



Dr Helen Cameron

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'The morality of the food parcel: Emergency food as a response to austerity'

The Morality of Austerity

Dr Helen Cameron, Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology and Head of Public Affairs for The Salvation Army

Introduction

The term 'austerity' is now widely identified with the measures introduced by the Coalition Government when they came to office in May 2010 in response to the global financial crisis of 2008 (O'Hara 2014). In this article I want to turn the spotlight on the churches and look at one of the main ways in which they have chosen to respond to austerity, by the provision of emergency food. In the search for justice we must not shrink from examining ways in which the church responds to the world.

The article follows the structure of the pastoral cycle (TSA 2009). I'm going to start by describing the way in which austerity has affected the incomes of the poor and the nature of the churches' response. I'll then explore the issue by looking at the historical, international and political context. Based upon that, I'll reflect upon my concerns about emergency food in dialogue with the parable of the two sons. Finally I'll suggest some actions arising from my reflections.

What is the issue?

There is no doubt that making ends meet has become a greater challenge for greater numbers of people since the 2008 financial crisis. There are real pressures on the budgets of those affected by austerity. Wages have increased at a lower rate than inflation until recent months and there will still be many people whose wage increases are not keeping pace with inflation. Most people will not have had the spending power of their wages restored. For the first time in April 2013 working age benefits increased by 1% rather than by the rate of inflation. Sheffield Hallam University looked at the impact of the cuts in benefits across the country and estimated that £19bn of spending power would be removed from the pockets of claimants (Beatty and Fothergill 2013).

Many people have experienced a period of unemployment and although overall numbers in work now continue to increase, there are higher numbers of people working part-time, in temporary contracts, zero-hours contracts or self-employed than in the past. Those items which poor people spend a larger proportion of their income on such as food and utilities have increased in price more quickly than the general rate of inflation (NPC 2013). Finally there is a greater high street and on-line presence of commercial organisations offering unsecured credit to people on low incomes at high interest rates.

At the same time as these reductions in spending power, the government has embarked on

a complicated and lengthy process of Welfare Reform which won't be complete until 2018. These reforms change the relationship between the working age citizen and the state making the receipt of benefits more conditional and the consequences for breaking those conditions more serious. Public support for these changes is substantial (NatCen 2013).

The following reforms have already been implemented (see Money Advice Service website for details):

First, people with a disability or long-term health condition are being migrated onto new benefits involving a reassessment of their condition, a change in eligibility criteria and often significant delays in processing their claims.

Second, there have always been conditions for receiving work-related benefits but these have been significantly increased. A claimant agreement is being introduced which specifies the type and volume of job-search activity. Failure to meet conditions results in benefit payments being sanctioned for periods from one month to three years.

Third, the Social Fund which DWP used to administer to make emergency grants or loans has been delegated to Local Authorities who are free to devise their own scheme. From April 2015 the central government grant that funds these schemes is being withdrawn. Each local authority will decide whether or not to retain their scheme.

Fourth, social tenants as well as private tenants receiving Housing Benefit now have that benefit restricted according to the size of their household. The lack of smaller properties to down size into means that some people are paying 'the bedroom tax' whilst others are getting a transitional payment from their Local Authority.

This is the complex context in which some people find their incomes failing to cover their outgoings and where unexpected expenditure can cause a cash flow crisis.

Emergency food responses by churches

In 2004, two organisations started to introduce an approach to food poverty that was already common in other countries namely the Food Bank. There are two types of food banks. The first (of which FareShare would be the main UK franchisor) takes food that will soon be out of date and redistributes it to community organisations that make it into meals for their clients (NatCen 2014). The second (of which the Trussell Trust is the main UK franchisor) takes donations of non-perishable food from members of the community and gives it at no charge in three-day parcels to people who have been referred to them as being in emergency need (Lambie 2011; House of Commons Library 2014).

