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## Introduction

In communities across the country, churches and Christian organisations provide life-changing support and provision for those in greatest need. They are often the first to respond and the ones who stick around long after headlines have faded and attention has shifted elsewhere.

In this short booklet, we set out nine examples of how churches and Christian organisations are providing hope to their communities. There are countless more we could share and doubtless there are stories where you live of people committed to the care of their neighbours, providing love and compassion in action. These are stories of hope.

Whether it's global, national or local, it can be easy to be overwhelmed by the avalanche of bad news in our world. Soaring prices, stagnant wages, global instability, changes in government and policy shifts all contribute to uncertainty about what is ahead. And when we do look ahead it can be easy to slip into despair as to what may happen next. But there is hope. There is hope for every community of our nations, for every neighbourhood within towns and cities across the UK.

As Christians, we believe in the good news of Jesus who offers hope to all people, and in seeking to follow God we want to be good news to everyone around us. Churches are feeding the hungry, walking alongside people in their times of greatest need and opening their doors to provide a warm welcome when heating bills are too high to afford.

The church is foundational to our communities. This cannot and must not replace action by government to address the challenges across society, but neither can it ever be fully replaced. The church reaches places that the government cannot, it is connected in every neighbourhood, it is full of committed and compassionate volunteers.

Our thanks go out to the organisations and people for sharing their stories in this booklet. We also recognise the work that takes place all across the UK, often without sufficient recognition but out of the deep compassion and conviction to make a difference where it matters most It is my hope that these stories will display the creative and innovative ways the church is meeting the needs of people during this cost of living crisis, as well as inspire policymakers to work more closely with the church.



Danny Webster, director of advocacy for the Evangelical Alliance

# Hope during times of debt

## **Christians Against Poverty, Highworth**

Highworth is a market town around six miles northeast of Swindon town centre. Being a 15-minute drive from Swindon, many people who are struggling financially cannot afford to journey into the town to access cheaper food stores or visit advice centres.

Seeing the need for a local response to poverty, four Highworth churches of different denominations decided to set up a debt advice service in the area. Since 2014 and throughout the pandemic, the churches have been working in partnership with each other and with UK-wide charity Christians Against Poverty (CAP), to support people in challenging financial situations in Highworth and other towns in the surrounding area. The team consists of two employed debt coaches, four job club coaches, four lifeskills coaches and four CAP money coaches plus many volunteers from the church community who help with befriending, food shopping, transportation, benefit advice and more.

Through CAP's professional debt advice service, the team have carried out more than 600 home-visit appointments

and have seen 66 local households become debt free. Since launching their CAP Job Club in 2020, they have held seven courses that have resulted in many people being supported in finding work, and they have run 10 CAP Lifeskills courses, enabling more than 50 households to feel equipped to manage life on a low income.

The CAP team regularly hold social events for their clients and those they know in the community. Some of the events they have hosted are Christmas dinners, Easter dinners, movie nights, fish and chip suppers and street parties. At their latest street party, more than 50 people attended the event geared towards community connection, complete with a free BBQ, children's face painting and a bouncy castle.

The team have seen how much people in the local area care for their neighbours who are in need. At a recent fundraising and awareness event called 'Swimming Against Poverty', 68 local people completed a sponsored swim that raised over £7,000.



### Michael's story

Michael\* got into debt after struggling with PTSD and other mental health issues following injury during his military career, which saw

God has changed me, I don't know where I would be without Him - Michael

him lose the ability to talk. When the team at a drop-in centre, ran by a local church first met him, they saw how his experiences had led him to be mad at the world. He had attended the drop-in centre looking for help in finding a job and the volunteers there encouraged him to book an appointment with CAP. As the CAP team began to work with him, he was reassured, and he felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders and thereafter became debt free Although Michael had previously been opposed to religion, the practical support and love he had been shown led him to develop his own personal faith. Now he has a new family through Highworth Community Church, has become a CAP Lifeskills coach, and has freedom from debt.

