

Valerie Rowe helped start a foodbank in her area



FEEDING THE POOR

key points

The Trussell Trust is the only UK Christian charity running a network of foodbanks.

The rising cost of food and fuel combined with static incomes, high unemployment and changes to benefits, is forcing people into crisis where they cannot afford to eat.

Doctors can play a key part by distributing vouchers to hungry people.

*'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.'*¹

As you shop do you think you could buy just one extra item—a tin of fruit, some sugar, a jar of jam? Have you ever been greeted by those words as you rush into a supermarket intent on quickly doing the shopping? I have, but now often it will be me asking you the question.

Why? About two years ago a member from the church I attend in Lambeth felt that the Lord was calling her to start a local foodbank. As she shared her passion, more church members caught the vision.

We could see increasing numbers of people in Brixton, Norwood and the surrounding areas in dire need of help to survive in tough economic times. Today, about 13 million people in the UK live below the poverty line. That is one in every five people.

We contacted the Trussell Trust, a Christian charity that runs the only network of foodbanks in the UK. It partners with local churches and communities to launch foodbanks in their towns. As I wrote this article there were 265 foodbanks across the UK with about three new foodbanks being launched every week. Trussell Trust receives no government funding and relies entirely on the generosity of the general public, businesses and charitable trusts.

Getting started

We invited a speaker from the Trussell Trust to explain how we could set up a local foodbank in Lambeth. He arranged training days for volunteers. Other local churches were approached and as they caught the vision the numbers of volunteers gradually increased. We visited other local foodbanks, receiving tips on what works well and potential problems to avoid.

Our foodbank is now a partnership with more than 18 participating local churches – a cause for praise in itself. An area of the church was set aside for food storage. We produced leaflets and made a large banner to hang outside the church. By September 2011 the Norwood Foodbank was ready to open its doors. But would anyone come?

We didn't need to wait long for the answer. It soon became widely known that on Tuesday and Friday mornings the Norwood Foodbank was open. Increasing numbers of people with various needs came through the church doors. Not all were looking for food. Seeing the church open, some came for a cup of tea, for prayer, for a friendly chat. But in the first six months from September 2011 to March 2012, Norwood Foodbank fed more than 1,000 people and gave away over seven tons (6350 kg) of food.

Demand continued to increase. In January 2012

UK Foodbank Clients

- 2008-09: 26,000
- 2009-10: 41,000
- 2010-11: 61,468
- 2011-12: 128,697
- 2012-13: 200,000 (predicted)

Source: Trussell Trust

a decision was taken to open another foodbank in Brixton. Currently the Norwood and Brixton Foodbank is feeding more than 100 people per week and giving out over 1100lbs (500kg) of food.

Hunger in the UK

Nationally, UK foodbanks fed 128,697 people in crisis in the 2011-12 financial year. That is up from 61,468 in 2010-11. The rising cost of food and fuel combined with static incomes, high unemployment and changes to benefits, have forced these people into a crisis where they cannot afford to eat. Other reasons for referrals include delayed wages, domestic violence, sickness, debt and refused crisis loans. The single biggest reason that people were referred to foodbanks was benefit delay (40% in Norwood and Brixton). This is followed by low income.

To receive emergency food, clients must be referred by front-line care professionals such as doctors, social workers, other healthcare professionals, head teachers, faith-workers and debt advice agencies. Clients bring with them a voucher from a recognised professional and this is logged on to the database.

Without a voucher they will be welcomed, given a warm drink and some cake, then given advice as to where they can access help. Once a week we have a specialist advice worker based in Norwood Foodbank.

Since opening, vouchers have been sent to as many appropriate professionals as possible. Hopefully many of you reading this article will have seen the vouchers issued by your local foodbank. If not, and if there is a foodbank in your area, ask them to send you some. Have them to hand when you are seeing patients and use them prayerfully. Our experience is that not many of our vouchers have been completed by doctors and I wonder why not.

Charlotte's story

One exception, though, was a referral from a hospital where a pregnant woman came in. She was malnourished due to various reasons. We were able to give her immediate nourishment and provided her with at least three more days' worth of food and arranged for a key worker to continue to support her.

We have had several mothers with new-borns who have had trouble feeding babies due to lack of food. Charlotte, with baby Peace, is one example. We were quite concerned when we first saw Peace.

She was more limp than expected. With the food and support given her and her mother, Peace is now a bright alert little baby. Another client is a sofa-surfer with little access to benefits. He has several medical conditions including being diabetic and having had a CVA. He requires appropriate food for his dietary needs.

Where the food comes from

All the food given out is donated by the public. Schools, churches, businesses and individuals donate non-perishable, in-date food. Supermarket collections are another way food is donated. Volunteers give shoppers a foodbank shopping list and ask them to buy an extra item or two for local people in crisis. Very few are unsympathetic and many drop off not just one item but a bagful. If someone wants to find out more, or even become a volunteer themselves, we have leaflets. On a recent Saturday at a local supermarket we collected one and a half tons of food.

At the church the food is weighed and stored, ready to be given out. When a client comes, they are given nutritionally balanced, non-perishable food to last three days. It might include tinned fruit, vegetables, meat, fish, pasta, cereal UHT milk, sauces, tea, coffee and long-life juice. Foodbank clients can receive a maximum of three foodbank vouchers (each voucher is redeemable for at least three days' food). Longer term support is available in exceptional circumstances.

If it would help (and this is often the case) we try to signpost clients to agencies able to help resolve the underlying cause of their crisis. A client struggling with debt, for example, would be referred to CAB or Christians Against Poverty. We receive clients from these agencies as well. More than 120 agencies now refer people to the Norwood and Brixton Foodbank.

As one of our volunteers said, 'A foodbank is not just about food. That is a starting point and a real practical help. But just as importantly it's about empathy: listening, advice, love, care and referral to outside agencies.'

'These agencies can provide long-term practical support and solutions to enable people to regain control, confidence and self-esteem. It's a privilege to be able to serve our community in this way and meet so many amazing people, all with a different story to tell if only someone is willing to listen.'

As we are helping the clients who come to foodbank we are ministering to Jesus himself and what we give them is a gift from him. Some are finding Jesus personally for themselves through speaking and praying with volunteers, joining Alpha groups and attending church. As Isaiah said, the duty of faithful people is to 'share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter'.²

Valerie Rowe trained as a GP and works part-time as palliative care consultant in Dartford, Gravesend and Swanley



Vouchers: have them to hand when you are seeing patients and use them prayerfully

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references

1. Matthew: 25:35
2. Isaiah 58:7