bread broken for ALL

securing the right to food
On 18 January 2016, Church Action on Poverty is moving from our Dale House office to new premises in Salford.

These are our new contact details – please use them from now on if you need to get in touch:

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This edition of SPARK explores the relationship between food and poverty. Our faith tells us that both people and food are of intrinsic value – but in today’s world, both are too easily seen as of little value, surplus to requirements, or even disposable.

‘Bread Broken for All’ is the theme for Church Action on Poverty Sunday – 7 February. On page 14 you will find resources to use on the day, or indeed at any point over the next few weeks – including prayers and reflections on the right to food. Additional resources are available at www.church-poverty.org.uk/sunday.

On pages 5 and 6, Geoff Tansey introduces the findings of the Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty (which I was privileged to be a member of over the past year), and Anna Jones from Stockport Homes explains the exciting new ‘Your Local Pantry’ approach to tackling food poverty which we hope to extend across Greater Manchester (and in time nationwide). Meanwhile, Martin Johnstone argues that whilst the right to food is one of the most basic of all human rights, food itself is not the problem – but can be part of the solution, if it is seen as an ingredient in nurturing community (page 11).

Lastly, we are delighted to share stories of our impact over the past year, on pages 7–10. We have given a voice to people like Golda, Letitia and Martin, whose stories feature in this edition of SPARK. We have put food poverty on the public and political agenda, through working with the End Hunger fast campaign, the Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty, and the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger. We’ve had a tangible impact on aspects of the Poverty Premium, including high-cost lending and fuel poverty – and started work on developing long-term practical local solutions.

All this – and more – is only possible through the generosity, prayers and ongoing support of our fantastic and loyal members, supporters and local churches across the UK. I look forward to working with you to build an even more powerful movement for change in 2016.
Action on sanctions – but not a real rethink

In October, the Department for Work and Pensions finally responded to growing concerns about the punitive and unjust regime of benefit sanctions. They committed to introduce a ‘yellow card’ system which gives people a 14-day warning period to provide evidence and get their sanction overturned.

Alongside many Christian denominations, Church Action on Poverty has been calling for a full independent review of the sanctions system (see www.church-poverty.org.uk/rethinksanctions). The Work and Pensions Select Committee had also called for a proper review.

This ‘yellow card’ system is a small step in the right direction, but we will continue pressing for a proper review to stop the benefits system making people destitute.

Preventing poverty beyond death

Church Action on Poverty’s report on funeral poverty Preventing Poverty Beyond Death (www.church-poverty.org.uk/funerals) had a significant impact on its publication in October.

Almost 200 people responded by emailing bishops and other church leaders, urging each denomination to do what it can to help bereaved people avoid falling into funeral poverty. We’re very grateful to our supporters for raising awareness of this important issue.

We have subsequently had fruitful discussions with a number of church leaders about how we can work with them to train and resource ministers, ensuring that churches incorporate a concern for funeral poverty into their pastoral work with bereaved people. We will share news on this work as it develops.

“Church Action on Poverty saved my life”

A new book contains personal stories from people who gained strength and confidence to overcome poverty through Church Action on Poverty’s Schools of Participation.

In the book Everyday Life in Salford, Letitia Rose describes how Church Action on Poverty “saved her life” when finances were bleak and she felt isolated and alone.

Download Everyday Life in Salford free at www.the-sarf.org.uk/everyday-life-in-salford

Enough!

In the autumn, Church Action on Poverty supported several major UK Churches as they warned that the Government’s Welfare Reform and Work Bill marks a dangerous shift away from a core principle of the welfare state, and will make poor people poorer.

Their report Enough: Our responsibility to meet families’ needs highlights how the benefit cap reduces families’ incomes but hasn’t resulted in the vast majority of them finding work; and how the Bill undermines the vital principle that benefits should be sufficient to meet people’s basic needs.

Paul Morrison of the Methodist Church said: “Fairness to the tax-payer should not be achieved at the expense of unfairness to children. As Christians we believe all people are made in God’s image. We do not believe that we should ever deliberately deprive a person, a family, a child of enough to thrive or to fulfill their God-given potential.”

