, but there are sins behind some of the issues that have been highlighted above. We can often think of sin as simply defining our wrongdoings as individuals, but it might help us to recognise that at times human societies can be guilty of 'collective sin' by building injustice and wrongfulness into the way things are structured and organised. God is very clear in his word that he considers it a sin when some in society are left poor and disadvantaged while others prosper at their expense. God's word includes lengthy regulations about food hygiene – he considers it a sin when people's food is damaged and contaminated.

We are called to be a 'new creation', to be those who seek and endeavour to make the world more like God intended it to be. This is why we might describe foodbanks as a sign that the world is not as it should be – they reflect our commitment to identify when things are wrong, and to work towards the world being more in line with God's ideal. Jesus often describes this as working for God's coming Kingdom.

### Discussion point:

The words from Genesis invite us to recognise the root cause of what is wrong – what are the 'sins' that lie behind our access to food and some of the issues that we discussed above?

## Prayer:

A time of prayer can reflect on some of the things that are wrong with the ways we produce and share food, praying for those who suffer and struggle as a result, and also those who have the power to make a difference by doing things differently.

*Generous God, may we never take your provision for granted or forget the plight of those who for many reasons have to do without. Forgive us for when we are quick to judge, slow to act, or simply fail to ask the right questions. Help us to use what influence and power we have, to speak and act in ways that expose and acknowledge the things that are wrong, so that we might be those who bring about change. We confess the scandal of food that is wasted, spoiled and used only for decoration while many in our world will go to bed hungry this night. Even though we might understand why the wrong in our world exists, give us restless spirits that long and work for things to be different. Through Christ our Lord. AMEN*



## Lorna's Story

Lorna's oldest son, Shaun, has a disability and attends a special residential school during the week. Lorna lives in Tower Hamlets, on the doorstep of the City of London, and can see the towers of Canary Wharf from her living room window. Tower Hamlets is one of the richest boroughs in the country, but also has the worst rates of child poverty. Although there is a huge shortage of housing, luxury flats are springing up around the borough to cater for the growing population of City workers and wealthy Londoners.

"Tower Hamlets is, at the same time, one of the richest and one of the poorest parts of Britain", says Revd Giles Fraser, chair of Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission. "It has the highest rate of child poverty in the country and yet the average salary of those who work in the borough is £58,000, the second highest in the UK after the City of London. This is a place where many kids sleep six to a room yet the borough has an economy worth more than £6 billion a year."

Although Lorna works as many hours as she can fit around school times, she is struggling to put food on the table. Her very low wage means that she is dependent upon housing benefit and tax credits to top up her low income, but still she has repeatedly found herself seeking help from the local foodbank, as she simply does not earn enough to keep afloat. With benefit rises this year capped at just 1%, the soaring costs of food, fuel,

gas and electricity have hit her very hard. Lorna's first referral to the foodbank came from her son's school, who were concerned that he had been absent for two days because she couldn't afford a packed lunch for him, and was ashamed to send him into school without. As a dinner lady, not being able to feed her son during his school day was too much to bear.

Lorna is now waiting to move into a three-bedroom flat, as Shaun needs a room to himself because of his disability. However, she will now be hit by housing benefit changes – as under current rules, Shaun would not qualify for his own room. This will further cut into Lorna's food budget. To cope, she will have to take money out of Shaun's disability living allowance, which is intended for transport and extra care.

"I felt very ashamed having to go to foodbank the first time... I couldn't afford a packed lunch for him and I couldn't afford to pay for a school dinner. I couldn't do what a mum should do for them – look after them. I couldn't even feed them. That just makes you feel really low as a parent. "I wake up every morning to look out my window and see Canary Wharf, all the top shot banks that are there. I do get angry because we are struggling and it's like nobody seems to take any notice..."

From *Walking the Breadline*<sup>1</sup>, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty 2013

1 [www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile)

## 2. Foodbanks are a sign that we have a vision of a world that is better

The last study helped to highlight that world is not as God intended. As a 'new creation' we are called to be different. This study will explore how God has called his people to this ministry through history.

### Begin by reading the story of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 2:1-9).

*Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour". Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter".*

*So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek. Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The Lord be with you!" "The Lord bless you!" they answered.*

*Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, "Who does that young woman belong to?" The overseer replied, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters." She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."*

*So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."*

Ruth and Naomi found themselves in need through circumstances that were not of their own making, but they were part of a society that made provision for those in their position.



### Discussion point:

In what ways do the actions of Boaz and his famers reflect the work of foodbanks today? Where do you see similarities? Where do you see differences?

Although Boaz was clearly generous, what he was doing was not uncommon. Allowing people to find food in the harvested fields was known as 'gleaning'. This arrangement was part of God's blueprint for his people, reflected in the words of Deuteronomy, through which God spelled out his expectations before they inhabited their land (Deuteronomy 24:19-22):

*When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.*

When God's people were in Egypt and wandering through the desert they were sustained by a vision of a better land, a land described as 'flowing with milk and honey'. But God is clear that their well-being does not simply depend on his provision, but also the people's responsible stewardship of what he had given them. Sharing food in the way described above, reflected in the actions of Boaz, was not an end in itself but a sign of a broader understanding of how wealth was generated



and distributed. This lay at the heart of God's law (Deuteronomy 8:10-11):

*You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.*

*Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.*

### Discussion point:

We might notice from the story of Ruth that it was groups of women who gleaned in the fields – Deuteronomy requires that this provision is made for 'the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.' Why do you think that these people are particularly highlighted as beneficiaries? (Try to draw out the point that in Old Testament rural society women were reliant on men for their income – the widows and the fatherless would be those who could not provide for themselves, the foreigners would not yet have land through which to provide for themselves.)

But this was only a part in a greater whole. While God required immediate practical help for those in need, he also had things to say about systems that locked people into poverty. In Exodus, another of the early lawbooks, a system is spelled out that would be considered radical in today's society (Exodus 23:10-11):

*For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.*

Similar principles are echoed in the writings of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. God's vision of a new society was one that deliberately and generously made provision for those in need.

### Discussion point:

How might we enact the principles of Exodus 23:10 in our society today?



### Now read 1 John 1:1-2

*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us*

As Christians, we too have a vision of a new and different world. We see the coming of Jesus as launching a new beginning for humanity, a reality that touches every aspect of our lives. The segment above reflects the sentiment of many New Testament writers who describe themselves as those who have a vision of God's greater Kingdom. The coming of Jesus is first announced to Mary, and in Luke's Gospel, part of her response is expressed in these words (Luke 1:53):

*... he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

Mary's vision of God's coming kingdom, includes God's ideal for the early Israelites, one where food is shared and no-one is hungry.

### Now read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22

*Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!*





These are challenging words to the Corinthian Christians, and it is interesting to notice what the writer, Paul, describes as meetings that 'do more harm than good' and 'divisions.' We might expect them to be about some kind of false teaching or division over doctrine, but his concern is an unequal sharing of food. When the Corinthian church comes together, instead of reflecting their vision of God's new Kingdom, they reflect the injustice and inequality of the world in which they live. Just like his Old Testament people, the Early Believers are expected to be a sign of a world that is different. We might compare Paul's challenge to the Corinthian church with these words from the Old Testament (Isaiah 1:13):

*bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation - I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.*

God perceives the worship offerings of his Old Testament people in a similar way. Like Paul, his concern is not whether they have not observed the correct ritual, but the underlying values and attitudes of the society that they have created. This is expressed in the verses that follow (Isaiah 1:17):

*learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*

### Discussion point:

To what degree do Paul's words to the Corinthians reflect God's concerns and values as expressed to his Old Testament people? What might this have to say to Christians today?

