

Introducing our Poverty Partners: Paul Livingstone (Christians Against Poverty) and Jonny Currie (Trussell Trust)

Readers will be aware of the recent announcement of the partnership arrangement between the Council on Social Responsibility, Christians Against Poverty and the Trussell Trust encouraging Methodists on the island of Ireland to (1) learn, (2) pray and (3) act to reduce / eliminate the plight that is poverty.

In February, a video was posted (see <https://buff.ly/35qC3x2>) highlighting fuel poverty alongside prayer points and several challenges were issued, either to help someone in your neighbourhood struggling with their energy bills by signposting to appropriate agencies or for those who don't actually need their Winter Fuel Allowance, to donate it to one of the Methodist Missions, CAP or the Trussell Trust.

The challenges facing low-income families and child poverty throughout Ireland was highlighted in March (see <https://buff.ly/3NliMi6>) ; again prayer points and challenges were issued.

However, it is all so apparent that many more individuals and families in the UK and on the island of Ireland are encountering real hardship with the quadruple whammy of increased energy costs (30+%), inflation (5.5%), increase in National Insurance (approx. £20 per month) and public transport costs (7.8%). These, and the economic consequences of the terrible war in the Ukraine which will be long-lasting in their severity provides the backdrop to this partnership with CAP and the Trussell Trust. So, we are fortunate to be able to work alongside two organisations with much experience and local knowledge. Therefore, it gives the Council pleasure to interview the local representatives Jonny Currie of Trussell Trust and Paul Livingstone of Christians Against Poverty.

What is your role, how long have you been in it and what has the highlight been so far?

JC: I am The Trussell Trust's Network Lead for Northern Ireland, with responsibility for ensuring our vision for an end for the need for food banks in the UK is implemented in Northern Ireland. I represent The Trussell Trust on policy and public affairs in Northern Ireland, the leadership of a dynamic staff team of Area Managers and volunteers, and the day-to-day coordination of projects and partnerships. I joined the organisation in May 2021 after working for 12 years on community development projects.

An ongoing highlight for me is getting to know the diversity of our food banks across the network. It's been amazing to see how they are all supporting their communities with more than just emergency food, and doing so in partnership with other churches, charities and statutory agencies. All the food banks in our network are also bought into Trussell's vision for an end to the need for emergency food and are working on local strategies to help bring this about which is incredibly encouraging.

PL: My title is Partnership Manager for CAP in NI. There are two main parts to my role: (1) church partnerships, growing our network of partner churches, as all services delivered through church and (2) Building relationships with others, faith based and not, who we feel we can work with to achieve our objective of an end to poverty. So we work with churches but also Government, elected representatives, charities, advice sector, industry.

One of my highlights is a story told by one of our debt centre managers just after the second lockdown in 2021. This man walked into the church associated with a CAP centre. He had just moved into the area two weeks prior. He needed a sofa. The church was able to contact another local church which runs a furniture ministry. He also asked about a foodbank, and could he have some food. He hadn't eaten anything in two days. The church had a great selection because of donations from local supermarkets and shops so he got to pick what he liked by way of food, meat and ready meals for the freezer too. He wanted his children to stay with him but didn't have the bedding. Because of financial donations and gifts, our Centre Manager was able to go to a local supermarket and buy some things for him. He shared that he was angry with God because of a family bereavement some years before. The manager asked if she could pray for him and he agreed. He then asked about Sunday services and he took away a book of testimonies as well. It took a lot of courage for that man to walk through the door of a church and to ask for help.

But, with help from a couple of churches with great links to a food bank, local businesses, donations from the community, his life has been made better, he's heard about Jesus and has resources to read. And he's being prayed for!! What a difference working together can make.

What difference is your organisation making?

JC: Our network of 41 food bank centres in Northern Ireland is the smallest part of the network but we have seen the largest increase in the UK in terms of the numbers of food parcels we give out (78, 827 parcels – a 75% increase in 2020/1). Our food banks are about more than just food. They also provide additional support services in partnership with organisations like CAP and Advice NI, with the aim of ensuring that people do not need to return to the food bank in the future.

PL: I would say a massive difference. Poverty affects all aspects of people's lives - health, mental health, relationships, children, day to day life. People become isolated and cut off from support. They skip meals or ration their heat or lighting. We don't just provide debt advice, but we see the person in front of us and help them find freedom from debt and hope where there has been none. We give practical help with love, meeting urgent needs through emergency support, referrals to Food Banks and other sources all while telling people about the love of Jesus. CAP has helped over 9000 people since starting here in NI in 2009. In 2021, CAP has helped 542 people and saw 95 people go debt free. 21,095 people contacted CAP UK and large numbers of these received practical help and emotional support. CAP has over 400 frontline volunteers here in 20 Debt Centres, 7 Job Clubs, 14 Life Skill Groups.