The first sort of food bank is seen as avoiding waste and reducing the cost to community organisations of providing meals. The main critique is that it can institutionalise over-supply by the supermarkets at the expense of agricultural providers and saves the supermarkets the cost of land fill tax.

My focus in this article is the second sort of food bank, that solicits donations of non-per-

ishable goods from the public, stores them, makes up food parcels which are then issued to those who have been referred by other agencies as being in need.

Both types of food bank have grown in number since the lead charities adopted a franchise model. Most dramatic has been the growth in Trussell Trust food banks from the first one in Salisbury in 2004 to 420 and growing in 2014 (Trussell Trust 2014). Their aim is to have a food bank in every town and they seek groups of churches to act as franchisees.

The idea of food banks has caught on and there are an unknown number of non-franchised food banks operating to their own model and involving one or more churches, faith groups and voluntary agencies (CUF 2013). A 2013 report from Oxfam GB estimated that they provided a further 150,000 food parcels in 2012 compared to the Trussell Trust's 350,000 (CAP and Oxfam GB 2013).

The first review of research on the provision of emergency food has recently been published by DEFRA and it shows that there are currently more questions than answers about the nature of food poverty and its relief in the UK (Lambie-Mumford et al 2014).

Exploring the issue

Having outlined the pressure on the incomes of the poor and a brief description of emergency food responses, I will now explore some of the historic, international and political context.

Historic context

It is always good to look back and ask whether the church has been in a similar situation before. The rapid urbanisation of the UK in the second half of the nineteenth century led to areas of intense poverty in all cities. Churches responded by setting up many direct relief associations that gave practical assistance of food, coal or clothing when the person applying presented a ticket that had been given to them by a lady visitor who had investigated their circumstances. There were many debates about whether 'charity' could be of sufficient volume to keep people from the work house and whether the provision of charity weakened people's sense of responsibility and self-reliance. The Charity Organisation Society attempted to organise these many small charities and ensure practical assistance was provided to those in a genuine emergency. But this meant turning many people away. The fear of the work house was matched by a fear of charity as entailing moral judgements about the recipients' worthiness (Lewis 1995). The journey to the welfare state in 1945 was paved by a growing dislike of 'cold charity'. What is unusual about the UK is that a system of food banks did not emerge in the 1980s as it did in other developed welfare states (Riches 1986).

International context

An advantage of belonging to an international organisation is that you can find colleagues in other countries who have experience of the issues you are tackling.

The Salvation Army in the USA has been providing emergency food for over 30 years and it is one of the services with which it is most commonly associated. Welfare payments are monthly and demand rises at the end of each month when rent and utility bills fall due. Concerned at the volume of demand and repeated demand, centres in the Chicago area are introducing a case work programme designed to help some families move from dependency to sufficiency. A Canadian food bank, The Stop, has become internationally famous by turning itself into a Community Food Centre changing the nature of the food supply chain in a poor Toronto neighbourhood (Saul and Curtis 2013).

The New Zealand Salvation Army provides about 50% of emergency food parcels and has been doing so for about 20 years. They aim to provide a budgeting session to every client who approaches them for emergency food but in practice there are six food parcels for every one budgeting session provided. 65% of clients say that an underlying financial problem has caused them to seek a food parcel. The demographics of food parcel recipients correlate with other forms of social exclusion particularly in the two major cities. 60% of referrals come from government agencies. Food banks are an accepted part of the welfare system for those willing to use them.

Political context

Returning to the UK, political acclaim for food banks has been overwhelming. Conservative politicians have been quick to point out that their policy of rolling back the state has been correct, that welfare benefits have been over generous and that the church as part of the Big Society has stepped forward to plug any gaps. Labour politicians have said that food banks are a clear indication of the failure of Coalition welfare policies and that growing numbers of people face destitution. Let me illustrate from a parliamentary debate on food banks in Scotland on 19 December 2012. The debate was secured by Lindsay Roy, Labour MP for Glenrothes

I want to praise the many individuals and organisations stepping up to the mark to address this unprecedented food crisis. Throughout the country, groups are often overwhelmed by the extent of food poverty in their communities... Such volunteers are, in every respect, local heroes who contribute above and beyond the call of duty to address hunger and poverty that is sadly increasingly rife in our society.