### Jack's Story

Jack was left with just a bed and a sofa and a few items that were later donated by friends. She has had to live on a budget of £10 a week for food for a long period of time. Her local foodbank is able to provide nappies and five items of food each week. On reading an article in *The Independent*, she was shocked to find that nine of the 16 criteria that class a child as being in poverty applied to her

The words of Isaiah were spoken some centuries after the story of Ruth and Boaz above. We might notice that God makes particular reference to the 'widow' and the 'fatherless'. Who are the equivalent people in our world today? Notice that they are not presented as a 'problem' but a responsibility. In what ways do we reflect that, or fail to reflect that in our society today? How are we called to express our vision of God's coming Kingdom in our world today?

### Prayer:

Prayers might focus on giving thanks for the hope that is ours, made known through the glimpses we have of God's coming Kingdom. This in turn might lead to prayers which recognise the responsibilities that belong to those who are the people of God, seeking wisdom and courage to live as God desires.

*God, at whose word this world came into being, help us to hear and respond to your call for justice and righteousness in everything we seek and do. Place within us a desire for your kingdom, and the courage and resolve to work for its coming. Thank you for those whose generosity, selflessness and commitment to others makes the work of foodbanks possible. As we endeavour together to bring hope, support and nourishment to those who need it, may we also strive for a world where injustice and inequality are challenged in their every form. Help us to build a society that more truly reflects your will for the whole of creation. Through Christ our King and Redeemer. AMEN*

own son, including: not having outdoor space to play, not having two pairs of shoes, and not having meat or dairy in his diet. "It was a shock to me. I thought, 'My child is in poverty', and I wondered if I was a bad mother."

From *Walking the Breadline*<sup>1</sup>, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty 2013

1 [www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile)

### 3. Foodbanks are a sign of deeper questions that we need to ask

#### Discussion starter:

We often use the phrase the 'tip of the iceberg' to describe things that are part of something deeper – reflecting the fact that a far greater mass of ice lies under the water and hidden from view. In what way might we describe foodbanks as the 'tip of the iceberg?' What are the underlying issues that are evidenced by the growth of foodbank provision?

The discussion resulting from the questions above might feel quite 'political,' perhaps leaving us to wonder whether these are things that should be of concern to a spiritual people. But as we explore God's word together, we recognise that God has deep concerns about food and how it is provided and shared.

Look again at last week's readings from Isaiah chapter 1. You might compare them with these words from later in Isaiah's writings (Isaiah 10:1-2): *Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!*

Or these from the writings of the prophet Amos (Amos 2:6-7):

*For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals - they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way;*

There are words of warning to the nation of Israel. They have failed to observe the laws of the Covenant, and it is this, rather than their spiritual worship, with which God is concerned. This should not surprise us, because God has expressed this as a priority from the outset of their life and worship together. When God's people first arrived in the



land of Canaan, establishing a process of food production was vital to their ongoing wellbeing. God had described their new home as a 'land flowing with milk and honey,' so it is perhaps inevitable that he has much to say about how they produce, store and consume food.

#### Read Leviticus 2:14-16

*If you bring a grain offering of first fruits to the LORD, you shall bring as the grain offering of your first fruits coarse new grain from fresh ears, parched with fire. You shall add oil to it and lay frankincense on it; it is a grain offering. And the priest shall turn a token portion of it into smoke - some of the coarse grain and oil with all its frankincense; it is an offering by fire to the LORD.*

God's people are offered a blueprint for their worship, and at its very heart are the outcomes and the symbols of their food production. Similar instructions are offered in Deuteronomy (17:1): *You must not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep that has a defect, anything seriously wrong; for that is abhorrent to the LORD your God.*

God is clear that he expects the best from his people in worship, but we might also note that the first fruits and best animals were likely to be kept for next year's seed-stock and breeding. By bringing them as sacrifices, God's people were quite literally placing their livelihoods into Yahweh's hands; they were recognising that their economic life should be defined by God's values and purposes – their worship was a reflection of this reality, not a distraction from it.



These verses create an inseparable link between work, the production of food, economics, social justice and the worship life of God's people. Gathering to worship God is central to our identity as Christian people, but we cannot do this in isolation from the world around us. Many of the major religious festivals of the Old Testament involved significant meals and feasts. This continues into the New Testament as Jesus inaugurates the central act of worship for his church at a meal table, 'the last supper'

### Discussion point:

How are our everyday lives reflected and 'offered' in our worship today? Do we feel that the way in which our society is ordered and shaped reflects God's purposes and ideals? The discussion above may well reveal a sense of helplessness – we know our world is not right but what can we do about it? There may be things that we cannot change, but this might be a useful moment to reflect back to the previous study – we are called to be a sign of something different. Our foodbanks serve to do that, but they can reflect deeper concerns than simply meeting immediate need.

Look again at the verses from Isaiah 10 and Amos 1. Notice that they are addressed to two key sectors in society – those who make and shape political policy, and those who are engaged in the world of business. God speaks out against those who make laws and organise business in a way that oppresses the poor.

### Discussion point:

What do you think Isaiah and Amos would say to our world today? As a group activity, you might like to develop a similar 'oracle'. This could be used at the end of the evening as an act of prayer.

### Now look at a later part of Amos's prophecy (Amos 4:6-9)

*I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. And I also withheld the rain from you when there were still three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would be rained upon, and the field on which it did not rain withered; so two or three towns wandered to one town to drink water, and were not satisfied; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. I struck you with blight and mildew; I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees and your olive trees; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.*

We might struggle with the idea of God inflicting hunger on his people, or perhaps even be tempted to argue that feeding people's hunger distracts from the deeper call to 'return to me'. But Amos does not allow such an interpretation – he has already made clear (see above) that in his eyes 'returning to the Lord' includes seeking justice and provision for the poor. But what he does point out is that the disruption to the people's food supply was intended as a sign to them of deeper inequalities in their nation.

Many would argue that in an ideal world foodbanks should not be necessary. As long as they are necessary, Christians can be a blessing to their communities through them, but they also serve as a sign of deeper questions that need to be asked. There were deep injustices and wrongdoing within Israelite society; the disruptions to their production and provision of food should have served as a sign that deeper things were wrong. Some of these issues are raised in the verses that are quoted at the beginning – how might our engagement in the work of a foodbank provide the opportunity to ask the right questions of our society?

### Finish by reading Psalm 12:5

*"Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up," says the LORD; "I will place them in the safety for which they long."*



### Discussion point:

The New Testament depicts God as working through his people, the Church. To what degree might our growing commitment to foodbanks be a sign of God 'arising'? A previous report by the Joint Public Issues Team, *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty*, highlighted how often the rhetoric attached to certain debates and discussion distorts truth and presents people in an unfair light. In what way might this be part of our calling to protect the poor from 'those who malign them'?