<sup>\*</sup> Pseudonym used to protect identity

# Hope for the hungry

## **Manchester City Mission**

According to the Greater Manchester Food Poverty Alliance, some 620,000 people in the area are living in poverty and struggling to put food on the table. More than 200,000 children experience poverty in Greater Manchester, where foodbank use is considered to be higher than most other areas.

Manchester City Mission is a Christian charity that fights to end some of society's most challenging issues. Their food security programme, Nourish, aims to alleviate hunger and make sure that everyone in need has food to put on their table. The Nourish team run local projects, facilitate church-based food distribution initiatives, and develop food clubs.

Through the Nourish programme, four food clubs have been established across Salford and Bury and two more will commence shortly, including in Oldham, with further plans to establish more. Each are run independently through local churches, ensuring that they meet the unique needs of each local area. With the rising cost of living, the number of people using Nourish services is also rising. While many of these people are in receipt of benefits, the team have found

themselves supporting people who are in employment but are still struggling to make ends meet for their family.

The Family FoodFayre in Salford is the name of one Nourish food club, which opens twice a week at the Windsor Christian Centre; it enables local people to put food on the table at affordable prices. Attendance at the centre also gives people access to the Narrowgate Support Hub where they can get a welcome cup of tea as well as a listening ear and some practical support and advice. Membership of the food club costs  $\pounds 5$  per year (payable in instalments), with each visit costing  $\pounds 3$  – this allows members to pick the food they want (just like they would during a weekly shop).

Manchester City Mission works in partnership with local churches, local businesses, HMP Manchester, and Salford University accommodation blocks to increase the provision of products for service users and to generate support in the way of volunteering, prayer and produce. They also have a good working relationship with Salford Council and Salford CVS.

The care shown by staff and volunteers of the food clubs goes beyond simply meeting the physical needs of their clients. They often provide spiritual and emotional support, create welcoming communities through their churches and help them to explore the Christian faith.

The Food Club has been a lifeline. especially as I need a special (expensive) diet for medical reasons and I am on a very low income... Without the food club I would probably be dead! We all knew that the £20 UC uplift would be stopped soon as it was a 'temporary' uplift due to Covid-19, so the fear was already there. I am scared that without this Food Club I will not be able to get through this winter with both 'heating and eating', which will make my health problems worse.

- Food club member







# Hope during winter

### Saltbox, Stoke-on-Trent

The socio-economic landscape of Stoke-on-Trent makes it one of the poorer areas of the UK. There is a high disparity in the level of skilled and higher paid jobs in the area compared to other parts of the country. As a result, 21.8% of households living in Stoke-on-Trent were living in fuel poverty in 2019 (the rate across England was 13.4%). With increasing energy costs across the country, it is estimated that these numbers are rising.

Saltbox is a faith-based charity based in Stoke-on-Trent that aims to tackle some of the prominent social issues in the area. Their Money Matters programme exists to support Stoke-on-Trent's most disadvantaged people in managing their money and tackling debt. The Money Matters team helps clients overcome a range of issues that stem from poverty and debt. Over winter months, one of the biggest issues that they see clients encounter is the struggle to sufficiently heat their homes due to unaffordable energy bills.

The approach of the Money Matters team is not just to address immediate need (for example, dealing with a debt issue), but also to help service users up-skill in order that they can be more confident in managing their money and successfully navigating the benefits system.



### **Brian and Marie's story**

Brian\* and Marie\* are a couple who were referred to the Money Matters team by the Income Advice Team of Stoke on Trent City Council in January 2022. They had no credit on their energy meters and required a fuel voucher.

Upon visiting the couple in their bungalow, the Money Matters team discovered that, although the heating was on, their home was very cold. The team were able to help them move furniture to make the radiator heat the room better and provided them with energy vouchers. They referred them to energy charity Green Doctor who installed some further energy saving products and also contributed vouchers towards the couple's energy meters.

