

2023-24
annual review
pages 8-9



spark

news from Church Action on Poverty

winter 2024-25



HOPE

Inspiring stories from a growing
movement to end poverty

Act on poverty

“Our group was really

inspired by the Act

on Poverty course.

Now we’re looking for

ways to share the messages

with our wider church”

This two-hour course will help you and your church gain a deeper understanding of poverty and help equip people to do something about it.

Developed jointly with Christian Aid and our other partners, it addresses poverty both globally and in the UK.

Download the course to use in your church – or take part in one of our online workshops www.church-poverty.org.uk/actonpoverty

Reflect Speak up Take action

Act on Poverty
A Short Course for Churches & Groups
2 hours + a break

Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 mins)
God of justice and compassion, you are present with us. Help us to listen to one another with care. Give us open minds and hearts, ready to learn and be challenged. Inspire in us hope for change. Fill us with energy and determination. That we may act for the good of our neighbours. Amen.

Talking Poverty, Talking Politics (10 mins)
Poverty and politics aren't easy subjects to discuss. We each bring different views and life experiences to our conversations.

Listen to Methodist Vice President (2023-24) Deacon Kerry Scarlett talk about her family's experience of poverty.
Kerry encourages us to be mindful of the assumptions we make about other people. It is important to avoid stereotypes about poverty and those it affects.

Political discussions can be divisive but Christianity has a lot to say about how we should do politics and what our priorities should be. Jesus taught about the issues and everyday choices facing ordinary people and those in power. He wasn't afraid to confront unjust power structures that were harming the very people they were supposed to nurture and protect.

Take a moment to agree some simple ground rules for your group discussion, such as:
• We will listen to each other – no one will interrupt or speak over someone else.
• We will strive to disagree well, showing respect for one another and asking questions without judgement or hostility.
• We will keep confidential any personal information shared in our discussions.

where people feel comfortable to share their personal experience, if they wish to?

POVERTY TRUTH
because part of the point was that by

Ashleigh May, Mums on a Mission - Halifax, UK
“Poverty is something that if we work collectively together, it can be erased.”

What do I need to prepare in advance?
Before running the course, it's a good idea to read all the materials, listen to the audio, watch the video, and look through the slides provided. If you don't have facilities to show slides you can use a laptop or tablet. You may still want to look through the slides to see what they contain useful information for you as a group. For the 'Speaking Prophetically about Poverty' activity, you will find some additional resources in this guide. If meeting in person you will need pens and paper. A print out of the course pack for each person in your group. These do not need to be printed. Alternatively group members can bring their own paper to read from. A way to listen to the audio interviews and watch the video resource. You can download these in advance from the Christian Aid website. You can also play these direct from the website, from Soundcloud or from Youtube.

The power of hope



Happy New Year and welcome to this latest issue of *SPARK* from our Chief Executive **Niall Cooper**.

As we planned this issue, we were struck again and again by the amazing things being done by so many people around the country, and by the hope that radiates throughout their work – so much so, that this issue is centred on the idea and power of hope.

I see hope all around us. Dynamic churches, compassionate community groups and inspiring individuals are easing the immediate effects of poverty where they live, and also speaking up tenaciously for lasting, positive change. We see hope driving people to do great things together, and that in turn generates more hope for us all.

One of my highlights of last year was visiting Parliament with people who had written to the Prime Minister as part of the Let's End Poverty campaign, sharing their wisdom and hopes. It was a privilege to read the letters and to meet the writers. And to then hear Sir Keir Starmer acknowledging the power of the letters in the Commons was fantastic. Read about it on page 10.

We have also been reflecting on hope as we celebrate the impact of the *Dreams and Realities* art project (page 6). The exhibition exceeded all of our early hopes, encouraging thousands of people to explore their own hopes and dreams. If your church has not yet discussed the paintings, then Church Action on Poverty Sunday in March is the perfect chance to do so.