### Prayer:

Our prayers might focus on giving thanks for the opportunity to love and serve our neighbour and seek God's help to be a people of blessing. At the same time we might also pray that our eyes will be open to the deeper issues and questions that are raised by the situations in which we seek to bring hope and help.

*God of all truth and wisdom, we offer our lives in love and service to you. May our acts of kindness and deeds of love bring glory to your name and hope to our world. Yet in our giving and receiving, give us eyes that are open to the challenges and causes that underlie the needs that we encounter, minds that are attentive to the questions and concerns they raise, spirits that are restless in seeking out deeper truth, and words to speak that are truly from you. AMEN*



### Audrey's Story

"Even when you have money, buying food is a problem. If you're unable to go anywhere else, we haven't got a market any more... it's gradually gone to two food stalls and three butchers. How do you cut back and stay healthy? ... in big supermarkets, it's too tempting for people. If you're going in, and you've got two kids with you and they've seen the

sweet aisle and they've seen the pretty dresses, why wouldn't you be tempted? ... and there's not an awful lot of loose, unprocessed food in the big supermarkets."

From *Walking the Breadline*<sup>1</sup>, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty 2013

1 [www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile)



## 4. Foodbanks are a sign that God's people are called to transform our world

### Begin by asking someone to read the commandment from Deuteronomy 5:12

*Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.*

### Discussion point:

Invite the group to consider: what do you think it means to 'keep the Sabbath holy?' What do you think God intends us to understand by the word 'Sabbath?'

The term 'Sabbath' has a breadth of meaning in the Scriptures – it is derived from the Hebrew word 'shavath' which means to rest. We first encounter it in the creation narrative of Genesis, when God is described as resting on the seventh day. Biblical commentators have come to recognise that the significance of the Sabbath comes not simply from being distinct from the other days of creation, but being their fulfilment and culmination. A world in 'Sabbath' is a world as God intends it to be.

### Read Mark 2:23-27

*One sabbath he [Jesus] was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."*

The nature and purpose of the Sabbath is a prominent point of contention in the Gospels. It might not be lost on us that this particular episode also involves the eating and sharing of food. Jesus regularly found himself in opposition



with those who saw it solely as a religious ritual. Jesus was clear that he had not come to do away with the Sabbath, but that somehow its meaning had become lost. 'Resting' was not so much a matter of withdrawing from work and enterprise, as remembering that its purpose was founded in making the world more as God intends.

### Read the verses that follow the original commandment (Deuteronomy 5:14-15):

*But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work - you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.*

God's command for his people to rest is rooted in their previous experience of being slaves. As slaves they were exploited and denied the dignity and liberty of rest; they were part of a society where some could enjoy prosperity at the expense of others. God was concerned that in their new-found nationhood they did not impose the same oppression on others, particularly those who might be seen as 'other' or foreign. The Sabbath extended even to animals, in this case the working animals rather than livestock. God includes 'rest' in the process of production, rather than it being one that simply exploits the maximum return.





The actions of Jesus and his disciples echo the experience of Ruth and those like her in the Old Testament who, within the overall process of food production, could expect to be provided for. God's laws drew clear associations between this and the concept of Sabbath (Exodus 23:10-12):

*For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.*

#### **Discussion point:**

In what ways does business and enterprise in our society today reflect, or fail to reflect the principle of Sabbath?

We might argue that the purpose of Sabbath was to put things right again. This is certainly echoed in the actions of Jesus, even though it again caused controversy and conflict with the religious leaders of his day. One example of this is Luke 13:14-16: *But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"*



#### **Discussion point:**

What are the things that 'bind people' today – things from which God might call us to seek for them to be set free?

In the Old Testament, the idea of Sabbath is also used to sound echoes of the nation's future demise and exile (Leviticus 26:33-35):

*Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it.*

God's judgment is often perceived as merely belonging in the Old Testament and as something that is negative and punitive. Here it is depicted as being the means of last resort, by which equality and justice would be restored. We might note that when the land was hit by famine, it affected everyone – God repeatedly speaks of 'rich and poor' being afflicted. An added scandal in our world is that our economic systems ensure that it is the most vulnerable and already disadvantaged who suffer, while others can still profit and prosper. Foodbanks seek to restore that inequality, but they also serve as a sign of its existence.

## Now read 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

The writer, Paul, equates a commitment not to embrace 'worldly' divisions and perspectives as being part of God's 'new creation' – restoring our world to the 'Sabbath' described in the opening chapters of Genesis. When James writes to the New Testament believers he makes clear that he does not expect them to stand idly by when they see the inequalities that Sabbath is intended to restore (James 2: 14-17):

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

We might argue that the idea of Sabbath over-arches the whole of human history, and the eventual age of Christ's coming will be an eternal Sabbath. Yet Jesus has some powerful words to speak as he anticipates its coming (Matthew 25:34-36):

*Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."*

## Mike's Story

Mike comes to our drop in, he is friendly and would love to be hardworking. Today he came for a food parcel, he needed to leave early to appear in court, he had been caught shoplifting.

Now I know that shoplifting is a crime but I need you to understand Mike's circumstances. Four weeks ago Mike boarded a bus into town, it is usually a 10 minute journey and he had left himself plenty of time to get in, but a mixture of the roadworks and an accident meant that Mike's journey took him 45 minutes, he was 10 minutes

The root of Sabbath is in God's good creation. Finish with the words of Psalm 104:10-15 and reflect on this as a picture of 'Sabbath'. Notice particularly that God's provision is reflected in the global cycles of nature, but that human beings have their place within it as those who are nourished and fed. Particularly encourage people to recognise that we have to work locally, but also in a broader perspective, if we are to create 'Sabbath' in our world.

*You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.*

## Prayer:

Capturing the image of 'Sabbath' that is summarised by the words of Psalm 104, there is opportunity to give God thanks for the peace and security we find in him, and to commit ourselves and one another to seek Sabbath 'Shalom' in all things.

*God in whom all things find their source and fulfilment, inspire us with that vision of your eternal Kingdom, that will spur us to seek its purposes and possibilities in all that we do. Help us to fulfil our calling as stewards of your creation; sharing its resources, caring for its most vulnerable inhabitants and working for your Sabbath 'Shalom' for all things. As we share food, campaign for fairness and seek to love our neighbours, may others catch in us, a glimpse of your Divine purpose. AMEN*

late for his appointment at the Job Centre. Mike has been sanctioned until the 2nd March. He stole £7.50's worth of food from a local supermarket for the simple reason that he was starving, he had not eaten for 4 days. He had been unwell and missed our drop in and had no food, desperation drove him to do what he did, he was in tears as he told me his story.

The full post can be read at the blog [Eternal Echoes](http://eternalechoes.com)<sup>1</sup>

1 <http://sallysjourney.typepad.com/sallysjourney/2014/02/dear-mr-cameron-id-like-to-talk-to-you-about-your-moral-mission.html>

## 5. Foodbanks are a sign that the Gospel is expressed in practical reality

### Read Matthew 4:1-4

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

The story of Jesus being tested in the wilderness is an important one in this context. We are introduced to him as someone who is 'famished'; but he was hungry by his own choice. Fasting is an important spiritual discipline for many Christians – the physical condition of hunger and self-denial helps us focus more fully on our need for God and to express our commitment to him. We might be tempted to argue, therefore, that hunger can sometimes be a positive thing, but it is important to recognise that fasting is a discipline of choice – it is a conscious decision to deny ourselves of that which is available to us. There is an equal argument, therefore, that to be without food in the first place is to be denied even that choice of intentionally going without.