The report and other resources for churches can be downloaded at www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/enough-resources
Making the connections between immediate hunger and poverty and the broader issues of health, sustainability and fair working conditions was a key challenge for the Commission over the past year. We are a volunteer, independent non-party political group hosted by the Fabian Society, supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and informed by an expert panel of people living in poverty in Salford, who were recruited by Church Action on Poverty.

We focused on food and poverty rather than ‘food poverty’ because that tends to direct thinking to the immediate needs of people in acute crisis, often focused on use of food banks. In fact, the links between food and poverty are far wider and deeper than being able to afford to eat. They require us to address the need for healthy and sustainable diets, decent working terms and conditions for those working to feed us from field to fork, and sustainable food production systems – all in ways that don’t harm the poorest. We found:

- Parents skip meals to make sure their children get fed.
- People squeeze the food budget because it’s the most flexible part of the household budget.
- People have to prioritise calories over nutrients.
- Food banks are just the tip of the iceberg, and often a means of last resort for people living in a continuing state of household food insecurity.

We believe five principles should underlie any action to address the issue:

- Everyone in the UK should have secure access to nutritious, sustainable food they can afford, and nobody should live in a state of household food insecurity.
- Food banks and other forms of charitable food provision should become unnecessary by 2020.
- Decent work is the best way of achieving sustainable food security for most households, but the social security system also has an important role to play for many, both in and out of work.
- The links between low income and diet-related ill health should be broken.
- People on low incomes should be protected from price rises and other negative effects of addressing the long-term environmental, health and workforce challenges of the food system.

Nationally, we want the Prime Minister to create a senior minister responsible for eliminating household food insecurity, which should be a central criterion for evaluating Universal Credit. The minister would oversee how government respects, protects and fulfils the right to food, monitored by a civil society alliance. We must measure household food insecurity so we know how successful we are in eliminating it. And government, regulators and businesses must work together to end the Poverty Premium (where the poorest pay most for key living costs including food, utilities, housing, household appliances, and transport). More locally, local authorities need to develop food access plans with their local communities.

A range of actions are needed on income. We must ensure that the DWP stops benefit sanctions, delays and errors causing food insecurity. Social security benefits for working-age people need to be uprated in a way that keeps pace with the actual cost of living. To bring everybody up to a minimum socially acceptable level of income, we must: proceed with raising the ‘national living wage’ to 60 per cent of median wages; actively build coverage of the voluntary Living Wage; and re-establish the principle that social security benefits should be adequate to ensure subsistence.

More, though, is needed to change the environments that shape our food preferences and influence the health and sustainability of the food system. For long-term savings and better health, we must protect public health schemes and budgets. The Department of Health should lead a review of advertising codes to protect children from the marketing of unhealthy food and drink products, and work with the Treasury and devolved governments to pilot a duty on sugary drinks. The current DEFRA 25-year plan for food and farming needs to be broadened to reduce household food insecurity and tackle health, sustainability and workforce issues.
Almost three years ago Stockport Homes saw more and more people having to use food banks, and struggling to meet the costs of everyday living. As a responsible landlord we knew there must be more we could do to help people in need, and this is where the Your Local Pantry network began.

The Pantry model is designed to be a sustainable resource to help those struggling to make ends meet – before they reach crisis point. Changes in the benefits system and rising food costs have all taken their toll on people’s weekly budget. In some cases people have to choose between heating or eating.

Each Pantry is a community food club where local residents are invited to join up as members for a small weekly fee of £2.50. In return, residents can select their own items from a wide selection of goods: fresh milk and bread, fresh fruit and veg, and all the usual store cupboard favourites. All monies collected are reinvested straight back into the project, paying for additional supplies (we have just expanded our range to include toiletries, due to popular demand!) or essential equipment. This enables the Pantry to stand independently and to cover its overheads without reliance on funding.

Although the main draw of Pantries is food provision, they provide much, much more. They offer work experience opportunities through a volunteering scheme; there are customer service roles in the Pantry shops or, more behind the scenes, working on deliveries and stock control. A Pantry training package is being developed.

In less than three years, our three Pantries have already helped over 670 households, received over 2,380 visits from their members, assisted five volunteers into full-time paid employment, and redistributed over £50,000 worth of stock!

