

The Impact of Faith Organisations in Supporting People Experiencing Food Poverty: Transformation Cornwall's involvement in Food for Change and the change faith can make.

"I see people of faith compelled to speak out about the situation as it is in their localities with people going hungry and day by day hard choices being made by parents and families." *The Right Revd Tim Thornton, former Bishop of Truro.*

Transformation Cornwall is an organisation tackling poverty in Cornwall through faith based social action. Understanding that at the root of all faiths is to care for the most vulnerable in society, we have been working with faith organisations to offer practical support for people experiencing hardship, food poverty and isolation. Foodbanks might have become a feature of our communities, but that doesn't make it any easier for people to make that first step to help. The issues are complex and there is often so much shame and stress around food poverty, all of which faith-based organisations understand and work hard to alleviate.

Food for Change is an initiative that takes people beyond crisis point, working with them, through food, to regain confidence, be inspired, empowered and move on to a better way of living. So, we were delighted to be one of their original partners (2017-2019), led by Cornwall Food Foundation (CFF). Often working with foodbanks, Food for Change has proved to be an effective force for good.

Transformation Cornwall supported the programme by employing a community support worker, Nicky Abrahams. Nicky, who worked across two of the four localities, Truro and St Austell, demonstrated consistent belief in the abilities of all her participants to make real and sustainable change. It has been an honour to share those stories charting participants journeys.

As Nicky says, "The impact of food poverty is highly significant and present in many areas of work throughout the Food for Change programme. It's a source of stress, worry and anxiety for many people and can leave a feeling of hopelessness and failure when they can't provide suitable meals for themselves and loved ones. Many access foodbanks, but this can be emotionally difficult as individuals don't want to rely on them. Faith organisations provide critical support in enabling people to access help without feeling judged. They make their buildings available and facilitate many other actions providing crucial support to those in need. The partnerships faith organisations have with their local communities and compassion for those in need is unrivalled and inspirational."

Our initial involvement in Food for Change came from The Right Revd Tim Thornton (the then Bishop of Truro and our then Transformation Cornwall Chair) and his involvement in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty in April 2014 and subsequent report 'Feeding Britain' (Dec '14).

<https://foodpovertyinquiry.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/food-poverty-feeding-britain-final.pdf>

Of foodbanks and food poverty he says, "I have been impressed since the first time I met with people volunteering to help with Foodbanks by their commitment ... to help people in real need ... to see an end to food poverty... I see people of faith compelled to speak out about ... people going hungry and day by day hard choices being made by parents and families."

In Cornwall, the faith communities are very responsive to the needs of their vulnerable. Revd Jeremy Putnam of All Saints Church Highertown, Truro, welcomes between 600-800 people every week who struggle with food or financial poverty, addiction, disability or isolation. He says, "The work of faith communities in supporting and enabling people out of food poverty is crucial...They are a vital instrument of change, often centred around a vision for justice and transformation. A lot of the time this is seen more publicly through the work of supporting foodbanks, crisis support, and pastoral care; but in addition to this and potentially more powerful, is the everyday gathering of people in

community that brings the struggling and confident together, this heightens awareness of the challenges people face and the opportunity to share in the work of transformation and change.”

Perhaps some of the most revealing insights into the difficulties faced by people using foodbanks, Food for Change or any of the services that come into contact with faith-based organisations, are the items on a small Crisis Fund that Nicky was awarded from Cornwall Community Foundation:

£6.35: Provision of lunch and drink for an individual that hadn't eaten a full meal for two days

£3.60: Provision of bus fare to enable attendance at a support worker session/coffee morning

£30: Urgent payment on electricity key – no money and benefits not due for 12 days. Needed for heating flat during exceptionally cold period and cooking food.

£21.70: Formula for baby – benefits payment due in a few days/struggling to budget (getting support to address this) and the formula had run out.

Food poverty isn't just a trip to a foodbank. It can be the bus fare there, the cooker that's broken with no money to repair or replace, the electricity to work the cooker.

In Cornish foodbanks, all of which are faith-based, a holistic approach is often taken. Volunteers don't just offer bags of donated food and a cup of tea, they offer the chance to talk and be heard, the opportunity to find out about who else might be able to help with other needs, and assurance that people are not doing this alone.

In St Austell, Pastor Jon Langford comments, 'St Austell foodbank is a faith-driven expression of God's unconditional love for all people. People arrive at the foodbank for all sorts of reasons, and we seek to offer a consistent, sympathetic response in all circumstances. We pride ourselves on offering hope as well as just a food parcel, so we also offer prayer, a listening ear, and have information and support advisers to hand. We regularly signpost people to other agencies, including the churches of St Austell.'

In the west of Cornwall Revd Andrew Yates, who co-ordinates a Food Network across the county to link all the foodbanks, found more ways to help the community through food and faith. School children during holidays no longer had access to free school meals, so extra food packages were provided for children in the Penlee area and the churches cooked lunches for children and families on the Playscheme Project.

Food for Change has been a fantastic project that has worked so well with foodbanks, taking people beyond a crisis and into a much more hopeful situation. We are so encouraged that the initiative is being taken forward by CFF who are leading a second Food for Change programme <http://www.cornwallfoodfoundation.org/food-for-change/> from September 2019. We celebrate this decision that builds on the huge success of the initial Food for Change programme and the lasting impact it has had on its participants. Food for Change isn't a faith-based organisation, but faith has been behind it. At so many touchpoints, there have been faith organisations, caring, supporting and nudging people gently forward.

As Pastor Jon Langford says, 'I believe that what sets the Christian community apart is a holistic concern for the person, and people affected. Hunger is but one symptom of larger circumstances, and our love for Christ drives us to offer all we can for those in need'.