The government minister responding was David Mundell, Conservative MP for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale.

I put on record my thanks to the many organisations that provide food banks and other services, and especially to their volunteers. Many such organisations, if not most, are set up by charities and churches, which have a valuable role to play in supporting the most vulnerable in their local communities. We should feel thankful for

the work that they do to provide support in sometimes desperate situations.

Senior Christian leaders have also been quick to cite food banks as an example of the way in which the church responds to social need.

Five concerns in conversation with scripture

In this climate of acclaim it is a fool hardy person who raises concerns. I now want to raise five concerns about emergency food in dialogue with the parable of the two sons found in Luke 15: 11-32. I'm using the bible here as a public document available to citizens as a means of raising moral questions.

Concern 1: Creatures in relation: the meal as the heart of the household

Our common need to eat reminds us that we are creatures in relationship both with the earth, its plants and animals, and with each other as we source, prepare and share food. The younger son comes to his senses not only when his hunger leads him to contemplate eating food intended for pigs, but also when he realises he is alone with no one to eat with. He looks back with fondness on the family meals of his childhood and starts to think. The younger son has shamed his family, gone beyond the pale so there is no longer a place laid for him at the table. Yet the Father welcomes him to an honoured place at a banquet held to celebrate his return.

So powerful is our creaturely need to eat, and so deeply does it signify the human condition that the people of God have used an annual meal to remind themselves of God's saving them from slavery, sustaining them in the desert and placing them in a land of plentiful food. Their salvation history is wrapped up in a meal which brings each family together at the climax of the religious calendar. No wonder that that meal makes its way into the Christian tradition. But the meal of the new covenant moves beyond our biological kin to welcome the despised others who eat with us as equals.

Sharing a meal is at the heart of living in a household. We may have memories of student or workplace fridges where every item has the name of the owner attached to it and the level of hygiene drops until someone's temper snaps. It is clear these people are coexisting rather than members of one another. The practices of shopping, preparing and sharing food are central to the life of the household. To intervene with donated groceries is to intervene in the most basic form of communal care a household performs. Why is it food that is being supplied rather than the money that would enable the household to maintain its chosen shared eating practices?

Concern 2: Creatures in Culture: Food as symbolic of the gap between survival and participation

Whilst our bodies tell our minds that we are hungry without any conscious thought, the hunger that is triggered is specific to our time, place and culture. No matter how hungry

we are there is still pig food that could be placed in front of us and cause revulsion. Horse meat springs to mind. Hunger places us and any response to that hunger needs to know where we come from.

When the younger son finds himself as a Jew not only looking after pigs but looking with longing at their food, he knows he is truly in a far off place. He journeys home to a place where he is known and is received with a roast beef dinner which satisfies his hunger.

We live in a culture where food is far more than calories. The food industry and our patterns of consumption use food as a signifier of ethnicity, religion, prosperity and leisure. Food banks typically provide a parcel that is nutritionally balanced, albeit without fresh produce. In a society where a use of convenience food is a sign of social participation, not all household have the skills and the time to take these basic food stuffs and turn them into edible meals (Munroe 2014).

York is famous as the home of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which every other year costs a basket of goods which the public deem to be the essentials for survival and basic social participation (JRF 2013). Every year the gap between the cost of that basket of goods and the level of welfare benefits gets wider. How can church communities become more aware of their use of consumer goods, including food, to indicate identity and status? What level of consumer participation is necessary to feel comfortable attending your church?

When we select groceries to give to a food bank, we place the recipients where we think they belong in our culture. We will not meet the recipient or share table fellowship with them so our choice of grocery tells us something about ourselves. What do we find palatable?