We have also been heartened by the continued growth of the Your Local Pantry network, which now reaches 129 neighbourhoods. Susan at Kingston Pantry in London captured their power beautifully, and inspired the name of our *Places Of Hope* report (page 12).

This year, we continue our work to end poverty in the UK, as part of a growing and increasingly broad movement. Your ongoing support and compassion continue to give us hope – but we'd love to hear what hope means to you, what gives you hope, or what your own hopes are for your church, community or country. If you'd like to write to us or send an email, we'd be delighted to hear from you.

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Swept away by hope

The cover image is 'Hope in His Love' by Susan Bence, Coordinator at Kingston Pantry (see page 12): www.susanbence.com, www.instagram.com/susanbenceart

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Company no 3780243

give

Take a collection on **Church Action on Poverty Sunday**
See page 15

act

Run an **Act On Poverty** workshop in your church
See opposite

pray

Share poems and prayers about **hope**
See page 5

news

Churches call for end to sibling injustice

In October, 175 church leaders from many denominations and across the UK joined Church Action on Poverty in urging the Chancellor to scrap the two-child limit in social security systems. Our Chief Executive Niall Cooper shared their call on national TV (pictured below).

This policy is unjust and unjustifiable. No child should be actively held back by Government, just because of how many brothers and sisters they happen to have. The Scottish Government has now announced plans to end the limit in Scotland; we'll keep calling for the Government at Westminster to do the same.



Making the real experts heard

In November, five members of our Speaking Truth To Power programme took part in a fantastic day at London School of Economics, talking about meaningful collaborations with people experiencing poverty, and how to avoid tokenism. Wayne, Penny, Steve, Tracy and Stef shared their good and bad experiences, and talked about the need for meaningful relationships, and a willingness for the powerful to relinquish some of that power.

Changes in our team

During the autumn, we sadly said farewell to some members of staff: Your Local Pantry development workers Shabir Jivraj and Chris Shelley, and Events and Digital Communications Facilitator Jessica Clark. Pete Duberly also completed his work for us on the Let's End Poverty campaign. We're grateful for their hard work and commitment to values of dignity, agency and power, and we wish them all the best.

events



Church Action
on Poverty
Sunday

Church Action on Poverty Sunday 2 March 2025

What are the realities facing your church and community?

What are your dreams for a world free from poverty?

2 March 2025 is Church Action on Poverty Sunday. Give, act and pray with others to help build a movement to end UK poverty – inspired by the powerful 'Dreams and Realities' art exhibition.

The exhibition has toured the UK through 2024 in support of the 'Let's End Poverty' campaign. Now you can use the pictures to spark reflection and action in your church.

Sign up and get your resource pack at
www.church-poverty.org.uk/sunday

DREAMS & REALITIES

Homecoming exhibition and reception Sheffield Cathedral, 4 February 2025

During 2024 we've been touring the UK with this powerful portrait exhibition by Sheffield artist Stephen Martin – see page 6. Everywhere the paintings went, community arts events shared their stories, and built support for action to tackle UK poverty.

The paintings are now returning to Sheffield. Come to see the paintings and stories, and hear from local decision-makers and the tour organisers about the impact it's made. Celebrate with us, and get involved in action for change!

Book a place at
dreamsandrealities.eventbrite.co.uk

Hope in poetry

These prayers and poems from our anthology *Dignity, Agency, Power* explore our theme for this issue of SPARK: hope.

Be-longing

The bleeding woman dared to touch Jesus
... and was not turned away.
The woman at the well offered Jesus water
... and it was received.
The Syrophenician woman called Jesus in ...
for his attitude to her race.

None of these women are named
by those who thought themselves
important enough to write the Bible.
But Jesus took time to meet with them
to find out about their lives
to understand the pain of isolation
to find the points of connection
to realise that we need to belong
to contribute, to give a little of ourselves
to give something back.

Because we all long to belong
or at least those of us
who society does not include
long to belong ...
to feel part of a bigger picture
to feel connected with ourselves and one another
to feel we have a purpose and value
to flourish and grow
for this is the infectiousness of hope
the experience of what it is to
be-long.