All three Pantries are well loved by their communities. Not just for the supplies they offer but for what they’ve done to bring different parts of the neighbourhood together. Members will often congregate outside their Pantry before it opens so they can have a catch-up with new-found friends!

With a great deal of support from Church Action on Poverty, we have recently submitted paperwork to become a fully-fledged co-operative and are developing a social franchise package where interested groups will be able to apply for a ‘Pantry in a Box’ so they can replicate the model where they are.

It’s been an amazing experience to have seen Your Local Pantry grow from one small pilot scheme into something that has appeared on national TV and garnered interest from all around the country (furthest so far is the Shetlands). I can’t wait to see what the next chapter brings!
Church Action on Poverty delivers programmes that equip local communities, and particularly the most marginalised, with the skills, capacity and assets to exercise more power over decisions which affect their lives locally and nationally.

During 2014–15 we worked to embed learning from our unique ‘Schools of Participation’ approach into Church Action on Poverty’s wider work. Schools of Participation give people from marginalised groups the skills and confidence they need to become active agents of change.

We trained and mentored people – including partner organisations as well as people with personal experience of poverty – to run their own Schools of Participation.

We ran successful Schools of Participation ourselves, with people affected by fuel poverty and with people worried about the stigma associated with poverty.

**IMPACT**

- More people are becoming facilitators for Schools of Participation, letting us multiply our impact.
- We are exploring ways of sustaining the Schools of Participation approach in a separate social enterprise.
- The grassroots voices that emerge through Schools of Participation have significantly increased the impact of our wider policy and campaigning work.

Golda is a volunteer counsellor and has been affected by benefit sanctions.

**The whole attitude that people are scroungers is terrible; there’s just no respect**
building a more just society

Church Action on Poverty continues to play a leading role in a powerful movement within the churches and beyond to build a more just society. Over the past year, we have played a significant role in securing changes in a number of policy areas which contribute to this overall objective.

Below the Breadline: setting the media agenda on food poverty
A major plank of our work over the past year has again been to highlight the underlying causes of the huge growth of food poverty.

During Lent 2014, we supported the End Hunger Fast campaign, which hit the headlines with two joint letters to the press from church leaders.

In May 2014 our Below the Breadline report with Oxfam and the Trussell Trust showed that 20 million meals had been handed out as emergency food aid in the UK last year – and confirmed that the single most common reason for this was problems with the benefits system.

Our Director, Niall Cooper, gave verbal evidence to the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the UK (Feeding Britain) and we helped organise the Inquiry’s hearing in Salisbury. Niall also joined the Fabian Society Commission on Food and Poverty, and we set up an Expert Panel of people with direct experience of food poverty to advise the Commission.

Impact
- The End Hunger Fast, Below the Breadline and the Feeding Britain Inquiry were all major news stories, ensuring food poverty was a major national issue in the minds of the media, public and politicians.
- The Feeding Britain Inquiry was established directly in response to our call for a parliamentary inquiry.
- The Feeding Britain Inquiry has made progress on many of its recommendations, which include not only action to tackle problems with the benefits system, sanctions etc, but also in relation to the Poverty Premium.
- The Feeding Britain Inquiry established a dialogue with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) on the issues – which had previously been impossible to do.

Reducing the Poverty Premium for low-income households
We completed a 12-month research project ‘Closing the Gap: Tackling the Poverty Premium in Scotland’ in conjunction with the Iona Community and Faith in Community Scotland, with funding from the Church of Scotland, Scottish Episcopal church and Christian Aid. We carried out grassroots research with partners in Glasgow, and heard stories of how communities are tackling the problem themselves through creative initiatives such as food hubs, community gardens and shops, and district heating schemes.

In December we launched a report explaining how the Poverty Premium affects people’s lives, and called on the Scottish and UK governments to develop plans for tackling the Poverty Premium in partnership with communities.

Impact
- Edinburgh and Glasgow City Councils have issued a joint statement committed to “eradicating poverty in our cities in all its forms”, and explicitly endorsing the findings and recommendations in our report.
- A further 30 cities across the UK have signed the ‘Food Poverty Declaration’, calling on Westminster to take urgent action to reduce benefit delays, review how benefit sanctions and welfare reforms are being implemented, and make sure work pays enough to meet basic needs.
Time to Rethink Benefit Sanctions
Together with a coalition of free church denominations including the Church of Scotland, the Church in Wales, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church, we published research revealing that in one year, 100,000 children were affected by benefit sanctions and nearly seven million weeks of sanctions were handed out to benefit claimants. Over 1,400 people emailed their MPs to call for a rethink of the sanctions regime.