Concern 3: Re-narrating our hunger: The stories we respond to

Hunger makes us wise as serpents. We think who might help us and how they might be persuaded. The younger son realises he must make the journey of shame and he prepares the story that will at least secure him food, shelter and clothing. He doesn't expect his dignity to be restored. In seeking help for basic needs we open ourselves up to the judgements of those who will help us. The Father's response was unconditional love. The older brother responded with fury. He was angry not only about the irresponsibility he knew of but also the foreign travel and sexual adventures he had dreamed his brother was having.

If budgets are tight and what is on offer is free food, then the story will include hunger. Understandably people fear judgement and so learn how to describe themselves to those who hold the vouchers.

There are stories behind the stories – here are some that you may recognise:

- Inappropriate or delayed service from Job Centre Plus that the person is insufficiently brave or articulate enough to challenge
- Difficulty in budgeting and being in debt.

- Being asset rich and cash poor and unable to come to terms with the need to dispose of assets and their associated running costs.
- Feeling pressure from children to participate in society rather than get by – trainers, smart phones etc.

None of these needs is resolved by an emergency food parcel. But the real story can be masked by a need to narrate oneself as hungry. Where food is given on presenting a voucher, the voucher issuing agency has the responsibility to resolve the issues that have brought the person to them. But some of these issues cannot be resolved within the time span of emergency food. When the Father dies, the prodigal will be at the mercy of his older brother - what is the new story he will need to learn?

Concern 4: Does generosity mask accountability and create dependency? Lives of permanent crisis

Living on a farm, the Father was not short of food. He had to hand the means to throw a banquet and the servants to prepare it. It may be that the simplicity of gathering and distributing food through a food bank will mean we fail to challenge the wider social structures that erode the budgets of the poor.

The one figure in the parable we know we are not meant to criticise is the Father. His generosity is the paradigm for both sons and for us. The father gives what is readily to hand but there are limits to his generosity. He reassures the older son that he will not be giving further capital to the younger son who will now have to earn his keep.

As overseas aid agencies will tell us – a problem with emergency food aid is that it can prevent donors asking the question about what happens next (CUF 2013). It is important that the churches continue to ask questions about public and private agencies. For example:

- How is it that some Job Centres fail to make new and sanctioned claimants aware of hardship payments?
- How can Local Authorities be persuaded to maintain their Local Welfare Assistance (Financial Assistance Scheme) when the central government grant is withdrawn in April 2015?
- How can providers of high cost credit be challenged? The pawnbrokers, payday loan companies, Bright House etc? How can low cost credit be made more available to those who most need it?
- How can the poverty premium whereby the poorest pay the most for their utilities and insurance policies be reduced?

When the benefit system finally moves over to four-weekly payments, will a proportion of people find that every month ends with a crisis and resource to food banks becomes a regular way of getting by? This is certainly the experience of The Salvation Army in the USA as I have already indicated.



Concern 5: Emergency food as a gateway to financial inclusion: Moving the fence to the bottom of the cliff

For me a final question to ask is: How would the story of the two sons have ended if there had been a food bank in the far country? What if the younger son had told them his story and they had realised that in addition to being hungry he was working for an exploitative employer and had debts to friends that he couldn't pay. Would that help have kept him in the far country and stopped him repenting and seeking reconciliation? If it did, the father would have been left with his heart ache and the older brother with his smouldering resentment.

If we are to get to the heart of the matter, the need all humans have for reconciliation, then the point at which the help is offered is crucial. In New Zealand food banks have become the point of contact with the 'true poor' who because they are in crisis are receptive to help. Other services such as budgeting and debt advice are accessed through the food bank. Those who seek out the pawnbroker or the loan shark and don't come forward for free food are made less eligible.