Marie had been in receipt of disability benefits, but her last application had been denied. The couple were living off of Marie's pension alone – this was not nearly enough to cover rent, bills and living costs. The Money Matters team were able to help them through the process of appealing this decision. Their appeal was successful, and the team were also able to help Brian apply for Universal Credit and Carer's Allowance. The couple are no longer getting into rent arrears and no longer have to rely on charities for fuel and food. They are no longer under threat of eviction, and they will be able to live a reasonably comfortable life

<sup>\*</sup> Pseudonym used to protect identity

# Hope for the community

## King's Church Aberdeen

Torry is an area of Aberdeen where deprivation and social issues are high. 75% of Torry school children are in the most deprived quintile (20%), and teenage pregnancy is 13 times more likely in the area. Torry is designated by Aberdeen City Council and Community Planning Aberdeen, the community planning partnership, as a priority regeneration neighbourhood; it also comprises some of the most deprived data zones in Aberdeen and Scotland.



King's Church Aberdeen has been engaged in the local area of Torry for over five years, running a children's club for around 30 children on Tuesday nights, providing an adult group every Wednesday night and enabling Friday night attendance of around 20-25 young people at the King's Church Youth Club. Through this work, members of King's Church were able to recognise the complex social and economic needs of the community and, as a response, decided to set up a centre to holistically meet those needs.

King's Community Foundation – founded in 2010 through the vision of several members of King's Church Aberdeen with a desire to make a difference to communities both in Aberdeen and across the world – took responsibility for an unused community centre in the town which has lain derelict for over 10 years. With the support of Aberdeen City Council, they have transformed The Bridge Centre back into a vibrant community space that will provide a highly localised place for the community to gather and access social, health, wellbeing and learning opportunities. The centre is in its early days of operating, having opened in August this year.

With the rising cost of living, and an increase in the number of people making use of foodbanks in the area, a further deepening of the social and economic issues in the area can be expected – making the development of The Bridge Centre all the more necessary and timely.

Taking into account the aims of the Locality Plan set out by Aberdeen City Council Community Planning team in 2016, King's Community Foundation hope to use The Bridge Centre to help local people, places, economy and technology develop and prosper. Some of the outcomes they hope to see are: reduced youth crime, increased post-school opportunities for young people, increased digital proficiency, better health and wellbeing, more community ownership, reductions in food poverty, and increased employability. They recognise that this work cannot be done through the church alone and are building partnerships with other third sector organisations to deliver on these plans.



We realise that when people thrive, the communities they live in thrive. We understand that the solution is not in our hands alone. but by working in partnership with others. By creating communities where people thrive, reducing barriers and providing training opportunities, we can help people make a meaningful contribution to society.

- Tom Seal, Assistant Pastor of King's Church Aberdeen



## Hope for families

### **Transforming Lives for Good**

27% of children were living in poverty in the UK in 2020/21. Many children face devastating struggles: feeling the burden of stress about finances, ongoing anxiety, facing a lack of sleep and affected concentration because of malnutrition, caring for siblings when parents have to take on additional work... the list goes on. Holiday hunger is particularly high, with more than 1.5 million children receiving free school meals during term time, and many being left without during school holidays. The expectation is that the cost of living crisis will cause rates of child poverty and holiday hunger to rise.

Transforming Lives for Good (TLG) believes that every child deserves to eat a hot and healthy meal every day. To achieve this, it partners with churches across the country to establish Make Lunch clubs. TLG Make Lunch enables and equips churches to bring hope to struggling children through free holiday lunch clubs. Through these clubs, churches can provide vital support to some of the most vulnerable children in their community and, in addition, build relationships with families in desperate need of the loving support of compassionate church families.



Since Make Lunch began, TLG's partner churches have cooked and served more than 120,000 meals in more than 100 locations across the UK. All their kitchens are run by volunteers who believe that even just one meal for one child could make a vital difference

Make Lunch clubs provide not only practical help, but a place of belonging and hope. In providing a hot and healthy meal for the whole family and offering fun activities. Make Lunch enables families to enjoy their school holidays together in a local space without any hidden costs. Make Lunch clubs also provide an opportunity for connection that combats isolation and often leads to other needs being met by the wider support of the church and the local community.