Tackling high-cost lending
Building on our past research into high-cost lending, and our work with the rent-to-own company Buy As You View, Thrive (our local partner in Stockton-on-Tees) and the Centre for Responsible Credit gave evidence to an inquiry into the rent-to-own market conducted by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Debt and Credit.

Tackling fuel poverty: Let Us Switch!
Our Let Us Switch! report highlighted how households who pay for energy via prepayment meters face major barriers when they try to switch to cheaper energy suppliers. It persuaded the regulator Ofgem to meet directly with a group of low-income consumers we have been working with in Salford and hear their concerns.

Living Wage campaign
Over the past year we have continued to pursue our long-term interest in promoting the Living Wage, within churches and via the Greater Manchester Living Wage campaign.

IMPACT
- An inquiry by the Work and Pension Select Committee in March 2015 also called for a review of the sanctions system.

IMPACT
- Our campaigns helped to persuade the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) to regulate payday lenders, with a cap on the total cost of credit (which we first called for in 1999) and robust action against Wonga.
- The APPG Inquiry picked up many of our concerns about rent-to-own lenders, and the FCA now has plans to tackle them.
- This dramatic clampdown on high-cost lending has clear benefits for millions of people who have been ripped off.

IMPACT
- Ofgem has now changed the ‘Debt Assignment Protocol’ so that it is easier and simpler for the four million customers with prepayment meters to switch suppliers.

IMPACT
- People on low incomes will be able to access more affordable credit, goods and services and have more control over limited budgets, which will reduce levels of stress and debt.

Impact
- All 4,700 Church of England schools are now committed to paying a Living Wage, following a General Synod motion promoted by Church Action on Poverty member John Freeman.
- The number of accredited Living Wage employers in Greater Manchester has increased by 400% since October 2013.

We do a lot of research with consumers but it was really good to hear direct from people who have first-hand experience of prepayment meter issues

Marcus Clement, Ofgem
changing public perceptions

We aim to cause a positive shift in attitudes amongst the people we communicate with, within the churches and beyond. With the right support, training and mentoring, the voices and stories of people with direct experience of poverty can be the most powerful means of challenging and changing public attitudes to poverty.

In 2013–14 we secured funding from a major national grant-maker, which has enabled us to establish a new three year ‘Poverty Media’ programme. This aims to make the voices of people living in poverty heard on a more sustained and regular basis in and through both mainstream and new media. Through this work, we aim to challenge some of the negative images and stigma associated with poverty in the UK.

Building a Good Society in the 2015 General Election

Church Action on Poverty worked with a wide range of partner organisations, to encourage churches across the country to take up the theme of a ‘2020 Vision of the Good Society’ with MPs and prospective candidates in the run up to the 2015 UK General Election. The ‘2020 Vision’ statement had been drafted by a consortium of agencies over the previous twelve months, and published in January 2015 under the auspices of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

‘Visions of the Good Society’ was chosen as the theme for Church Action on Poverty Sunday – 15 February 2015 – on which over 250 churches across the UK used our materials for prayer, worship and reflection on the theme of the Good Society.

An overwhelming 97% of Christians say that churches and church leaders in the UK have a key role to play in promoting a debate about what makes a good society (Comres poll of practising church members commissioned by Church Action on Poverty and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, February 2015).

The videos made by the experts of Real Benefits Street show the resilience and resourcefulness that enables people to get by in difficult circumstances – and provide a reminder that the benefits systems should be a safety net for all of us.
The right to food is amongst the most basic of all our human rights. It is a matter of justice and not charity. And so when hundreds of thousands of people, including tens of thousands of children, have to rely on food parcels in one of the richest countries in the world, we have a fundamental problem. It is not just a crisis. It is a systems failure.

Although the number of people in Scotland (and other parts of the UK) having to use food banks continues to spiral out of control, it is vital that we recognise that the problem isn’t about a shortage of food. Indeed, with an estimated 400,000 tons of high-quality food not even making it on to our supermarket shelves every year, the problem is blatantly not about a food shortage.