We might also wonder whether Jesus' response challenges our involvement in the foodbank movement. In the face of his own hunger, Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread, to make provision in response to his need. But he declines this obvious invitation, declaring instead that we "do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

We might be surprised, then, to discover later in the Gospels that Jesus is at the very heart of an initiative to feed a hungry crowd, not turning stones into bread, but certainly forging a miracle that provided bread and fish for a vast crowd of people (Matthew 14:14-21):

*When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*



### Discussion point:

What are the apparent contradictions between these two episodes? Why do you think that, after rejecting the idea of turning stones into bread, Jesus does something very similar later in the Gospels?

The story of the feeding of the 5000 might help us to look more carefully at what Jesus says in the wilderness. Jesus does not dismiss the physical human need for food, but argues that we do not only need food. Jesus is quoting words from Deuteronomy chapter 8 – we have already looked in some depth at what this book says about food, and many of its messages are underlined in these verses. Jesus draws his words from verse 3: *He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

These words embrace, not only Jesus's response to temptation, but also the spiritual discipline of fasting. There is a clear connection forged between the hunger which God's people experienced and it helping them to recognise the significance of God's laws and teachings. But we have to recognise that in the wilderness the whole nation was hungry.

Foodbanks are not a sign that our nation is in a state of famine – they speak of a world of inequality where some prosper at the expense of others. It is interesting to note that the experience of hunger is coupled with God's provision of manna. (If people are not familiar with this episode it is recorded in Exodus chapter 16.) As well as being a further expression of God's provision for the hungry, there are some particularly relevant realities outlined in verses 16-21:

*This is what the Lord has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents." The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, 'Let no one leave any of it over until morning.' But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.*

God's provision of manna was more than merely supplying the physical needs of his people. It was riven with messages of equality, sharing, communal wellbeing and a clear and unavoidable challenge to greed and stockpiling. God provided bread and God provided instruction, and it was through the combination of the two that people's needs were met.

### Discussion point:

What 'words that proceed from the mouth of God' apply to how food is produced and shared in our world today?

The crowd on the hillside had gathered because they wanted to encounter Jesus – the 'word become flesh'. The disciples saw their physical need as a reason to dismiss and send them away. Jesus invited them to see this instead as an opportunity to engage them further – to enable them to encounter more fully the generosity, provision and miraculous presence of the Living God.



It may be interesting to note how Jesus responds to those who he met the next day, which is recorded in John's account of this episode (John 6: 26-35):

*Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*

These words of Jesus, along with the readings above, express a rich and complex intertwining of our physical and spiritual needs. In describing himself as the 'bread of life' Jesus connects again with the story of the manna in the wilderness, and how he himself is also sent by God. Historically, many Christians have used these connections to 'decouple' the two, reading much of what God has to say about food, hunger and provision as simply being a metaphor of our spiritual needs and their fulfilment. Foodbanks are a sign to us of how these two belong together – they are an expression of what it means to be a Gospel people. A foodbank can be distinct in that it has the potential to be, not simply a place where the hungry are fed, but an expression of who we are as a Gospel people.



Recognising this, we might finish with two questions:

- » To what degree has our focus on 'spiritual' aspects of our Gospel message caused us to overlook what it has to say about the physical needs of those around us?
- » To what degree do we allow our Gospel values to shape and influence, not only what we do to meet the physical needs we encounter, but the way in which we go about the task?

#### **Prayer:**

The reflections above provide opportunity to seek forgiveness for when we may have separated the physical and spiritual needs of those around us.

*Loving and generous God, forgive us for when we become so pre-occupied with our physical needs and expectations that we fail to leave room for you. Help us to see every struggle as an opportunity to understand more of your purposes, and be more fully embraced by your love. Forgive us too, for when our search for spiritual fulfilment, blinds us to the needs of those around us, and your call to respond to their plight. So help us to embrace your Gospel in all its fullness, that our deeds and our words, our priorities and concerns might truly be an expression of your love and salvation. AMEN*

### **A story from Manchester**

"I stay in bed to keep warm, especially in winter as I can't afford to put the heating on. The bleakness of this week to week is having an impact on my mental/physical health. I'm looking for somewhere else to live, but so far have not been able to find anywhere affordable in this area. I have had to get

occasional food parcels from the food and support drop-in service."

From *Walking the Breadline*<sup>1</sup>, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty 2013

<sup>1</sup> [www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/walkingthebreadline/info/report/walkingthebreadlinefile)

## 6. Foodbanks are a sign that we share a common humanity

### Icebreaker:

What was Jesus like? Invite the group to identify and share words that describe what they imagine, from the Gospel stories they know, Jesus was like. Try to emphasise that we are not looking for words that describe what he did, or indeed theological phrases that tell us something of who he was. It may help to imagine that you are one of the early disciples or a close friend of Jesus, and you are simply asked to describe the kind of person he was (examples of responses might be 'loving', 'caring', 'kind', 'straight-talking', etc.) If possible write these words on a large sheet of paper, perhaps inside an outline of a person that can represent Jesus.

### Now read the words of John 20:21-22

*Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.*

Each of the Gospel writers, in their own way, concludes their story of Jesus' earthly life with some form of 'commission' – we are called to continue the work that Christ has begun. Each Gospel writer also connects the commission of Christ with his coming – in John's case this is particularly obvious: Jesus sends his disciples "as the Father has sent me". We are called therefore to proclaim the message of Jesus in the way that Jesus would proclaim it. We are called to reflect his likeness and nature in the works that we do. Jesus makes this point in several ways throughout the Gospels – one particularly powerful occasion is another that uses the metaphor of food (Matthew 26:26):

*While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body".*

Through the symbolism of a broken and shared loaf, Jesus equates his physical presence with the gathered community of his disciples. While this may not be the only way of understanding what Jesus did at the last supper, the Apostle Paul,



writing later to the Corinthians, is in no doubt that this is at least part of its meaning (1 Corinthians 12:27):

*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

### Discussion point:

Look again at the words that you earlier used to describe what Jesus is like. Study 5 particularly recognised how the work of foodbanks is rooted in our Gospel calling. If we are called to proclaim the Gospel in the way that Jesus proclaimed the Gospel, it seems important that people experience something of Christ's nature in how they are received, welcomed and supported through visiting a foodbank. To what degree would these words apply to our foodbank\*\*? Are there ways we can be more 'Christlike' in how our foodbank operates?

Christ's nature was often revealed in the way that he treated people. Some of the encounters in the Gospels might serve as a useful model for how we engage with those who visit our foodbanks – for example, Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (John 4:7-9):

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink". (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me,*

.....●  
\*\* If you are not directly involved in a foodbank, you could think about another area of your church's life where you connect with the wider community.



