**Urban Mission and Public Policy**

**Discussion paper**

**Food Banks**

**Introduction**

The development and growth of food banks across the Diocese of Southwark and other parts of the country leads to questions about the needs that are being identified within communities. It is of particular interest in the diocese that the areas that are usually associated with residents who are best described as being in the middle to higher income range. Examples include New Malden, Purley and Wimbledon where Food Banks have been set up in recent months.

The fact that within these communities there are of course pockets of poverty. A recent report from the *Policy Exchange* suggesting the sale of social housing in communities where private homes are only available to the wealthy reinforces the fact that most neighbourhoods contain a social mix of individuals and families.

In addition the problems of reduced income and increasing redundancy within middle and higher income families and the problem of late payment of benefits leads to individuals and families may also be a factor that leads to the development of projects that offer direct social care. The concept of the squeezed middle in this context needs further examination and consideration.

Another factor may be the awareness amongst some churches that social action can be a creative sign of care for the communities that they serve. In this case Food Banks and debt counselling through Christians against Poverty are examples of initiatives that can be developed with the support of organisations with experience of setting of advising local churches on the setting up of projects.

In this context it is important that consideration be given to the theological understanding of the churches that are offering new services and support. Are they for example from a traditional evangelical background for which direct social care is not part of their traditional model of outreach? Or are they an ecumenical partnership of churches from a wide range of theological traditions.

In developing the projects to combat social need it is important to ensure that research and planning underpins the setting up of projects. In particular offering evidence of how the specific needs that are being served were identified.

**Theological background**

The challenge to any group of Christian who want to combat poverty is to be clear that they have a theological understanding of why they are undertaking a piece of work. A natural response will be to offer care to the poorest which is rooted in discipleship and pastoral care. The call to serve the weakest and excluded is encapsulated in Luke 4 and the reading by Jesus of Isaiah 61 and reinforced in the parable of the sheep and goats in Mathew 25.

In these biblical texts the message of seeking justice for the poorest is clearly laid out and the Church has a history of service that is to be found in many social action projects. The challenge is for outreach that is rooted in empowerment of the individuals and families who are offered support not paternalistic binding of wounds that is a short term solution to a long term endemic problem of poverty.

The counter to this approach is the recognition that the churches that support a Food Bank may well be collecting food for reasons of charity arising from the worshiping member’s personal sense of well being. If this is the case it is important that the challenge of poverty in a reasonably well off community needs to be highlighted in the context of a theological understanding of the gospel message for the poor.

The dichotomy that is at the centre of the discussion is around doing good for the sake of doing good against the challenge of addressing poverty as a systemic problem that is rooted in government inertia and anti poverty policies.

The theological underpinning of Food Banks must be based on the challenge of why individuals and families need the support and how to move from charity to justice that serves the common good of everyone.

In 21st century England the underlying question both theologically and in the political context must be why Food banks are necessary in a wealthy nation.

**Global economy and food distribution**

Any discussion of Food Banks must also take into consideration the fact that in a global economy that food is often distributed across many thousands of miles. The supermarket selling runner beans from West Africa to meet consumer needs in South London raises issues of how and why food is distributed.

In exploring this specific question we are faced with the issues of the local and the global. The local both in the context of South London and in the countries that supply food for the markets of the west, in both cases the fundamental issue is one of justice for the poorest. In the developing nations it raises issues of land use to produce for local consumption and in South London we return to the question of why are food banks necessary in a wealthy country.

**An alternative model**

On a recent period of Study Leave in New Zealand I spent a few days in the city of Christchurch which had been at the heart of two earthquakes on 2010 and 2011. The devastation was enormous and whilst building are standing it is only time before they will be demolished. Many communities and in particular the poorest are suffering from the problems that have arisen from the destruction.

A response by a number of churches as been to open Veggie Banks, the focus is on offering families a bag of fresh vegetables (worth $20 for $10). The focus being on healthy living without the charitable element associated with the giving of food handouts. The bags might also include recipes to ensure best use is made of the vegetables.

It is important to note that the government impose a tax GST (the equivalent of VAT) on vegetables which lead to an unnecessary higher cost for the consumer, which of course hits the poorest the hardest.

The model is one that might be considered by those who want to support the least well off by offering an alternative to the Food Bank model.

**The challenge to the Church**

The challenge that all churches face is how to best serve their community and in the light of the above it is important that local Christian communities have an understanding of the context in which they worship and serve.

If poverty is endemic what are the long term policy decisions that need to be made by those in authority at both the level of local and national government. In this context the problems may be associated with long term decline on housing estates where poverty and exclusion underpin the problems that are the cause of poverty.

The political challenge in these areas is one of identifying appropriate policies that lift people out of a benefits culture and offers a better way of life.

If the problems of poverty are associated with the down turn in the economy and the problems associated with unemployment there are wider range of issues to be explored. In particular how the ‘new poor’ are best supported and given a pathway out of the need for short term solutions such as food from a Food Bank.

In a news report in the Guardian on August 22nd 2012 about the possibility of local councils funding food banks the following was published:

*“Liz Dowler, professor of food and social policy at the University of Warwick, said: ’Despite the apparent win-win appeal to some councils, food banks conceal realities of poverty and hunger. They let the state off the hook from their obligations to ensure that all have the means to live well.’”*

In addressing the problems of poverty and the setting up of Food Banks it is important that the perspective of Liz Dowler is taken into consideration.

**Conclusion**

The Prime Minister David Cameron believes that Food Banks encapsulate his vision for the Big Society and in many ways they are a good example of outreach to those in greatest need in our society.

At a time when Welfare benefits are being reduced it is clear that the least well off will suffer and face problems of insufficient funds for a healthy diet. The challenge to the Churches and others is to challenge the fact that Food Banks are seen to be a necessity in many communities.

The reality remains that in a wealthy society there very existence is a challenge to our understanding of the common good and what constitutes a healthy society. In setting up a Food Bank or supporting their work we must not lose sight of the imperative that they are a response to the problems of poverty and exclusion that should not be prevalent in 21st century Britain.

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With thanks to Andrew Wakefield

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