What are your hopes for this partnership?

JC: Most of our food banks in Northern Ireland are run by churches or faith-based organisations. Churches are at the heart of our work generously providing venues, volunteers, leadership, donations, and more. The Trussell Trust has a vision for a Northern Ireland where people have enough money in their pocket to buy their own food, where the root causes of destitution are met in local communities, where there is greater public resolve, empathy and understanding about what drives people to a food bank, and a willingness to take action. It is our hope that by partnering with the Methodist Church in Ireland and CAP on this initiative that we can help to build a movement for change that will help to achieve this vision.

PL: That people become more aware of issues facing so many people around them/us. People in their street or town, people just like them/us. And then, as a result, they want to get involved in something.

This could be in praying for organisations working with people in poverty, and we can all do that. Or it may be to volunteer, with their church, CAP, Trussell, or something else. It could even be just to speak to someone they wouldn't otherwise have spoken to, to perhaps be the one bit of adult conversation that person has in their day.

It is hoped to have some time at Conference in June and at the Castlewellan Holiday Week to engage more thoroughly and prayerfully with this urgent imperative. It is the hope of the partners that more volunteers can be found for both CAP and Food Banks or that new services can be established. With that in mind, we are highlighting Food Banks during September and Jonny Currie would be delighted to facilitate visits to local Food Banks for delegations from congregations or youth groups. Please look out for further details in the Methodist Newsletter or MCI and CSR websites.

The CSR, CAP and the Trussell Trust hope and pray that the Connexion will rise to this challenge. It may be that people will wish to respond as individuals and in a way that is appropriate and meaningful to them. It may also be that each congregation, Circuit and District will wish to take up this challenge or continue on the work they have already commenced. With that in mind, it is hoped that there will be a special conference in October highlighting poverty and how churches may be able to respond, or have responded, in their local context. Again, please look out for further details in the Methodist Newsletter or MCI or CSR websites.

How to contact Jonny Currie for more information about Trussell Trust: jonny.currie@trusselltrust.org or by calling 07909 110313. **Contact details and exact locations of Trussell Trust Food Banks can be found at** www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-foodbank/

How to contact Paul Livingstone for more information about CAP: paulivingstone@capuk.org or on 07804 475012

If you would like to be kept informed about the Poverty Partnership activities / programme, please contact either Hazel Baird: shbaird74@gmail.com **or David Gallagher:** davidgallagher@gmail.com

Readers can see the Table providing the locations of Trussell Trust Food Banks in Northern Ireland and the closest proximity of a CAP service, and its particular emphasis.

Food Bank locations	Close CAP location and service DC Debt Centre LS Life Skills JC Job Club
Antrim Food Bank Oasis Antrim	Antrim DC LS (PCI)
Armagh Food Bank Armagh Elim Church	Lurgan DC (COI) Killicomaine JC and LS (COI)

Ballycastle Food Bank	Ballymoney DC LS (COI +)
Ballyclare Food Bank Newtownabbey Food Bank Carnmoney Church	Newtownabbey DC (PCI) Ballyclare LS (COI)
Ballymena Food Bank The Peoples Church	Ballymena DC (BUI) LS (Elim) JC (PCI)
Ballymoney Food Bank	Ballymoney DC LS (as above)
Bangor Food Bank	Bangor DC (PCI & COI) Bangor Town Centre (PCI & COI) LS Bangor Balloo (Elim)
Carrickfergus Food Bank	Carrickfergus DC (BUI)
Causeway Food Bank Hope Centre Vineyard Compassion	Causeway Coast DC (Vineyard)
Craigavon Food Bank	Lurgan DC Killicomaine JC LS (COI)
Dundonald	Willowfield DC (COI) Belfast East DC (CFC) Dundonald LS (Elim)
Enniskillen Food Bank The Lakes Vineyard Church	West NI (PCI)
Foyle Food Bank	Foyle DC (Ind-Cornerstone)
Larne Food Bank Craigyhill Methodist Church	Larne DC (BUI & PCI partnership)
Lisburn Food Bank LCC Community Trust	Lisburn DC (COI)

Magherafelt Food Bank Magherafelt Baptist Church	Mid Ulster DC (Hope Magherafelt / non-denominational partnership)
Newtownabbey Food Bank Carnmoney Church	Newtownabbey DC JC (PCI)
Newtownards Food Bank Thriving Life Church Compassion Centre	Ards Churches DC (The Link and multi church partnership, all denominations) LS (Independent Thriving Life Church)
South Belfast Food Bank	Belfast South & West DC (Independent - City Church)
South West Belfast Food Bank	Belfast South & West DC ((Independent - City Church) Finaghy DC LS JC (PCI)
Strabane Food Bank	N/A