Clara Rushbrook

Hagar (Genesis 16)

To Sarah,
her owner,
she was "my slave".
"That slave woman".
A tool;
a baby-bearing machine.
If Sarah ever knew the slave's
name,
she wouldn't bother to use it.
A tool doesn't need a name;
it shouldn't have attitude,
or get above itself.
If it is unsatisfactory,
it can be, should be
discarded.

"Get rid of her," said Sarah.
So, she had to go.
But in the desert,
the desolate place,
God spoke to Hagar,
spoke her name.
No longer a slave,
or a tool,
but a human being,
made in God's image.
He gave her a hope, a future
and a place in history.
Brian Ford

Speaking truth to power

*(Written for Church Action on
Poverty Sunday 2020)*

Listen:
I cannot recommend speaking
truth to power.
Speaking truth to power ...
will get your head served on a
plate
will see you hiding in a cave in
the wilderness
will land you in the lion's den
will take you to the cross.

But listen:
What if there was nothing to
hear?
No truth to power ...
no voice crying out into the
silent wilderness?
no one to check the idolatry of
corrupt rulers?
no one to defend our freedoms?
no news of resurrection joy?

Listen:
What if we raise our voices?
Echo the truth once spoken to
power ...
the kingdom will be proclaimed
the still small voice of God will
comfort the exile
the roar of the righteous will
drown out the wicked
the hope of resurrection will be
sung out.
Rev'd Marie Pattison

Hope where all seems lost

We lament the injustice of our world
Where more is taken from those who have nothing
We cry to you for freedom from poverty
Freedom from oppression and despair
Freedom from all that binds us.
Come and save us O God.
Give us beauty where we see only ashes
Joy where there is mourning
And hope where all seems lost.

Amen
Diane Craven

Read more

You can find more poems, prayers,
stories and reflections in *Dignity,
Agency, Power*. Visit www.church-poverty.org.uk/anthology to order
a copy.



Following our dreams

Twelve venues, hundreds of visitors, wonderful feedback, and now a spin-off... it's fair to say the Dreams & Realities art tour has been a success!

“It has been an amazing experience,” says the artist, Stephen Martin. “I’ve met some really interesting people, and I’ve been moved by people’s stories of their experiences living and dealing with poverty and daily hardship. People’s responses to my portraits have been positive and enthusiastic.”

Stephen painted portraits of himself and nine other people living in hardship in Sheffield. Each portrait showed the person’s reality, plus the dreams they would pursue if they were not held back by poverty. All the people are connected to choirs at St Mary’s Church in Sheffield, and the project was coordinated by Yo Tozer-Loft, community choirmaster, with support from Church Action on Poverty.

The paintings were unveiled at St Mary’s last March, then toured the country, reaching Newcastle, Stoke, York, Camden, Leeds, Halifax, Manchester, Barking & Dagenham, Portsmouth and Retford, as well as the Greenbelt Festival in Kettering last summer. Stephen says:

“I had a strange sensation each time I visited and saw the paintings again – it has been like meeting old friends again! And there have been some really positive reactions.”

“The events at Camden and Halifax especially were amazing, because there were other people also sharing stories of hardship. They talked about their own situations and issues; it has been so moving. In

Halifax, I’m now working on a follow-up, doing five paintings with people there.”

Yo says: “I was really pleased with the uptake and response, as communities came together for political, informative, solution-seeking and sometimes frustrated debate. How can we end poverty in the UK? End the two-child benefit limit? Bring back fully funded Surestart? Introduce Universal Basic Income? We certainly need to communicate with our MPs...”

“My late mum, Iris, would be so frustrated to see her own story still being lived – her pathway to education and opportunity blocked by poverty. It meant a lot to me to see the exhibition in Dagenham where she grew up. She achieved so much but still spoke about those lost opportunities in her old age.”

“I feel blessed to have played a part in this project, raising the profile of friends and family still suffering poverty in the UK. As the fifth richest world nation, we can do better!”