*a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)*

These few verses give us a glimpse of a much deeper encounter. Jesus was part of a community that had no time for Samaritan women, but he was prepared to challenge prejudice, cross boundaries and not see someone as 'other'. In asking her for a drink, he gave her the dignity of giving as well as receiving, and so began a deeper conversation of acceptance and truth.

### **A woman restored – Mark 5:24-34:**

*And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "if I but touch his clothes, I will be made well". Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."*

Jesus could have simply allowed the woman to be healed and moved on to his next appointment – he had good reason to do so since Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, was desperate for Jesus to arrive at his home to attend to his dying daughter. But Jesus was determined to engage with the woman, to assure her of her dignity and ensure that she left affirmed. The fact that an important official is left waiting while Jesus gives his attention to her says something about how Jesus recognises all people to be of equal worth.

### **Discussion point:**

What do these two encounters have to say to us about how we engage with those who use a foodbank? Are there other encounters you are aware of where Jesus offers further lessons about how we engage with people? Are there actions we can take to better reflect Jesus's attitude to people?



### **Zacchaeus – Luke 19:1-10**

*A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

Zacchaeus is a particularly interesting character, because he could be seen as more representing those who caused the social problems in his society than one who was a victim of them. He has become wealthy through an unfair system of taxation, which he implies has at times been a source of dishonest gain for him. But Jesus does not condemn or label him: rather he engages in relationship, being prepared to enter his territory to share food and hospitality. Rather than seeing him as a 'fat-cat' or a swindler, Jesus appeals to his shared humanity and reminds everyone that he, too, is a 'son of Abraham'. We have no idea what was said at the meal table, but the consequences are dramatic: wealth is re-distributed to the poor, those who have been wronged are compensated, and a system of taxation is reformed.

### Discussion point:

Are there ways that we can engage with those who are influencers and have the power to change things? Are there lessons we can learn from Jesus in this respect.

### Now read Acts 6:1-4

*Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."*

There are some important lessons to be learned from this episode. Firstly we might note that need and poverty were a reality within the Early Church community as well as beyond it. One lesson in how we treat people is not to create or assume dividing lines between those who share their bread and those who receive it. We might also notice that the issue in this story was not whether the early believers shared out food but how they did it. They too had made the mistake of reflecting the divisions and discriminations of their culture, rather than recognising that even in the sharing of food they could declare something of their unity in Christ. The seven were appointed not to ensure that food was distributed, but to ensure that it was done in a Christ-like way.

We can recognise this reality in the laws that God gave his people in the Old Testament. In previous studies we have noted that the people were instructed to make provision for those who, for varying reasons, might be seen as 'outsiders'. Towards the end of the book of Deuteronomy there is a summary of the laws and statutes which God has given, which includes these words (Deuteronomy 26:11):

*Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.*

We might notice that God did not simply want people 'provided for': this was to be the beginning of, and a symbol of, their being included.

We might finish this study by returning to the words and events with which it began.

'Jesus took a loaf of bread ... broke it ... gave it ... and said "Take eat..."'

We have already recognised the rich and varied symbolism of these actions. This includes the fact that Jesus is seated at a table, sharing bread and offering the invitation to belong. Foodbanks are a sign that everyone can belong in God's Kingdom.

You might finish the evening, and this series of studies, by a simple act of sharing bread together, or if it is appropriate to your tradition, perhaps even a simple celebration of communion. As you do so, you might reflect further on how the broken bread and shared wine are reflected in the work of our foodbanks.

### Prayer:

The reflections above provide opportunity to affirm our common humanity, seek forgiveness for when we have regarded people as 'other' and affirm that all can belong in Christ.

*Christ, our companion and example, help us in all that we do to reflect your love and likeness. In shared and broken bread, you offered hope, forgiveness, restoration and belonging. Help us to share our bread, not simply in response to the physical needs that surround us, but as an expression of what you invite each of us to become, through belonging in you. AMEN*

## Simon and Sarah's Story

Simon and Sarah have had had a string of problems in the last few years which have left them in very difficult circumstances.

Simon's family had worked in farming for generations and his father took out a tenancy that Simon inherited. In August 2009 Simon badly hurt his back and was paralysed from the waist down. He had emergency surgery, but it took 9 months for him to be able to regain some mobility. Sarah left her very successful career as an exhibition landscape designer to care for him and try to save the farm. She was in at the deep end trying to get the harvest in at the same time as caring for Simon.

As Simon regained some of his mobility he was able to help on the farm, but he has never fully recovered. On top of this an rare reaction to the anaesthetic he was under for the 5 hours of his back operation has made him forgetful and he is unable to concentrate for long, which means he has lost his former sharp business mind. They worked on together trying to make the farm work, but had a poor harvest in 2011. Selling off everything they could on the farm they managed to keep going for another year. Then in May of 2012 Simon had inoperable peritonitis and almost died. Miraculously he survived, but his illness, together with the poor summer of 2012, meant that they had a poor harvest again and finally went bankrupt. Having sold off so many things to pay money they owed to try and keep the farm going they have no assets left and, as tenant farmers, since leaving the farm at the end of February 2013, nowhere to live.

When Sarah stopped work to care for Simon and to try to save the farm she kept paying his National Insurance, but did not think about her own. They have been told that, despite Sarah's previous 30 years of contributions, the gap in her NI payments reduces the benefits they can now claim. They have a housing benefit allowance, but not enough for country rent and have been offered a flat in a town. Having lived in the country all their lives

they cannot imagine how they would cope in a town and there would not be space in the flat for their animals. They have no children, but do have several cats, chickens and other animals that they view as their family and cannot face the idea of having to get rid of them. So they have turned down the flat and are hoping to bring Sarah's mother's caravan up from Devon, find some place to put it in the area and try to find a way to make a fresh start in that.

In all of this time Sarah, too, has been having health problems. With the physical work she did in her career and then on the farm both her hips and one of her knees have gone and need replacing. The trouble is that she is too young to have a knee replacement on the NHS as the joints they use would not last the rest of her life. As they have no money to pay privately for a titanium replacement she has to cope on a large amount of painkillers until she is over 60 and can qualify for an NHS knee. That means over 10 years of living with the pain.

It was with all of this surrounding them that they were referred to the Fosse Foodbank Kineton Distribution Centre just before Christmas. Over a cup of coffee and some sandwiches they poured out their story. Having worked hard all their lives and done everything they can to try and cope with what life had thrown at them they are understandably devastated by the challenges and changes that they are now facing. We were able to offer help in some small way with food to see them through Christmas and New Year. Moved by their plight we have begun to research other ways that they might be able to find help.

Sarah said that it was wonderful to come somewhere and speak to people where they did not feel like they were being judged. She said, "The foodbank helped to restore my faith in human nature, I felt safe there and have started to believe that there is hope for the future." A podcast interview with Simon and Sarah can be found at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faith-in-foodbanks-media](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faith-in-foodbanks-media)





# Worship Ideas

Worship is our response to God's love for us. So is work done to tackle hunger, through foodbanks or through working to end injustice – we do this because we believe that God loves and values each human being. So it is right that we bring before God in worship the work that is done in God's name. Here are some ideas for ways in which you might resource your local congregation through worship.



# Hold a Food Poverty Sunday

If your church is involved in supporting a foodbank, why not hold a special service to help the congregation bring what it is doing before God in worship? You could use some of the suggestions in this section, which includes ideas for a family service; sermon notes; prayers; and reflections.

