

# *Practical Action on the Cost of Living*



Church of Ireland Church and Society Commission

October 2022

Representatives from dioceses around the island took part in an online discussion on Wednesday, 5th October 2022, to explore how parishes are helping (and planning to help) people in their communities at this time; and to share projects and ideas which can be helpful to others serving in a local setting.

The discussion was chaired by Archbishop Michael Jackson in his role as the Chair of the Church of Ireland's Church and Society Commission. This followed on from the Church Leaders Group's recent statement calling for more action on tackling poverty, and the resolution on housing and homelessness approved at this year's General Synod.

**What is happening? We heard the following stories about proactive local responses:**

- School uniform recycling – with families sharing uniforms which have been outgrown by their children, which are then made available to and shared with other families.
- Opening church halls for a drop-in a weekday afternoon to offer tea, coffee and biscuits and give people a warm place to sit and relax for a time without needing to heat their homes.
- A monthly supper club with a filling meal which people for whom going out for a meal is currently unaffordable can enjoy with parishioners. Donations can be left at the door. The event is particularly supportive for widows by giving them a place where they can have fellowship with each other.
- Fellowship groups for older people are starting to meet and become active again, having stopped during the pandemic.
- Pastoral visiting is the best way to discern who needs the help but who wouldn't come forward, and to gently encourage people to talk about the pressures which they are facing in a confidential context.
- Parishes are responding more regularly to appeals from local foodbanks, with Harvest and Christmas being times when parishioners can especially be encouraged to bring non-perishable food, which can then be shared to feed others.
- Grants from one diocesan hardship fund are already being made to help families cover the cost of Christmas shopping.
- Protestant Aid is encouraging rectors to get in touch with applications for support on behalf of families in need in the Republic of Ireland. The charity has given €250 to every Ukrainian family with whom it has come into contact.
- Six Ukrainian families are now living in homes refurbished by a Church of Ireland charity.

- A large foodbank has worked with a local department store to source 300 of their largest shopping bags so that people who visit the project can choose, pick up and bring food home with a sense of dignity.
- In another food project, people whom volunteers think will be in need are invited to come along and help to prepare the meal, which they can then enjoy without cost and in the company of others.
- Many parishes have refreshments after services or other activities during the week, which can give members and guests alike the opportunity to stay and to be warmly welcomed by a local church community.
- Support for Polish volunteers living in a parish who collected goods which they then brought to Eastern Europe to help refugees from Ukraine.
- Teachers buying schoolbags and books, and preparing breakfasts and lunches, for Ukrainian children who had come to Ireland with no possessions of their own.

**What more can be done over the coming months? Some examples were suggested:**

- Activities that relieve boredom – e.g. a talk or a film projected on the wall or screen giving people a sense of warmth, light, friendship and fun, something to eat and something good to talk about.
- Inviting people from minority ethnic backgrounds to prepare and share food from their cultures as part of an evening or afternoon with food (and offer money to cover the cost of ingredients).
- Clergy assuring people whom they meet in pastoral visiting that it is safe to come to events, and encouraging them to tell others.
- Decorating your church or hall for Christmas to help make a visitor feel more welcome and know that it is a place where they can bring a friend, and come back.
- Breakfast clubs in local schools to help children start the day well in a warm setting.
- Where families have become homeless and are living in hotels, churches can provide and create spaces in which their children can play and enjoy an open space.
- Listening to people who find themselves homeless and never expected to be in that situation. For example, where they have lost their home through difficulties in paying their mortgage and are waiting for the security of a new, permanent home.
- Asking supermarkets to provide cookery demonstrations to show how a weekly shop of low-cost items can be made into a healthy meal. Sharing videos of these events online so they are available for as many people as possible to view them.

- Asking local authorities (and similar government agencies) about what research has been carried out into social and economic need, and about the range of support services which are available. Share knowledge about services and grants.
- As an initiative of generosity, in terms of energy costs, prioritise heating parish buildings for events which intentionally invite in our neighbours, and/or using smaller (more easily-heated) rooms for services over the autumn and winter months.
- Learn from other proactive organisations with a local presence who have been helping people through the pandemic and are also seeking to help in this time (e.g. the GAA and postal services).

#### **What are the best overall approaches? Five main ideas shared in the discussion:**

- **Sustainability:** Finding something that suits people in their particular area, knowing what your parish is able to organise, and deciding how often your parish is going to provide the event or activity.
- **Trusted partnerships:** Remember that partnership – either ecumenically with other churches or with social services – is always possible.
- **Gathering:** When we bring people together and do this well, it gives them connection with one another and their economic status is no longer an issue with no-one looking down on them if they are in particular need.
- **Advocacy:** Local government and social services often need to be approached by local organisations, such as churches, which can make a case for help on behalf of people in need. For example, children cannot learn if they are cold and hungry but schools may be one of the few comfortable places where children can learn and play this winter – so school breakfast clubs can meet their needs in a very proactive way.
- **Overcoming pride and shame:** Someone may feel that they have always been self-reliant and therefore do not need to say: ‘I need help’ – or their sense of need may feel so overwhelming that they are embarrassed to come forward: ‘I don’t know where to start’. The cost of living crisis will affect everyone – in different ways depending on our circumstances. Cultivate an atmosphere in your church where people will feel free to ask for help and set aside thoughts that will hold them back.

*The Church and Society Commission’s leaflet with helpful information on responding to the cost of living crisis includes a listing of sources of support for dealing with debt and other personal finance difficulties, energy and household costs, and foodbanks. This is available at [www.ireland.anglican.org/cost-of-living](http://www.ireland.anglican.org/cost-of-living) alongside other resources for parishes seeking to reach out to their local communities.*

*Front cover illustration: The Parable of Good Samaritan window from Harold’s Cross parish, Diocese of Dublin, by Catherine O’Brien.*