“Seeing the exhibition and the debate go so far and wide has been like watching my baby grow up, leave home and do something really special and far beyond me!”

“Huge thanks to everyone at Church Action on Poverty, especially Pete Duberly, igniting the Let’s End Poverty movement with his energy. Stephen excelled himself as a painter, working really generously with me on finessing the likenesses and compositions. The biggest thanks for all goes to the generous singers who gave their faces and their stories, dreams and realities to the project.”

On Church Action on Poverty Sunday 2025, you can use Stephen’s paintings to get your church congregation reflecting on dreams and realities around poverty. Find out more on page 15.

A comments book accompanied the paintings around the country. Here is just a small selection of what people said...

“Seriously thought-provoking. An antidote to society’s tendency to turn people into problems, service users and statistics. These are real people living real lives, thank you for sharing your stories.”

“What a privilege getting to talk to the artist himself, Stephen. His paintings are deeply personable, just as he is. I feel an extraordinary warmth and care from each portrait – such an intimate insight into the lives of people who have been failed by government systems. I am moved – these are stories that must be told with PRIDE. I leave this exhibition with the dreams of these people alive in my heart for them to be within their reality. So powerful.”

“A wonderful event with the paintings and music and stories bringing to life the reality of poverty. Let’s work together full of hope to build a kinder world.”

“A powerful and truly inspiring exhibition that does what art should, speak the truth and lived experience in the voices of those power ignores.”

“I have met some inspiring people. It has been interesting. Loved the music and the choir. Let’s build for the future for the benefit of all. The art work and stories were inspiring and humbling.”



2023–24: dignity for all

We're pleased to share some hopeful highlights from the impact we made during 2023–24 as part of a growing movement to end poverty.

Over 5,000 people listened to Gordon Brown speak about the urgent need to tackle UK poverty, launching Let's End Poverty at the Greenbelt festival.



Panelists in our Speaking Truth to Power programme took a lead whenever we spoke out publicly, drawing on their lived experience to challenge policy-makers directly about the impact of their decisions on people in poverty.

"I think we will become known for making a change"

Ashleigh May, campaigner & leader in Speaking Truth to Power

People made 268,506 visits to Local Pantries this year. Members save an average of £21 on their weekly shop – a total of £5.76 million this year!

"There's help and support when you need it, not just the food"

A Pantry member in our 2023 survey

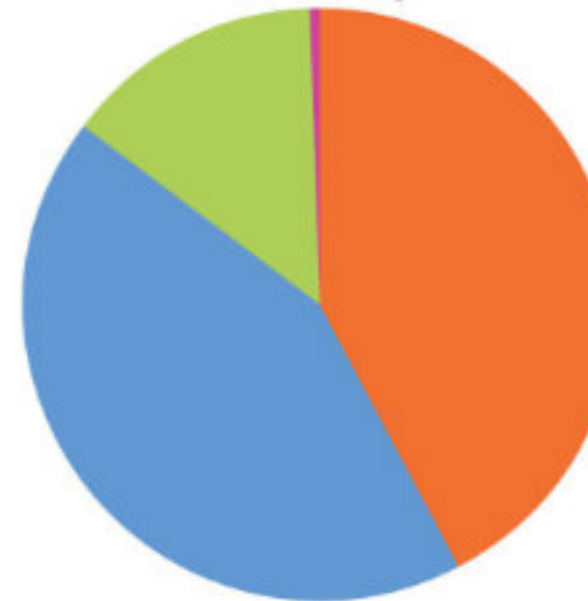


How we spent our money



- Your Local Pantry: £391,593 (51%)
- Core campaigns and events: £178,141 (23%)
- Speaking Truth to Power: £125,514 (17%)
- Self-Reliant Groups: £28,984 (4%)
- Church on the Margins: £23,198 (3%)
- Let's End Poverty: £9,352 (1%)
- Governance costs: £3,878 (<1%)

Where our money came from



- Donations and legacies: £315,908 (42%)
- Grants: £322,872 (43%)
- Subscriptions and other income: £105,249 (14%)
- Investments: £2,980 (<1%)

The ratio between the salaries of the highest-paid and lowest-paid staff members was just 2:1

We pay all staff and contractors at least the real Living Wage

Read more stories of hope

Download our full annual review and financial statements for 2023–24 at www.church-poverty.org.uk/tag/annualreview



PM responds to our powerful letters

People with first-hand experience of poverty wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to change the Government's approach... and received an immediate response.