The great majority of food banks, and other emergency food providers, are doing an amazing job. However, we need to face up to the fact that they are often left dealing with the symptoms, when we should be addressing the causes. And the cause is fundamentally an issue of money – or rather, the lack of it.

Since October 2015, I have been chairing an independent Food Poverty Working Group which will report and make recommendations to the Scottish Government in early 2016. Whilst we will make suggestions on how our emergency food systems can be improved – and calling for investment in alternative models to food banks – our primary focus will be on how our social security system must be improved.

Delays in benefit payments, sanctions imposed by the Department of Work & Pensions, and people not being able to access the resources that they are entitled to (through, for example, emergency hardship grants and the Scottish Welfare Fund) remain three of the main reasons why people are going hungry. That needs sorted.

Dealing with the failings in the system, however, is not enough. Social security – and I am using that phrase deliberately – has been falling in real terms and will continue to do so over coming years, particularly as Universal Credit is introduced.

Community is a core part of what helps us to flourish. So alongside changes in the social security system, we need to be supporting ways of working which encourage and foster community building.

The Scottish Government now has the power to top up benefits and to raise taxes. It needs to use these powers, particularly to ensure that children and families are getting what they require to flourish.

Community is a core part of what helps us to flourish. So alongside changes in the social security system, we need to be supporting ways of working which encourage and foster community building.

Food is often a vital ingredient for nurturing community. Food banks are often based on a profoundly unequal model of transaction: “I give and you take”. They reinforce inequality rather than tackle it. We need, instead, a communitarian approach, one based on the principle of “We share”. There are already good examples of that model out there, such as the Big Lunch in the Gorbals where people come together every week to grow, cook, share and distribute food. We need many more of them. As they grow, we might just have a systems response to food poverty and not just an emergency response.
The Chancellor of the Exchequer’s new premium minimum wage for over-25s, which he branded the ‘national living wage’, has created a huge amount of confusion. Whilst an increase in the National Minimum Wage to £7.20 an hour is welcome, a “Living Wage” it is not.

The real Living Wage is significantly higher – £8.25 as of today across the UK and £9.40 in London – and most importantly, calculated independently and pinned to the actual costs of living.

Like all great campaigns, the Living Wage is based on a very simple idea: that a person should be paid enough to live decently and to adequately provide for their family. At its heart is an ethical argument for preventing in-work poverty and ensuring workers are not exploited through low wages. The Living Wage campaign began in East London in 2001, and has since won the accreditation of over 1,600 employers. This adds up to over £210 million in extra pay and over 40,000 people lifted off the poverty line. It also means a strong challenge to economic inequality.

But, as Walter Brueggemann has argued, this is as much a spiritual issue as it is one of economics: “A fair, living wage is precisely the vehicle through which we express a deep theological conviction about God’s will for the neighbor, and we enact neighborly solidarity that cannot be denied.”

The Churches have played a key role in the Living Wage campaign. All the major Christian denominations have now committed (at least in principle) to paying a Living Wage to all church employees. More broadly, evidence is growing that people across the UK care deeply about decent wages which cover the basic cost of living. The challenge is to turn this concern into action which strengthens the Living Wage movement and encourages more employers to pay the rates.

That’s why the Living Wage Foundation is now not just inviting individuals to take action in support of the Living Wage, but also working to establish campaign groups across the country to mirror the efforts of existing Living Wage campaigns in places like London, Cambridge, Reading, Colchester, Lewes, Lancaster, Horsham, Leeds and Manchester.

The Greater Manchester Living Wage Campaign, set up with the support of Greater Manchester Churches Together, Church Action on Poverty and a range of trades unions and others, has demonstrated the power of local campaigning. Working closely with the Living Wage Foundation, it has achieved a 400% increase in the number of local Living Wage Employers in its first two years. It is looking forward to welcoming the 100th accredited Living Wage employer later this month.

In the end, the success of the Living Wage campaign is measured in the impact it has on the lives of those struggling on poverty wages.
Our Poverty Media Coordinator Jackie Cox works alongside people in poverty to ensure they are more fairly presented in the media. So she was excited to be invited to a conference in November on ‘poverty and TV’. Unfortunately, the event illustrated some of the very problems we are trying to tackle...

