

There's a lot of hungry people out there – St Aidan's FoodShare explained

By Barrie Pepper

One Saturday morning, twenty-odd years or so ago, I was in church chatting with Father Alan Taylor, the then Vicar. A tall man accompanied by two young children came in through the south door. Alan excused himself, spoke softly to the man, then went into the sacristy and returned with a shopping bag. He handed this to the man who thanked him. The Vicar had a few words with the children and the three of them then left.

'They come every week along with three or four other families who are having difficulties keeping their lives together,' said Father Alan. I asked what was in the bag and he told me it was food enough to feed a family of four or five for a couple of days. The food, and a few other essentials, was given by parishioners who didn't shout about it. And probably by Alan himself.

It was the sort of activity that had become expected of a church – of any denomination. Sometimes quietly, as I witnessed here at St Aidan's, and at other times, for good reasons, quite openly. As we entered the 21st century the practice became, if not common place, certainly better known. Food Bank and Food Share had entered the lexicon.

And the reason for it was explained by Gillian Gibbons in her contribution to the recently published *Inner City 125* the latest history of St Aidan's. She writes: 'Much of the outreach work that St Aidan's has been involved in over the last 25 years is in response to changes within the community of Harehills, in particular the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers in the area.

'Asylum seekers were arriving in Leeds as early as 1997 and churches were obvious places for them to seek support, many coming from strong faith backgrounds. Local church communities were quick to rally and offer a foothold and this included St Aidan's since many asylum seekers were accommodated in the local area of Harehills.'

By 2012 the system was in full swing at St Aidan's in the hands of the Vicar and Lay Reader Tony Jowett; later to be joined by Steve Marshall and other church members and then some of the recipients. Food bags were prepared and they were handed out to needy families in the immediate post mass period on Sundays. And while these were often refugees and asylum seekers, no one was turned away. And the ever generous half dozen provision givers were joined by other parishioners, locals, shopkeepers, supermarkets, charities and churches in affluent areas.

As Gillian Gibbons put it: 'This distribution is an essential lifeline for all those who slip through the safety nets of society. It is basic: offering, at most, one day's relief from hunger, for example, to a single childless person and proportionately less so for a larger household.'

But, of course things change. When Gillian wrote this in the autumn of 2019 the number of bags distributed was about 80 each week. Then along came lockdown and the evils of coronavirus. It placed restrictions on the Food Bank organization: its location moved from the church to the community hall and distribution moved to Saturday. And, more importantly the demand rocketed. By early July more than 200 people were using the scheme and there was no sign of a slowdown.

Mother Andi, the Vicar, has taken on most of the organizing. She is backed up by a group of enthusiastic workers who collect goods, raise funds and help with the distribution.

One of these helpers is James Edmundson – let Mother Andi tell us all about him:

'James and his girl friend Ruth, and members of her family (Ruth's mother is a GP and works at a surgery on Roundhay Road), have been volunteering at our Food Share for a few weeks now. James decided to use his passion for cycling to undertake a sponsored Bike Ride from the most southerly point of the UK to the most northern: Lands End to John O'Groats, 874 miles. £874 being the target of his fund raising drive to go towards buying more food and supplies for the upcoming months.'

James kept a blog of his epic journey in which he writes:

'The cycling started off more difficult than I expected, with Cornwall and Devon being much hillier than I expected, which then flattened out the further north I went, the Scottish cycle paths are flat and gloriously smooth.

'Meaningful stories usually involve the kindness of strangers and free food! On many occasions I have stopped in cafes or roadside snack bars and after talking with the owners and other clients about why and what I am doing, many have paid for my order to go towards the cause!'

James took three weeks and a day to complete his great adventure and the donations received so far have reached an amazing £1,115!

Numbers continue to rise. Mother Andi wrote about the last Saturday in August: 'We reached 430 people today. All our stock was totally cleared out, and we had donations from an Oakwood Community Group, from Bardsey and East Keswick, organised through the church there, St Edmund's, Leeds City Council and Fareshare. I did three pickups from Shadwell and Street Lane co-ops, too.'

Things are getting tighter. The arrangement with the council to provide 50 bags each week is coming to an end. We are not the only providers in the district looking for generous givers and demand for our services goes up each week. Mother Andi says we will have to raise our profile – we need both goods and money.

So where do we go from here? Traditional means of raising funds are closed to us because of the pandemic. I would love to organize a second hand book and record sale – I'll start it off with about one thousand books and 100 33rpm records and I know several folk who will also contribute. How about an auction? Let's have a raffle. They are all good ideas but difficult to organise at present. So let's have some workable proposals. James has shown us the way so it is up to the rest of us to put our activity thinking caps on.

Talk to Mother Andi or Pat Case, the Parish Administrator on Tel: 07754 450967, about a contribution on top of any regular giving by envelope or standing order. Have a word with your neighbours and local organisations – they may be on the lookout for an opportunity to help some suitable charity. It's not just money the Food Share requires – it's also goods. So why not add a few items to your weekly shopping. You know the things that are needed: tins of meat, vegetables, soups, pasta, along with soaps, cleansing materials – use your imagination, what would you want if you were in a similar position?