

An Impoverished Church? Tackling poverty through prayer, learning and action.

or

Poverty in focus – pray, learn, act.

Who hasn't winced or had a deep intake of breath when they heard the news of the latest sharp increase in fuel, food or inflation and who hasn't baulked when the utility bills dropped through the letterbox? And for such a tightening of personal and family finances at the most pressurised time of the year over the Christmas and New Year period has a cruel twist to it! Much media attention has focussed on the human side of so many people now trying to make ends meet with significant priorities having to be made, often at personal cost to health and wellbeing, and with no clear end in sight. The sense of despair and hopelessness is apparent.

Readers may have reflected on the theme of poverty in the recent Social Responsibility Sunday held at the end of January. Social media followers may have also seen on the Methodist Church website a piece commissioned by the Council of Social Responsibility (Northern Executive) announcing a partnership of prayer, learning and action between it, Christians Against Poverty and the Trussell Trust.

This article will cover 6 questions: What are the poverty figures for NI? What are the main drivers for poverty? Why has the CSR (Northern Executive) decided to undertake some work in this way and in partnership? What are the three elements to the partnership? What is presently planned for 2022? And, how might you become Involved?

1. What are the poverty figures for Northern Ireland?

According to the Department for the Communities:

- Around 370,000 people are living below the poverty line in NI – that is 1 in every 5 persons.
- Nearly one in every three is a child. Along with their parents/carers, they make up nearly 60% people living below the poverty line. More than two in every three children in poverty* live in households where someone is working. The vast majority of the remainder (c. 40,000) are being looked after by the 23,000 lone parents living in poverty.
- More than 1 in every 3 children living in poverty lives in a household where someone is disabled and, for four out of five of these children, the person living with disability is an adult.
- Two-thirds of child poverty is made up of children who have lived in poverty for three of the past four years.
- The majority of households in poverty live outside of the Belfast area and in the West of NI. The majority (60%) of people in poverty live outside the wider Belfast metropolitan area Derry City and Strabane has the highest poverty rate of all council areas at 27%. Belfast City Council area accounts for one in five (20%) of the NI total.
- Working age people without dependent children account for nearly one in every three people living below the poverty line. About 35,000 are young single people (under 29), with men outnumbering women by three to one. Recessions are particularly hard on this group.

- Around 43,000 working age people (without dependent children) living in poverty are people with disability.
- Pensioners are the only group for which poverty rates have declined steadily over the last twenty years. Less than one in ten of all those in poverty are pensioners. This is a significant change from ten years ago when pensioners made up one in six of those in poverty.
- However, almost one in every three pensioners in poverty (just under 10,000 of the 31,000) lives alone. Single pensioners make up about a quarter of all pensioners.
- All the indications are that poverty has risen during the pandemic.

2. What are the drivers of poverty?

Facts like these are shocking but they become alive and disturbing when a person comes into a food bank or seeks help with their budgeting, The following information of what drives poverty has come directly from our Christians Against Poverty and Trussell Trust partners and refers to 2020 /21.

Of those presenting themselves to a CAP advisor, the following is identified as a main driver:

- Low income 20%
- Mental health issues 18% (this has increased from 11% in 2015)
- Relationship breakdown 14% - with debt being a significant catalyst
- Budgeting problems 13% with 71% of CAP clients borrowing to pay bills and 61% borrowing to buy food
- Long term illness 11%
- Unemployment 8%

For further information

- <https://capuk.org/connect/policy-and-government/client-report-21>

The situation is very similar with those accessing Trussell Trust food banks. Other factors are also at work such as the problems with the benefits system be they delays, inadequacy and deductions, or challenging life experiences, or lack of formal / informal support.

In the first six months of 2021 there was in Northern Ireland a 40% increase in the number of food parcels given. This was the highest increase across the UK. Families with children have been hit the hardest, with food parcels for children increasing at double the rate for adults. Food banks are also highlighting precarious work and the difficulty people in rural areas face with accessing wider support. For further information - <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

3. Why has the Northern Executive decided to undertake some work in this way and in partnership?

Over the last couple of years, the Council has reflected on poverty, looking at updating past position papers with a more current analysis of poverty in Ireland, challenging unhelpful attitudes to those who struggle financially and advocating for a more compassionate implementation of the Universal Credit in Northern Ireland. But it was the impact of the pandemic that prompted the Council to invite the Trussell Trust to share experience and data on what was happening in local food banks. This brought a clarity of focus and urgency to

make a more meaningful response. There may also have been guilt! It was, in part, a Marcus Rashford moment: if a young footballer can be so determined and exercised about child poverty, why can't the church? There was also the realisation that a Church, even with best intention and resolve with its history in social action, is unlikely to make much of a difference in isolation so hence seeking common ground and joint action with others who may be better resourced with relevant skills and knowledge and together in common cause tackling poverty through prayer, learning and action. Poverty, of course, knows no borders and is just as prevalent in the Republic; however, given the differences in administrative and legal arrangements and the fact that CAP and the Trussell Trust only operate throughout the UK, makes this mainly, if not exclusively, a northern initiative. Suffice to say, that our southern counterparts are being kept informed and their input and support is very much welcomed.

4. What are the three elements to the partnership?

- i. A praying church: Methodists are equipped to pray for people in crisis who need emergency help, for support staff and volunteers, for partnership, for campaigners and influencers, and for a future without the need for food banks/debt centres. Praying for those encountered by the 5 Methodist Missions and for their staff. Prayer breakfasts and networks, developing theological reflections and other liturgies are possibilities here.
- ii. A learning church: Methodists are aware of the drivers of local poverty and the lived experience of people facing challenging economic circumstances. Possibilities include attending policy workshops, seminars and listening exercises, developing small group resources and promoting events and initiatives organised by CAP and the Trussell Trust. Indeed, should there be an NI equivalent of the Scottish Poverty Commission, this would help inform public discourse and policy development with authenticity.
- iii. An active church: Methodists are supported and empowered to get involved in taking action through campaigning and advocacy to end the need for food banks and create a fairer society, where no one goes hungry or faces destitution. Attending training sessions on how local institutions operate, becoming CAP Advisors, volunteering in food banks or joining in campaigns and engaging in policy responses are some of forms of individual / collective action.

5. What is planned?

- Using social media platforms to highlight fuel poverty (February), support for low-income families (March) and exploring the link between mental health and poverty (October)
- Having opportunities at the Methodist Conference (June) and the Castlewellan Holiday Week (August) to profile the work of CAP and the Trussell Trust and to explore the partnership arrangement with them
- Organising co-ordinated visits to local food banks (September)
- A facilitated discussion between local politicians and experts on a number of drivers of poverty. It is hoped this will be a hybrid event both in-person and on Zoom (October)
- Profiling the work of the 5 Methodist Missions as they engage with people experiencing poverty (November)
- Commissioning a theological reflection and other creative pieces

6. How can you be involved?

- Praying individually or through any prayer network you belong to
- Using the following resource <https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk/> for Lenten Bible Study
- Becoming more informed
- Finding out more about the needs in your local area
- Learning from others involved as CAP Advisors / food bank volunteers or similar charities e.g. Storehouse
- Following this partnership campaign on social media
- Considering, with others, what a congregational, circuit or District initiative might be.

* Child poverty is defined as being children living in households whose income is below 60% of the UK median equivalised net household income, based on disposable income both before and after housing costs - approx. £13.9k.