As a result of effective engagement with DWP by the national office of Citizens Advice, the government proposes to introduce Local Support Service Partnerships as part of the move to Universal Credit. Local Authorities will be responsible for setting up those partnerships and they are intended to draw in all local agencies that can advise and support people as they enter the benefit system. The aim is to identify everyone who may have difficulties with claiming or sustaining their households on Universal Credit and identify the advice and support at the start of their claim rather than when they have reached crisis point. No doubt people will still have crises but their access to advice and support will not be dependent upon them seeking food in a crisis.

Setting up these partnerships will be a complex task and at the moment DWP is encouraging Local Authorities to make a start but denying them the additional resources to do so (DWP 2013). They have recently announced their intention to pilot aspects of Local Support Service Partnerships. There is a huge potential here for the churches to engage in a ministry of reconciliation where people entering Universal Credit are supported as their lives change and the fractured relationships which both cause and result from poverty are addressed. The need for each community to take up this challenge is urgent as the migration of families onto Universal Credit could start as soon as 2016.

Summary of concerns and argument

Hunger unites us as creatures dependent upon the earth and its resources. Meals unite us as persons in relationship, a relationship which in the Christian tradition extends beyond biological family to equal table fellowship with once despised others. But we can only recognise the other person when we acknowledge our own particularity. It is not any food that satisfies our hunger but food that links us to a place, time, social status and culture.

Hunger forces us to address the other claims on our money. We discover our need to buy



social inclusion, status and identity. The food parcel can divert our attention from the commercial organisations that stake a claim on the incomes of the poor. It can mask the poor performance of government agencies tasked with providing a safety net for every citizen. It can move the fence to the bottom of the cliff.

Proposed acts of resistance

I want to conclude by suggesting five actions that could be taken to trigger further reflection on the concerns I have raised. My sense is that further reflection on the provision of food parcels will best be triggered by church members and churches taking slightly resistant actions and then reflecting upon the response.

Action 1: Give plastic not food

Every major supermarket allows you to put cash on a plastic card at their tills which you can then give as a present. If you regularly give food to a food bank then save up until you would have donate £5's worth of food and put the money on a plastic card and hand it in. By giving plastic you will enable households to continue their chosen eating habits. You will release volunteers from sorting and moving food to have more time to support clients.

Action 2: Eat unbranded or basic brand food for a month and discuss

How do we become aware of the way in which food has become more than calories but a signal of our affluence? This is a test for your household. How do household members react to the withdrawal of their favourite brand and what does it do to their sense of social participation.

Action 3: Ask voucher issuers for their stories

If you are involved in a food bank, spend some time visiting the agencies that issue the vouchers and ask them for their stories. How are their experiences changing? How is their capacity to resolve their clients' problems within the 'emergency period' holding up?

Action 4: Produce a leaflet on sources of local budgeting and debt advice and stand outside your local pawnbroker, pay day loan shop or Bright House giving out the leaflet

As an act of solidarity with those who don't or won't use emergency food, try leafleting outside the businesses that offer unsecured credit to the poor. Ensure their staff know that referrals from them are welcome.

Action 5: Ask your local authority to set up a Local Support Services Partnership now in anticipation of benefits being paid monthly in 2016.

This final suggestion is probably one best undertaken by a churches together group rather than an individual as it is the most challenging. Lobby your Local Authority to start setting up a Local Support Services Partnership (DWP 2013) that includes every advice and support agency in the area. If Universal Credit is to be universal – everyone claiming it needs their support needs identified and met as they enter the system and not when they reach crisis point. At present this is the only olive branch in public policy that the churches can cooperate with to prevent emergency food becoming a way of life for some people when monthly benefit payments are introduced.

Final words

You may feel I've descended to a level of detail that is hard to absorb. But my day job tells me that the devil is often in the detail of the lives of the poor and that unheroic and persistent interest in those details makes a difference. The churches have made a large scale and compassionate response to austerity in the provision of food parcels. Now is the moment to take a step back, take the long view and seek the compassion that lies on the far side of justice.

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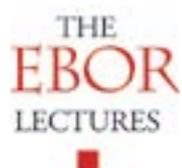
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