

# How to make our foodbanks more effective?

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Due to the economic crisis, more and more people have come into financial trouble, and in many locations food banks have been set up and they are only getting busier.

I've been involved in many international projects including social projects. About 30 years ago the big lesson in this field was that it was better to give a hungry man a rod than a fish. A fish is quickly gone and they will only need to ask again for another fish. A fishing rod on the other hand offers the opportunity to catch a fresh fish every day. Of course this example depends on the context in which a person lives.

Given the realities of economic hardship and the fact that people are struggling to put food on the table, it would not be right to leave them hungry.

However, I do wonder whether there is something more we can do to relieve their plight and make our food aid – and indeed any kind of poor relief - more effective for them in the longer-term. In a nutshell, is there something else we can do to make our giving more beneficial for the recipients?

When I read the Old Testament there are many rules for poor relief (see Ruth 2, Lev 19:9 - 10, Lev

23:22 and Deut 24:19 - 22). Israel had to give the poor the opportunity to collect their own corn. It does not say that there was a free dispenser.

The poor had to gather it themselves. This method had a good number of benefits than simply just giving away. The poor came into contact with others in their situation. They could relate to each other and build a network. It was good for their own sense of dignity and for integration.

With this in mind, I believe it is good to assess whether there is a method of helping that is more effective.

It depends on the issues and problems of the individuals and what the church can offer, but the foodbanks can ask their clients where their biggest financial problems arise from, and then look at what the strengths within the church are. For example, if a problem identified a problem with budgeting and there was an accountant within the congregation, perhaps the church could bring the foodbank clients and accountant together to find ways of getting their finances back on track.

There can sometimes be simple solutions right under our noses. If clients have lost jobs, are there many entrepreneurs in the church who can offer work placements or are there older members of the congregation in need who can pay for some assistance? Perhaps the church could offer to make up part of the salaries. Maybe the church can offer spaces for free on its child or youth camp holidays.

Or do we have the opportunity to use part of the church grounds or hire a plot of land and turn it into a kitchen garden? At my own church in the Netherlands, we collect money a couple of times a year towards the running costs of the foodbank and perhaps other churches do this too. Could we not use this money to create kitchen gardens and give people the seeds they can use to grow their own food? There are always people willing to help and the food can be shared or bartered between those who work to grow it. This is a much more creative way of addressing the need than simply getting others to give money.

If we only give away, we do not solve the underlying problem. If we just give food, we might not build any deep relationship with the poor and we won't have any context for giving our testimony. Therefore we need to be more strategic in building relations as we provide real help, it's about a combination of the two. To further this, a church can brainstorm 'how to build contacts' and come up with some corresponding 'activities' – or rods.

If we really want to help foodbank recipients, the church must do more than give them food and give attention to their wider needs. What 'rods' we can offer as a church? How can we be a bigger blessing to a request for help? By doing some targeted church, the foodbank and the church can

find some good matches that make a win-win situation and involves the poor in the ordinary course of business once again.

I believe we can learn something of the answer to this question looking at Peter and John's encounter with the beggar outside the temple recorded in the Book of Acts. When he asked them for alms, Peter told him plainly that he could not give him a penny. He focuses on the main problem and makes sure that this person will be able to live and work independently permanently. Peter actually says: Hey, friend, I have something much better, I offer you the Kingdom of God. That was his solution to the man's problem.

In the UK the foodbanks are organised by churches, but in other places like the Netherlands, where I come from, they are neutral with no religious affiliation and so even if a church wants to give a Christmas book to a child connected to the foodbank, for example, it cannot and this is unfortunate. But wherever possible, we should try to give more than the physical food stuff.

It is also interesting to see how the early church went about helping the poor. Many church members sold fields and shared the proceeds with the poor. Christians believed that Jesus would come back very soon so it was easy for them to give their money away and if you look at it in the longer term, it is much better to make a piece of land available to the poor so they can grow their own food. This is a lesson from history, not a command, but how might we apply it in today's world?

It is a challenge to us to consider whether we are satisfied in just giving a jar of peanut butter when God has given us so much more. Are we doing something with that 'much more' too? Have we still got a clear message behind our work?

I think we have as a church have lost the great opportunity in our society to be a bigger blessing. Of course we should alleviate immediate needs by giving out the jars of peanut butter that we are able to give. But there should not be a full stop at the end of this, but rather a comma. Something else should follow. The comma is where the real work begins.

We can help people to function independently again by paying attention to their personal needs and finding the right match between supply and demand within our churches. And most importantly, besides resolving the material need, there is always a spiritual terrain that we operate on. We can provide social help where we have the contacts but we also have a message of lasting hope that we can give them and just as we pray for the sick, we can also pray for the foodbank clients.

Let us not forget to be thankful for all the volunteers who help out at the foodbanks and, most importantly, let us as churches know the man who comes to the foodbank personally. Let's help him and offer him God's message of hope.

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