You could also include dedication of food donated to the foodbank – maybe even wheel it up to the front in a supermarket trolley – and encourage people to take action, such as writing to their MP, over a simple shared meal after the service.



# Idea for a service structure

The Bible studies in this resource pack use the idea that foodbanks are a sign of the times. You can find images to illustrate these different signs at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faihinfoodbanks-resources](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faihinfoodbanks-resources), and could even structure your service along these lines:

**Confession:** Foodbanks are a sign that the world is not as God intended it to be

**Thanksgiving:** Foodbanks are a sign that we have a vision of a world that is better

**Prophetic:** Foodbanks are a sign of deeper questions that we need to ask

**Intercession:** Foodbanks are a sign that God's people are called to transform our world

**Gospel:** Foodbanks are a sign that the Gospel is expressed in practical reality

**Commission:** Foodbanks are a sign that we share a common humanity





# Hold a family service

## 'The Great Sandwich Contest'

Provide some basic ingredients and get two congregation members to make 'the ultimate sandwich'. Invite a panel of judges to decide which is the best. While the judges are tasting, invite the congregation to reflect on how many people are involved in creating just a simple sandwich – e.g. the farmer who grew the wheat, baker who made the bread, retailer who sold the bread, dairy farmer who made the butter, cutler who made the knife to spread the butter, delivery driver, public health inspector checking that the food is produced safely and so on. We cannot have food without community: even if we have an allotment and grow our own food, we rely on the seed-provider, the person who designed and made the spade, etc.

But of course for all of this, our food also relies on God. Psalm 104 reminds us of the cycle of nature which begins when God pours the water on the mountains. (Psalm 104: 13-15)

*From your lofty abode you water the mountains;  
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.  
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,  
and plants for people to use,  
to bring forth food from the earth,  
and wine to gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine,  
and bread to strengthen the human heart.*



These may just be sandwiches, but they are a sign to us of our relationship with God and our relationship with one another.

Ask judges to announce results.

If eating a sandwich can speak to us about being in relationship with God and our fellow human beings, what does it say to us when we have to do without food? What does it say to us about a society where things are organised in a way that some are deprived of food, while others can make massive profits from its production and distribution?

The links and relationships identified provide opportunities for exploitation and abuse. God speaks powerfully against this. For example

*Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate; (Proverbs 22:22)*

*Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from  
the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been  
robbed. (Jeremiah 22:3)*

*Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,  
but those who are kind to the needy honour him.  
(Proverbs 14:31)*

When someone's access to food is disrupted, then their place and identity in society can also be disrupted.





Our foodbank is a way of reminding ourselves and showing our world that food justice is important. We recognise our relationship with other human beings, and want our sharing of food to be a blessing to others, rather than a means of exploitation.

But as we do this, we also have to ask deeper questions. Why are people without food in the first place? We might wonder if this is important, but in several places in the Old Testament God speaks to his people right at the heart of their worship – for example:

*Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice...  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry...  
(Isaiah 58: 2-7)*

*Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and  
grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;...  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!  
(Amos 5:22 & 24)*

*When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;...  
cease to do evil, learn to do good;  
seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.  
(Isaiah 1:15-17)*

‘The worship I want is justice for the poor – bread for the hungry’ is how we might summarise God’s desire. God was not simply asking worshippers to share their daily bread – he was addressing their life as a nation, their economic systems and laws. They were allowing the poor to be oppressed and the stranger to go hungry and God was asking why. God was calling for change. God was warning that a society that ignored these things did not have a future.

It is amazing to think that a simple sandwich connects us to so many people – in a similar way, our foodbank connects us to a lot of issues and questions that God himself is often found to be asking.

Later in the service, younger children could be helped to make crackers and snacks with the leftover sandwich ingredients – using some music and Scripture or perhaps a worship song. The children could share their ‘feast’ – and as people receive and share food, we can reflect on how God invites us to share in his great banquet of love and justice, and also that he extends that invitation to the least.

**Remember** that our actions speak as loud as our words, so please think about how you deal responsibly with the unused ingredients from the sandwich contest.

# Sermon Suggestions

## Reading – Genesis 41:46-57

*Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plenteous years the earth produced abundantly. He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities; he stored up in every city the food from the fields around it. So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance - like the sand of the sea - that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure. Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The second he named Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."*

*The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end; and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout 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." And since 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 world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.*



There are some clear differences between what Joseph did and the work of a foodbank – not least because he charged people for the grain that they received. But at the same time we cannot help but notice some resonances, as a hungry nation finds relief through a programme of which God and his people are at the heart. What Joseph had arranged was a re-distribution of the surplus from a situation of plenty to make provision for those in need. Joseph took these simple principles of sharing and stewardship and developed them into a national network of organised centres, particularly based in major cities. This sermon outline explores these similarities and differences as a way of applying the story to our context today.

## **Sharing and stewardship is to be commended:**

At the heart of this story is a very simple formula – be prudent in times of plenty so that there is provision in times of need. Joseph applied this principle across the land of Egypt, but the story makes clear that he is applying the principles and realities that God has shown him. Part of the ministry of foodbanks is to help us be better stewards of what God has given us, and to promote generosity and sharing. These are things that lie close to God's heart for his creation.

## **The power of foresight:**

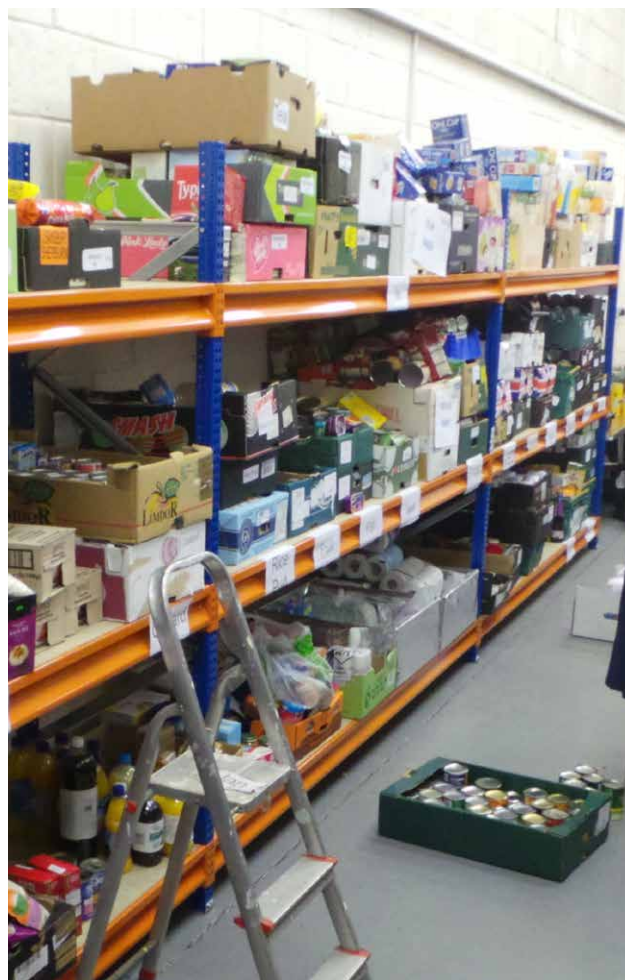
Pharaoh had one key advantage – he knew the famine was coming so was able to put measures in place. But he only knew this because he was willing to take some very serious risks. The story is told from the perspective of Joseph, but when we look at things from Pharaoh's point of view, we can see how radical his actions were. In summary, the ruler of one of the most powerful nations in the world was willing to restructure his entire economic policy around the advice of a foreign slave who was serving a prison sentence for a sex offence (albeit under false accusation). We have to recognise that the needs and inequalities exposed by foodbanks are the consequence of prevailing economic measures and policies. Today's politicians may argue that they haven't got a 'Joseph' to tell them what to do, but God's Word makes plain his expectations of a just, fair and generous society. The task of today's church is to follow Joseph's example and to speak God's truth into situations of power and influence.