LET'S END POVERTY



You can watch the Prime Minister's response to our letters at youtu.be/FcxnfJcclfw?si=TQyNu8SkP3nKKRPz

Listening to people who

know what it's like

to live in poverty is not

just the right thing to do,

it's the best way to

create solutions that

really work for

the long term

Hannah Fremont-Brown,
Let's End Poverty Coordinator

The Dear Prime Minister project was part of the Let's End Poverty campaign, and involved 15 people writing to Sir Keir Starmer about their own experiences, insights and hopes.

Getting a grassroots message to the heart of Government is no easy feat, so initiatives like this often require patience. But remarkably, these letters generated an almost instant response... that evening, they were the lead story on BBC London TV news, and the next day they were discussed at Prime Minister's Question Time, in a packed House of Commons.

Sir Keir Starmer told MPs:

"The letters are honest, powerful and important. They hold up a mirror to our country."

He was responding to a question from Cat Smith MP, who had hosted a Parliamentary event for the letter writers and supporters. Several contributors read out their own letters, and there was a discussion about what it would mean to truly involve people with direct experience of poverty, when policies and systems are written and designed. The foreword to the publication said:

"The new Government is aiming for a decade of national renewal. The people who need that the most - the authors of these letters and the millions who share similar experiences - must be invited to be partners in that change. We invite the Prime Minister to meet with the authors of these letters, to bring in person the wisdom and insights they bring, and to find ways to hear the expertise and insights derived from lived experience into the heart of policy making. Together, we can build a poverty-free nation, and we are eager to play our part".

Some contributors, such as Karen & Andy in Morecambe Bay, wrote about the positive impact that localised projects like Poverty Truth Commissions have had, and called for similar approaches nationally. They said:

"We have worked on many initiatives together and are seeing real change. It's an approach that could make politics more effective, locally and nationally."

Others talked of the importance of meaningful support, and others outlined the need for hope for a brighter future.

One contributor, Steve from west London, talked about attending his local food bank, and then becoming a volunteer. He said he had seen why we desperately need to end poverty, and what could be done differently, and added:

"By ending poverty, people will be freed to make a difference in their life and in their community."

Dear Prime Minister,
I am writing to you as a mum of two children, who is working hard to support them in the best way possible. I want to share with you how I believe that truly listening to people with experience of poverty can make a real difference.

Things aren't easy. I am a lone parent without family support due to bereavements. I struggle every day due to my ill health, and the side effects from my cancer treatment. Both of my children have special educational needs. I feel that many people don't want to truly understand our struggles. Some of the schools they have been part of are not understanding of our situation. They don't follow plans made with early help, or really listen to what we need to support us as a family. I do not receive disability living allowance benefits for my girls as I struggle to fill in the forms. I feel let down by the whole system at the moment. I am stuck between a rock and a hard place, having to make difficult decisions about how to care for my children and get the income we need. The stress of always having to make tough decisions has a really big impact on us. People in positions of power need to learn to really listen to people's circumstances and offer support, not restrictions.

Over the last few years, I have been part of the first Poverty Truth Commission in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole and it's changed my life. I think every council should run one. Lived experience voices should be heard in government. A Poverty Truth style programme at a Government level would bring MPs and people of lived experience of poverty into the same circle. MPs should attend Poverty Truth Commission launches and celebrations in their area and take part!

So, Prime Minister, I am writing to ask you to take the first step to really listen to those of us with experience of poverty, and to work with us for change.