### Sam's family's story

For one particular family, their local Make Lunch club has been a lifeline. Sam is raising four daughters, the youngest of whom was classed as a "failure to thrive" when she was around the age of one, and was put onto a nasal gastric tube for a year. Through the support of the Make Lunch club, Sam's daughter is now thriving and growing. For this family. Make Lunch is more than just about a hot meal, it's about friendship, community and fun.

The support we get from our local church family certainly helps to lessen the burden. The anxiety slowly goes down when you've got more people to talk to and more familiar faces around. Make Lunch always gives us something to look forward to.

#### - Sam

Make Lunch helped us. Everyone's very kind and it's just a time to be off your phone and socialise with people and make friends.

- Jamiey-Louise, Sam's oldest daughter

## Hope for the homeless

## **Hope Into Action**

Hope Into Action (HIA) is a charity that enables churches to house the homeless. Having operated for almost 12 years, HIA has over 100 homes open across 25 UK locations. Each of which offer tenants holistic support through a trained empowerment worker and a small team of church members who make up the 'Friendship & Support Team.' Together, they work to love, guide and befriend tenants and work on whatever obstacles prevented them from securing independent living.



Tenants may have been street homeless, be in recovery, be fleeing domestic abuse or war, or been trafficked or involved in sex work, have had mental health challenges, relationship breakdown or lost their home.

What all tenants have in common is that they have nowhere to go and no one to go to. HIA believe that by offering churches this model they can meet this need and offer some of the most broken and lost in society, safety, comfort and a place to heal and recover.

All HIA's tenants are in some sort of financial crisis when they go to HIA. They cannot afford or do not meet the necessary criteria for any other housing options. Getting them to a place of financial stability is always one of the toughest challenges. This is even more difficult in the current climate.

Whether it's a philanthropic investor offering to improve insulation or windows at a home to help reduce energy bills, or churches hosting fundraising events to help a tenant save for a deposit on a flat; HIA have seen the power of the church meet the financial needs of tenants in vast and impactful ways.

### Katie's story

Katie was told that even though she had a young baby, the waiting list at the local council was 4-6 years for a two-bed flat. Katie was a working single parent, but still couldn't afford private rent. Due to the HIA model partnering with local churches, during her time with HIA a local landlord from the church got to know of Katie's predicament and offered to lower the rent to allow her to move on successfully.

If it wasn't for my landlord lowering the price, I'd have never been able to afford it, I'm now able to pay all my bills and still have money left over for my son. If it wasn't for Hope Into Action, I'd never have learnt the life skills I didn't have. It's been such a massive help to both me and my son.

Katie



# Hope through the arts

### **Liverpool Lighthouse Arts and Community Centre**



Liverpool Lighthouse is a charity that demonstrates Christian faith through delivering practical help to the most vulnerable in the community, and by working with local communities to transform neighbourhoods that suffer the worst poverty in the UK.

The mission of Liverpool Lighthouse is: 'changing lives, changing communities'. The charity operates as a creative sanctuary – a safe and creative space for developing skills, creative work and wellbeing for the most vulnerable (as well as for the city's artists).

As a Black-led organisation, Liverpool Lighthouse has a commitment to creative engagement, developing a National

Gospel Music Centre with a 430-seat auditorium, recording studios, a dance studio and a newly installed cinema. Creative wellbeing and practical support programmes engage around 1,000 individuals a year, the majority facing complex needs and challenges such as poverty, discrimination and disadvantage.

The company works to improve wellbeing through two main approaches. The first approach addresses immediate practical needs such as food, safety and shelter to reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Wellbeing support workers signpost, mentor and support people to access the help they need. The second approach uses creativity to build skills for wellbeing – recognising that practical support programmes alone are unlikely to deliver the long-term changes that help people escape the cycle of crisis and poverty.