### **The nature of community prosperity:**

The story makes plain that the famine impacted the whole land, and beyond. Although a troubling event, it affected everyone equally, but because of Joseph's interventions, everyone was able to benefit and prosper throughout that period. Most of the issues of food justice that we face today do not come about because of widespread shortage, or because it is beyond our means to re-distribute to those in need, but because of inequality and injustice. The cycle of plenty and famine would have provided opportunities for some to prosper at the expense of others, to exploit need and pursue personal interest. Joseph and Pharaoh pursued the common good, and were able to benefit others. While foodbanks are a symbol of that principle of common good, they are also a sign of the inequality that prevails in our own nation; while some in our land are paid six-figure bonuses, others do not have the money to buy the food they need. How do the actions of Joseph and Pharaoh challenge this reality?

### **Our common humanity:**

In the middle of describing a national economic programme, the story teller returns the focus to Joseph and his immediate family (vv 50-52) to tell us how the years of plenty coincide with the birth of Joseph's children. This interjection underlines for us that in a human sense Joseph could be described as having 'arrived' – underlined not only by the gift of two sons, but the meaning attached to their names. But Joseph was a man on a mission, he knew what it was to be forgotten and exploited, and there is an interesting contrast here between Joseph and Pharaoh's cupbearer (see chapter 40) who, once reinstated, largely forgot about his former cell-mate. Joseph was not content to rest on his own good fortunes, but recognised that he had a responsibility to see the project through. Whether a foreign slave, victim of wrongful conviction, or civic dignitary, Joseph was the same person – his identity was not determined by his circumstances but the person God had made him. There are some significant parallels here: in the average congregation, we are likely to be a fair social mix, some may have enjoyed economic success and prosperity, others may well be struggling. We must resist the values of a society that places worth on people according to their wealth and position and recognise what it truly means to be 'one in Christ'. Like Joseph, our foodbank challenges the idea that anyone can consider their own success as a reason to ignore



their responsibility to others. It is also important to recognise that whatever circumstances result in someone using the services of a foodbank, their human worth and dignity is not defined by them. Foodbanks are an opportunity not simply to meet another's need, but to express and share our common humanity.

### **God's greater purposes prevail:**

Throughout this story there is a deeper narrative running. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would become a nation. Through the action of his brothers, Joseph had become outcast from that family, and the following chapter reveals that through the famine the remainder of the family were under threat of starvation. Through these events the family was preserved and God's promise prevailed. Our foodbanks can serve as a sign of that deeper promise of life and hope that is ours in Christ. We should never engage in the work of a foodbank with ulterior motives, or as a means to different end, but seeking how God might use this work to bring further hope, promise and possibility into the lives of those we serve though them. Our foodbank can be a platform for other acts of justice and mercy.



# Prayers

## Thanksgiving

Generous and righteous God

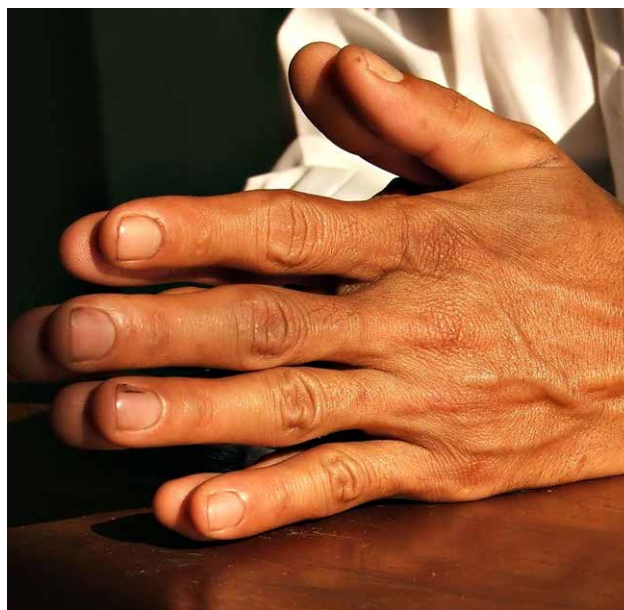
We thank you for food  
Which satisfies our needs and sustains our bodies  
Reminding us that you are the source and provider  
of all things.

We thank you for taste and texture, sweet and  
savoury  
Through which food brings us pleasure and  
fulfilment  
Reminding us of the richness of your goodness and  
grace

We thank you for hospitality  
Where shared food and warm conversation  
Reminds us of the generous welcome that is ours  
in you

We thank you and pray that in sharing our bread  
Through the work and ministry of this foodbank  
Or by simply responding to the needs we  
encounter

We might help others see more of you **AMEN**



## Confession

God of mercy and compassion,

We confess that at times we do not treat food as  
we should.

We take it for granted, and forget to be thankful for  
your provision;

We celebrate our plenty, with insufficient thought  
for those who do without;

We complain too easily when we cannot have what  
we desire;

We enjoy the fruits of others' labour, without  
always asking if it has been fairly sourced;

We celebrate its convenience, while others struggle  
to obtain enough.

We demand value and choice as the right of  
consumers,

But forget that our place in creation is as carers and  
stewards.

Help us we pray to obtain food, to eat food, to  
share food,

In ways that reflect the true values of your  
Kingdom

Give us an appetite for Justice in equal measure

To that through which we satisfy our body's needs  
and desires

Through Christ who invited all to pray for daily  
bread **AMEN**



## Intercession

Living Christ,  
 Who felt the pangs of hunger in the wilderness,  
 We pray for all who don't know where tomorrow's  
 food will come from,  
 And for all who will go hungry so that others might  
 eat.  
 May their hunger be ended, and their needs be  
 filled.

Loving Christ  
 Who provided for the crowd on the hillside,  
 We pray for all who are involved in foodbanks,  
 Seeking to show your love and compassion.  
 Give them strength to be your hands in the world.

Living Christ  
 Whose hands reached out to the outcast and the  
 stranger,  
 We pray for all feeling stigmatised and blamed for  
 their hunger,  
 For all who are labelled skiver or scrounger.  
 May you surround them with your unquestioning  
 love.

Loving Christ  
 Who called out against injustice,  
 We pray for those who seek a fair and just system  
 for all,  
 Challenging inequality and prejudice.  
 Give us all the strength to speak words of wisdom  
 and truth.

