

Please, no more beans!

The most often donated items are bags of dried pasta and cans of beans. Tinned vegetables can be very nutritious and canned meats are in short supply, so donations of these items and personal hygiene products are especially welcome.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me." Matthew Chapter 25, Verses 35 to 36

The Cotmandene Crescent branch of the Bromley Borough Food Bank was set up by the Oak Community Church under the auspices of the respected Trussell Trust in 2010, with Christians Mary and Guy Beckingham as project leaders. A sympathetic local counsellor procured a shop for the food bank initially in St Mary Cray and a project began which was to take over their lives in a way they never anticipated. The Foodbank has touched the lives of hundreds of hungry people and made a positive difference to them at a time when they have been at their most vulnerable. A fire forced the food bank to move to St Paul's Cray, where they are now.

Mary explained, "We belong to quite a 'foody' church and we were running a lunch club for the elderly, which was great, but we felt we were feeding the fed, not feeding the hungry. We are not an especially large church but we are in an area of deprivation and we felt we needed to do something for the wider community. The Crays are known for being poorer areas



of Kent and we happened to see a Trussell Trust mission stand at an event we went to. We knew this was it – bang!"

Guy added, "The Trussell Trust is brilliant! They provided all of the information we needed to get started. We became franchisees and we just ran with it. It took 13 months to set up, from beginning in May 2009 to opening 13 months later. It's essential that new

ventures like this one check what support is already available in the community. Guy said, "We have now taken over two other small-scale food banks, one in Anerley and one in Penge. To sustain a food bank, people need to keep donating, and one church is sometimes too small to be able to do this. So Bromley has a group of churches and food and toiletry items are donated to us from across the borough."

The Trussell Trust is based in Salisbury, and they use a voucher system for clients. One of the first challenges in establishing a food bank is in establishing commitment from local care agencies like the Citizen's Advice Bureau, GPs, Age Concern and Social Services. These official bodies must agree to hold the vouchers, so that they can distribute them to the people who most need this kind of targeted help.

Guy said, "When we started, we needed to publicise the food bank and tell people about it; now, people know how to contact us, and we can be found on Google. I am often invited to team meetings and one of my roles is to encourage people to collect food for us. Trussell Trust has built a relationship with Tesco who allow us to collect from their customers twice a year: July and December 2013 collections resulted in 14.8 tonnes of food being donated to which Tesco added a financial donation of £7,300. Last year, (2013) we received 58 tonnes of food in donations, which is about 25 banana boxes of food each week. Of that, we gave out 52 tonnes and recently we ran out of vegetables and meat completely. People do donate a lot of tins of beans and bags of dried pasta, which is great – but it's not always what we really need."

Mary added, "We started by asking people in church to donate food items on what we called 'food bank Sunday' because we needed to open with food on the shelves. We

also encourage churches to keep a box in their church, so that the congregation may donate food items each week."

With around 250 churches in the Diocese of Rochester, this could make a huge difference to those in need. The development of the Bromley food bank has been gradual, as Guy explained, "We opened in Orpington in the first instance, then two years later we opened in Bromley and then in Anerley and Penge last year. Our feeling is that in this time, the overall demand for food bank support has gone up, but it's hard to be certain because now more people know we are here and they can come to us for help."

Mary said,

"Typically, most of our clients are people who are struggling because of changes to the benefit system."

"When someone finishes work, it can take up to 7 weeks for them to get into the system. Unfortunately, any human error with computer systems for example, only makes this worse. This can cause a lot of heartache. It's not always the fault of the claimant."

Although Bromley food bank has enjoyed three years of working rent-free, they do now have to pay rent of £8,500 p.a. on the Orpington premises. This means that they do welcome financial donations, because there are significant overheads to pay. The food bank distribution

centres in Bromley, Anerley (Christ Church in the Diocese of Rochester) and Penge are situated in churches which have helpfully donated space. This is very helpful because there is very little space to store the food, and then another space for transactions where clients can be seen. A real example of churches working together! Mary said, "Food distribution is very carefully thought out. The Trussell Trust has done a lot of research into nutrition, and we try to balance the needs of a single person just as much as a family. We give people enough food for three days when they are in crisis or an emergency situation. Some people do try to exploit the system, but most are genuine. We just have to pay close attention to everything."

The primary purpose of a food bank is to help people with their hunger, but Bromley food bank like many others, offers support with extra household items like toilet rolls, washing-up liquid, shaving foam, sanitary products, shower gel, shampoo and toothpaste. Mary said, "There are extras that people need. We will provide nappies for people with babies, and tins of formula for those that need it. Pets can also be a great source of comfort for people, sometimes, that's all they have – so we will provide pet food if it is needed and people do donate it. We also talk to our clients on a 1:1 basis, and point them in the direction of other agencies – like MIND – who may be able to help them. Some people are very distressed not only by their circumstances, but also



by the fact that they have had to ask for help."

Emotionally, running a food bank can be very draining. It can be hard to see people struggling every day. Guy said, "It is very hard when you have no way to help people. Ours is a short-term measure. Mental health issues often contribute to difficulties in life for people; as an observer, you can't see that because people will look well, even when they are not. Sometimes, people with mental health issues can be well some of the time, and unwell for the rest. The benefit system was never set up to cope with that. People who are single also have real problems. I do understand that the system has to have rules, so, for example, claimants need to sign-on on time; the rest of us have to go to work on time. Some people are lazy and some people can't be bothered, but in my experience, they

are the minority. There is no flexibility in the official benefit system. The claimants are often vulnerable and they rely on other people who can sometimes be very helpful and sometimes be quite nasty to them. Some people do get angry and some are very tearful, and there are often medical reasons for that – but the benefits system doesn't consider this and people can be very alienated."

Churches can help either by collecting food and then delivering it to the food bank, or by donating money or time. Mary said, "The food bank system relies heavily on volunteers giving of their time freely. The donated food has to be collected, weighed and sorted by date during the working day. It's important because you are doing something to really help someone else. You will be making a real difference in the area. For us it is about

preaching Matthew: 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink'. This is about not turning our back and not making a judgement. Some people come and help us later, once they are back on their feet; they put something back when they can. The stark reality is this can happen to anyone. We are just trying to make a difference and help when we can."

If you would like to know more about the Trussell Trust or the Bromley food bank, please go to:
www.bromleyborough.foodbank.org.uk
www.trusselltrust.org

If you would like to volunteer to help Bromley food bank, or would like to support them financially, please call 020 3751 4177.