The conference ‘Who Benefits? Poverty and TV’ in Salford in November, led by the BBC and in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, NCVO and the Royal Television Society, offered an innovative way to widen the discussion and speak directly to broadcasters. The BBC Head of Outreach and Corporate Responsibility, Diane Reid, said in her opening speech: “There are many conferences about poverty and there are many conferences about TV. This is the first conference about TV and poverty”.

In keeping with our commitment to having the real voices of real people involved in debates about poverty in the UK, we invited Shirley and Letitia, two of the people supported by benefits who had made videos for our Real Benefits Street project (www.realbenefits-street.com), to the conference.

We were asked to make an eight-minute presentation, but because of time constraints, this was changed at the last minute and instead, BBC Breakfast News presenter Louise Minchin interviewed Shirley and Letitia “for a minute or so”. Theirs turned out to be the only voices of people with experience of living in poverty that were heard, along with a one-minute story from someone who has been filmed for a new BBC series. Benefits Street ‘star’ White Dee was part of a panel debate but didn’t get much chance to voice her opinion, discussion being dominated by broadcast professionals who got more and more defensive as the session progressed. At one point, a producer from an independent production company referred to people living in poverty dismissively by saying “you know how hard it is to find these people”.

The conference became divided between broadcast professionals and those who work in the charitable and voluntary sector challenging UK poverty. There was a genuine willingness to find common ground to enable both ‘sides’ to work together, but certain assumptions and misunderstandings made this difficult. In addition to the lack of authentic voices, Martin Johnstone,

I think for me the organisers completely missed the point of the conference. Or maybe I misunderstood the aim of it! I felt that Letitia and I were the only authentic voices in the place… overall I feel very disappointed. Sadly I did not feel like I gained anything positive from it. The person who said “these people” should have been thrown out!

Secretary of the Church of Scotland’s Church & Society Council, observed another problem:

“There is a misunderstanding that speaking to charities that work with those struggling against poverty is the same as speaking to people directly.”

There was an assumption among those representing broadcasters that charities want TV broadcasters to make programmes about the charities, to boost their profiles and help raise funds. But we are arguing for authentic voices to be heard; we want to raise the voices of people facing very real issues and challenges on a daily basis, to help them highlight the injustices they face, and demand change that ends poverty in the UK in the 21st century.

Andrew Grinnell of the Leeds Poverty Truth Challenge summed it all up on Twitter afterwards:

“I left the day with more questions than answers about responsible TV-making.”
The Church Action on Poverty Sunday prayer

Creator God,
you made this good earth and
gave us enough
that all could delight
in bread and wine, milk and honey,
story and song.
As Jesus sat by lakeside and table
and shared bread,
and said that his body was
broken for all,
he showed us a glimpse of your
Kingdom.
Inspire us
with a vision of a society beyond
the scandal of poverty
where bread is the birthright of
all your children.
Give us hearts that yearn for it,
voices to call for it,
strong hands to build it
together.

Marie Pattison, Katherine House
(www.katherinehousefcj.org)

We have prayer cards for you to
hand out on Church Action on
Poverty Sunday, containing this
prayer and more details of our
work. Call the office on 0161 236
9321 to request a set of cards.

The right to food in the Bible

Marie Pattison, Director of Katherine House retreat centre in Salford, reflects on what the Bible has to say about food as a human right.

The Bible talks about food as a gift from God, something over which we are stewards, something we have a responsibility to share – but as a right? Largely the Bible doesn’t talk in terms of rights, but rather responsibilities.

Beginning at the beginning, the Books of Moses concern themselves a lot with food as an offering to God and how it can and can’t be eaten. But here is something that caught my attention. In Exodus 20:10, if a man has a slave wife and wishes to take another, “he shall not diminish her food, her clothing or her marital rights”. Here is another thing: only a priest and his household can eat sacred offerings. If that priest buys a slave, guess what? Levitical law takes the time to tell us that the slave may eat of the food “and anyone born in his house may eat of his food”. In Leviticus 20:11, if the priest’s daughter is widowed or divorced and comes back to her father’s house, she too may eat it.