We ask these prayers in your name **AMEN**

## A prayer of blessing for donations

Generous Lord,  
 Giver of abundant life,  
 From little you fed many  
 Yet in our world of excess many go hungry.  
 Teach us all to take no more than we need  
 And share with all who are left without.  
 Bless this food and bless those who need it and eat  
 it.  
 Through your name **AMEN**

## Intercession/Commission

God at whose bidding the earth came into being  
 Who promised and provides seedtime and harvest  
 Who is faithful and loving to all he has made

**Give us this day our daily bread**

Christ whose food was to do the will of the one  
 who sent you  
 Inspire our hearts with desire to serve your  
 purposes  
 That through us the poor and oppressed may be  
 released

**Give us this day our daily bread**

Bread of life, Word made flesh  
 Make your truth known in places where injustice  
 prevails  
 Speak through us to challenge greed and  
 inequality

**Give us this day our daily bread**

God and Father of all humanity  
 May we welcome those whom others might call  
 stranger  
 So that in plenty or need, no-one need be  
 excluded

**Give us this day our daily bread**

## Bread: a reflection

*From there [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

Mark 7:24-30

This passage is extraordinary in so many ways. For a start, it's a miracle that it ever made it into the Gospels (it's here in Mark and in Matthew too if slightly changed). Frankly, it doesn't reflect well on Jesus. Does Jesus really call a woman a dog? And does he actually get bettered in argument by a woman? And did Jesus really change his mind about his mission, moving from domestic to global, because of a Gentile woman?

In Matthew's Gospel, the big issue that seems to lurk behind almost every story is the one about whether Jesus came only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, or whether he was sent to the Gentiles. Right from the beginning, from the genealogy and the wise men 'from the East' up to the ending with the great commission, Matthew is keen to tell his readers that Jesus is the Messiah for the whole world. So that's the lens through which we have become used to reading this story. And it's an important one. But Mark keeps on telling us to think about the bread – and this story is full of bread, or at least full of crumbs. And it always reminds me of that prayer in the Church of England communion service about picking up the crumbs from under the table, the prayer of humble access.

So what could it mean to think about the bread? We need to use our imaginations for a while here, because bread (from cheap white sliced to posh artisan) is in plentiful supply in the world in which most of us live. Unless we're old enough to remember the days of rationing then we take bread for granted. But in the ancient world, of course it was quite different. The provision of bread was highly politicised and contentious. There was very little stability in the food markets and a great deal depended on a good harvest. Even elite Romans, living in Rome itself, sometimes relied on importing grain from Egypt, particularly







in years when the local harvests were not good. When you thought about where bread came from you didn't mean the corner shop or Tesco's – you meant which corner of the Empire. If there was any sort of surplus of food to sell, the competition to have control of it was absolutely ruthless. And few people could feel safe from famine.

It's been suggested that Jesus' conversation here with the woman from Syro-Phoenicia about 'bread being given to the dogs' was actually a reference to the ways in some people had power over bread. The politics of bread was very volatile indeed in the ancient world. The woman might have been rather a rich woman, from the elite, since she is a Syrophenician. And they were in Tyre, a region which didn't have much of its own agriculture, but which imported grain from Galilee, so much so that there wasn't much left for the indigenous population of Galilee. The children of Galilee then have to eat the leftover crumbs from the rich folk of Tyre. And this woman may be eating her daily bread at the cost of the labour and hunger of rural Jewish peasants. So Jesus may be saying something like, "It's not right to take the food of the poor and throw it to the rich Gentiles in the cities".

But the woman talks back and she speaks from her situation in which she, rich though she and her people are, remain poor in others. She would welcome any crumbs of healing that Jesus has left over from the healing he is giving his own people. Perhaps what the woman does most effectively is to undercut the usual kinds of fixed ideas about who is poor and who is rich, who has the table laden and who has empty hands. Even those rich in faith, may be hungry for bread. And even those with full bellies may have empty souls. While in some ways the Gentile 'dogs' look rich and well fed, in others they need the crumbs from even the humblest of their Jewish neighbours.

The woman rejects what you might call a kind of binary pair of Jew and Gentile, or of poor and rich, as she points out that the places of giver and receiver may sometimes change and certainly that this relationship may be more complex than it first appears. She and Jesus stand together in kind of boundary land, where the usual kinds of assumptions and distinctions begin to fall away. All that matters is human need. Those who are usually thought to be those who have plenty and might even give, might suddenly become the vulnerable and the needy. And those usually thought to have been emptied out and poor become those who have something to give.

So – what is the meaning of the bread? Why does bread feature so strongly as a symbol of life, of God's gift, of economic justice, of God's presence with us, of miracle, sacrament, controversy and mystery? What is the significance of this? Perhaps its power as symbol lies in its ability to show us that the things we work so hard to keep apart, to frame as opposites or as completely different, are actually profoundly linked. Bread symbolises BOTH basic human hunger and the economic systems that go to fulfil it or deny it AND the deepest mystery of the presence of God with us. Bread is both the familiar taste of home and the intriguing aromas of a strange and different place. Bread is both what we long for in famine and what we celebrate with at a feast. Bread is both the dried up crust of the prisoner, and the enriched dough of Christmas and Epiphany.

Revd Dr Susan Durber, Theology Co-ordinator,  
Christian Aid

## More Prayers

You can find more prayers and reflections at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resource](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resource) and we will be adding to these over time. If you have anything you would like to suggest, please send it to [enquires@jointpublicissues.org.uk](mailto:enquires@jointpublicissues.org.uk)

## 10 things your congregation can do after a service

- 1 **Invite someone from your congregation who you don't know well round for a meal** – eating together is a great way to get to know people
- 2 **Bake cakes or biscuits for some of your neighbours** – food forms bonds
- 3 **Donate food to your local foodbanks** – add something to your shopping list each time you go shopping
- 4 **Cut back on fast food, chocolate, alcohol ... and give the money to a charity campaigning to tackle the causes of food poverty** – such as Church Action on Poverty ([www.church-poverty.org.uk](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk))
- 5 **Buy own-brand foods from supermarkets ... and give the money you save to a charity feeding hungry people** – perhaps your local foodbank or the Trussell Trust ([www.trusselltrust.org](http://www.trusselltrust.org))
- 6 **Visit the blog of the West Cheshire foodbank** (<http://westcheshire.blogspot.co.uk>) – find out the stories behind why people have to visit foodbanks
- 7 **Write to your MP** to express your concern at the growth of food poverty and hunger – a template letter is available at: [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/fif-mp](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/fif-mp)
- 8 **Reduce the amount of food you waste** – reuse it tomorrow, freeze it, buy only what you need
- 9 **Try to shop ethically** – locally, fairly-traded and using lower 'food miles' (how far your food travels to reach you)
- 10 **Are you ready to eat? Then thank God!**

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*Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Churches  
working together*

on behalf of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the  
Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church  
and Church Action on Poverty.

**For further information:**

[www.jointpublicissues.org.uk](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk)



[www.baptist.org.uk](http://www.baptist.org.uk)

The **Methodist Church** 

[www.methodist.org.uk](http://www.methodist.org.uk)



[www.urc.org.uk](http://www.urc.org.uk)



Church Action  
on Poverty

[www.church-poverty.org.uk](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk)

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