Liverpool Lighthouse's creative programmes are shaped by evidence-based practice to improve wellbeing through empowering participants to develop self-esteem, confidence and skills for life/employment, while providing opportunities for social connection and creative expression. The team's work with families, young people, the elderly, people experiencing homelessness, street-based sex workers, refugees and asylum seekers has seen them being awarded with the Chamber of Commerce Charity of the Year Award 2018.

Retween September 2021 and September 2022, Liverpool Lighthouse regularly provided food for more than 120 families and

hot meals for individuals in the youth and community programmes

They hosted **700**+ creative wellbeing sessions which involved



I first came to Liverpool Lighthouse to the Family Connect programme where we would have social events, cooking classes and so much more, which helped me with the situation I was in and helped develop some key skills. I have been a part of Liverpool Lighthouse ever since and I am now employed by them, so it really has come full circle and Liverpool Lighthouse has had a massive impact on my life.

- Emi Gibbs, events administrator at Liverpool Lighthouse

For 84% of community participants, their involvement in Liverpool Lighthouse's activities have led to increased wellbeing, and 90% of participants have stated that the support they have received has prevented hunger and reduced dependence on high-cost short term loans.

# Hope for the unemployed

### Gateway Church, Abergavenny

The help and support that Gateway Church provides to the town of Abergavenny isn't merely of practical benefit to the community; it brings hope to its people. Its volunteer-led café routinely serves free meals at their centre on Monk Street. The café had to close during the pandemic, but the staff and volunteers from Gateway Church were able to ensure that the people they supported still had food to put on the table through supplying thousands of food deliveries and hampers.

Reopening after the pandemic, the team has had to hit the ground running — with a high number of people in need of support in the area, the café has been busy. The cost of living crisis has further increased the number of people who the team see coming through their doors, and they are starting to see more young people in need of support.

The café operates three days a week, and each of those days the team welcomes between 50-60 people for a hot meal, a coffee and a chat. Through their links with various charities and organisations, they are able to offer advocacy

and support for people who need it. They offer shower and laundry facilities for people who experience homelessness or who are unable to pay their energy bills. This in turn has led to an increased level of community cohesion, with local police officers often directing people who need support to the work of the church.

Food and showering facilities are just the starting point at Gateway Church's Community Café. As well as addressing these immediate needs, the team engage with each individual to help address deeper needs and create long-term solutions. Most of the people who come to the café are unemployed and the café is a place where they can be equipped with key life skills, providing them with a chance to flourish and seek work. The opportunity to complete food and hygiene certificates are offered for those who want to develop their skills, and support is given in writing and developing CVs. The team at Gateway Church have seen many of the people who they have supported growing in confidence and entering employment.



### Antony's story

Antony\* is originally from an eastern European country; he came to Abergavenny from a nearby city to escape modern-day slavery. Antony turned up at Gateway Church, homeless, scared, and lacking in confidence. He was not working at the time, but he began to volunteer in several of Gateway Church's projects, including their Community Café and lockdown meals project where he developed his cooking skills, improved his English, and grew in confidence. These experiences helped Antony to gain work as a chef, and now he lives independently. He continues to serve in the church and their projects in the local community.

\* Pseudonym used to protect identity

# Hope for the school child

## Redeeming Our Communities, Northern Ireland

For many parents across the UK, the school uniform shop is unlikely to be their highlight of the summer holidays. The average cost of a school uniform per year per child in primary school is £315, and £337 per child in post-primary (The Children's Society, 2020) – a cost that is a stretch for many families at the best of times, and simply unaffordable for those hit hardest by the rising cost of living.

In 2019, Redeeming Our Communities (ROC) Northern Ireland set up their first school uniform project in west Belfast, supporting more than 80 families. The charity now has four School Uniform Projects across the Greater Belfast area with local churches at the centre of these schemes. This summer, they have provided uniform items to more than 500 children in Belfast

The concept of the School Uniform Project is very simple but the impact it has is great. Pre-loved, good-quality uniform items for local nursery, primary and post-primary schools are donated by families in the local community and are then made freely available for families who are struggling to afford new uniforms.