Thousands of years ago, the law of God’s people held that it was important that the most marginalised had a right to the basics of their existence. Do we still hold that to be a truth?

These days we find slavery abhorrent and we don’t turn to ancient law codes to tell us how to treat slaves and eat burnt offerings, or bathe before eating burnt offerings. This law was given to God’s people for a very different society. It is concerned here with the responsibilities of male patriarchs, those who could afford to support others. In that society, a slave wife who is being put aside, and a divorced or widowed woman, are the most powerless. This person has been reduced to being unwanted property of another person. Here is why I think it’s interesting: the code of this society concerned itself with what this person would eat and wear – with her rights. Those rights are not spelled out for patriarchs. They do not question their food as a right; they have it, and when they do not, they buy it from others as in Deuteronomy 2. Their right to food is not spelled out, it doesn’t need to be. For those who need it to be – slaves and dependants – the law takes the time to say that food is so fundamental, it is a thing they have a right to.

The welfare state of this country was brought about to protect society’s most vulnerable. Today we see that safety net threatened: a basic income to cover basic needs is being framed as a favour, a luxury, something to be withheld as punishment. But thousands of years ago, the law of God’s people held that it was important that the most marginalised had a right to the basics of their existence. Do we still hold that to be a truth?
A collect

Generous God

Once you created a Garden, teeming with life, where roots and plants and fruit from the trees were good for food: feeding birds and beasts, and men and women made in Your likeness:

show us how your image is marred when we let greed, personal gain, and waste deny our sisters and brothers their share in Your abundance.

Give us the overflowing energy that filled the world with nourishment and beauty — energy to live out your justice, so that all may take their rightful place at the table of your generosity.

Tony Phelan

Understanding the right to food

Church Action on Poverty supporter Tony Phelan has some - theological reflections on the right to food:

Food is absolutely basic to us as human beings, not just because we starve without it. It is essential to our lives: the cement of relationships, an index of status and love and the basis of livelihoods and much trade.

We show who we are through food, who we respect and who we love; and we couldn’t live or work without it — and for a very large number of people, food is their work. So when we think about what living in a Good Society would be like, food is an absolutely fundamental part of our lives. Food gives us a chance to create things, to enjoy life with others, to experience and practice generosity, to be ourselves and see ourselves as part of a family and social group that has a share in the pattern of our culture and its ways of celebrating.

In the Christian tradition, we can turn to biblical pictures of fertile lands, running water, rich soils, animal fertility and nets full of fish; and in the life of most churches bread and wine, in the Eucharist or Holy Communion, are the means of our most intimate relationship with Christ. This picture of a generous creation through which God shares his life with us, challenges what we find in ideas of endless economic growth — and among some Christians! — that creation is ours to exploit as we like, mere fodder for human needs.

The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the origin of the idea that there is a human right to food. The UN’s special committee on economic and social rights explained it in 1999:

The right to adequate food is realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.

The British Government signed up to guarantee an adequate standard of living, including food, when the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was ratified in 1976. So as citizens we are entitled to expect that the state we live in will respect and fulfil the right to food that is affordable for all our people.

So there are two ways of thinking about the right to food:

Our society, through its elected governments, has recognised there is a right to adequate food or the means to get sufficient food. It’s not a right to be given waste food, so that poorer people have to eat what nobody else much wants; and it’s not a right just to be given food handouts, however generous. It’s a right to food that puts us in touch with ourselves and other people, food we can work to provide, in a society that values everyone equally.

And as Christians, we can understand the right to food as an expression of what we believe about creation. In the Genesis story, the very sustainability of human life depends on the nourishment provided in God’s garden. Having access to that abundance is what makes us fully human. The phrase we often hear from Saint Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon in the second century, helps to make sense of it for us:

The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God.

And we can’t have either unless the generosity of the Creator is shared equally with all.
Church Action on Poverty is committed to Closing the Gap between rich and poor, and building a more just society.

With your support and solidarity, ordinary people like Letitia and Martin can do extraordinary things. Read more stories of the impact we’ve had on pages 7–10 of this newsletter.

Please continue to Give, Act and Pray with us in 2016. You can use the enclosed leaflet or visit www.church-poverty.org.uk/give to make a donation today.