Each scheme has dedicated days for families to browse and pick out uniforms. Church halls are turned into 'uniform shops' with volunteers from local churches and community groups sorting through donations, ensuring those receiving the uniforms will get good wear out of these items.



All four projects have been inundated with donations of shirts, trousers, school branded sweatshirts, PE kits and blazers, as well as school bags and shoes.

There is no criteria and no personal details are asked of those making use of the projects, and ROC Northern Ireland appreciates that everyone has a story, a reason to come for this help. The warm welcome, the offers of help and the conversations with volunteers ensure the school uniform project is a place of dignity and respect. The team's hope and prayer is that those who enter these church halls, maybe for the first time, feel God's love and compassion. They want parents to leave with a burden lifted.

With the rising cost of living crisis affecting many within communities across the UK, school uniform projects are a small way of practically helping families. These projects harness the power of community, with schools, churches, and community groups working together. They also align with Jesus' teachings: "I needed clothes and you clothed me" (Matthew 25:36).

### A mother's story

At the north Belfast School Uniform Project, a mother arrived at the church hall with a friend for moral support; she was nervous and unsure what to do She had five children, four in post-primary schools, needing uniforms. After chatting to her, the team of volunteers were very quickly able to get her the



different things she needed, all in the right sizes. This mother arrived embarrassed to be at the church hall getting free uniforms, but left with a weight visibly lifted off her shoulders. She and her friend were so thankful for ROC's help. Her leaving remark, "you've saved me a small fortune", resonates with the hundreds of families ROC Northern Ireland have helped this summer.



## **Conclusion**

These stories of hope show what is already happening across the UK: how churches are demonstrating the love of Christ to their communities, and how they are working to address the soaring cost of living and the crippling impact it is having. It is inspirational to hear the stories and more so to witness the transformation the church is bringing in communities, neighbourhoods and households. Yet, there is still significant need for greater action, and that is a task that requires concerted action from many different places.

First, it requires the government to do what only they can do and ensure there is sufficient support for those who need it most. We acknowledge and recognise the steps already taken to address energy prices and lessen the impact this winter, but many households will still face bills they cannot pay and insidious choices such as whether to heat their home or feed their children. No responsible government can look on without doing all they can.

Second, work must pay. It is a clear problem that many of those in need of support from the government are in work. The real Living Wage, set by the Living Wage Foundation,

should be the minimum companies provide and we need businesses that see the flourishing of communities around them as being as important as the numbers on their balance sheet.

Third, charities, churches and other civil society actors should be supported in the work they do that reaches places others cannot. Charity cannot replace government (and should not be left to fill gaps left by inadequate policy), nor should government make charities and other non-governmental organisations redundant in supporting their communities. Voluntary sector organisations, community groups, churches and other faiths have vital roles that should not be squeezed out.

The work of the church in relieving poverty and addressing social needs is invaluable, whether this is providing food for a neighbour, a lift to the hospital, or friendship to those who are isolated and alone. We hope that these nine stories inspire deepened relationships between policymakers and the church.

Do you know what it is like to have to put food back at a checkout because you are unable to afford the essentials? Or what it feels like to be told your home will be repossessed? I, and millions of people across the country, do. We know the gut-wrenching feeling of being unable to provide for our children, and it cannot go on.

History will judge ever so severely those who chose complacency at a time when they had the power and ability to help those unable to make ends meet. I am urging those in positions of authority to read the mood of the nation, to take decisive action and to prioritise further financial support to those households most in need.



**Dr John Kirkby CBE Founder of Christians Against Poverty** 





### **Together making Jesus known**

We sincerely hope that you have felt as encouraged and inspired as we have by these stories of hope. We would like to say a huge thank you to all those who have kindly shared their stories with us. If you would like to find out more about the Evangelical Alliance, please head to eauk.org



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