From Carrie, Poole

Left to right: Cat Smith MP, Niall Cooper, and letter writers Glory, Ashleigh, Val, Steve and Matthew



A place of hope

You can't miss the hope at **Kingston Pantry** in South West London... it is emblazoned all across the wall.

Here, hope is at the heart of everything – it drives the church that hosts the Pantry, it radiates through the volunteers, and it spreads through the members who come every week to meet, chat and pick up groceries. “When clients come to the Pantry, they should experience a feeling of dignity and feel the hope in the space,” says Pantry manager Susan Bence. “It needs to be a beautiful space. That adds a lot to the experience... you can make it a lovely space that people do not want to leave.”

As well as providing the cover art for this issue of *SPARK*, Susan shared the Kingston story for the recent Your Local Pantry report, *Places of Hope*. At the online launch event for that report, she said:

“Panttries are lovely communities where people support one another. It's about way more than food, and we want to offer support because our hearts will always be to get people in a better financial position, so we need extra intervention. The word on the street for people is that they can get a lot of help here.”

Kingston Pantry is run by City Changers Projects, which is part of Doxa Deo Community Church. They run various services and work closely with other organisations. Members can access Grace advocacy; employment help, especially for mums returning to work; health checks; nutritionist advice; art workshops; Growbaby for new parents; a Christmas savers scheme, and a wellness centre. Susan says:

“Over the last two years we have added so many extra things. We are lucky to be a big charity, so we can move clients between different services and offer people wrap-around support.”

The Pantry has 92 members, and Susan has a wealth of member comments, calling the Pantry a “light in a dark place”, and a blessing, and “a reminder that there are lovely people”.



Rasoul's story

Five years ago, dad-of-two Rasoul was in deep hardship. Today, he himself is helping hundreds of other families to access food – as driver for Kingston Pantry.

Once Rasoul's immediate crisis had eased back in 2020, he got chatting to the team at Doxa Deo Church, and that conversation turned his life around. Rasoul has said: “I came to food bank for food, but I found not just food – I found a job, a church, a family and God.”

“When Covid came to the UK, the Government had stopped paying my benefits: my housing support, everything, my Universal Credit was stopped. I'm a single dad of two kids and I was having a hard time, with no money for food. I spoke to someone and said I had no money, and they said I should go to Kingston Food Bank, and passed on my details.

“The director of the food bank called me and said where to go. I went two or three times, then after that I said to Paul the manager, thank you, and that my money had been returned, so I didn't need to come any more.

“I said to him that I had to ask one more favour: I asked for a Bible. I wanted to know more about Jesus. Paul let me come to his place and let me have his Bible. I went to his house with my kids and told him about my life story, that I'm the only parent for two kids, and that I needed a job but it was proving hard to find a job that meant I could pick up the kids from school.

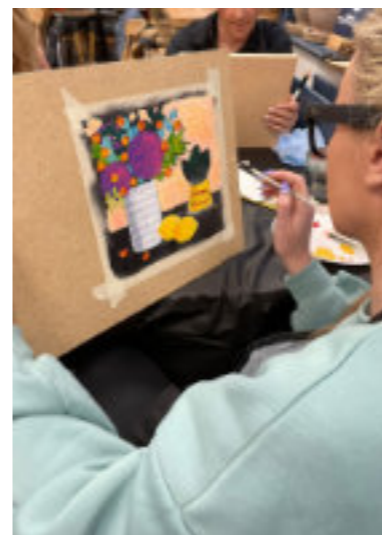
“He asked if I could drive and had a licence, and I said yes, and he asked if I wanted to drive for the food bank. I said of course! I started being the food bank driver, and when we opened the Pantry I joined the Pantry and I've now been the driver for the food bank and the Pantry for three or four years.

“It's a beautiful job. This job is not only about food – we support a lot of families to have things they need. I remember myself that time when I needed help, and now thank God I have a job and know what I have to do to support people.”

Rasoul was one of several Pantry members who had their portrait painted by art students at a local school, and a line from his story was overlaid on the painting.

Creative Pantries: the **art-beat** of the community

Members of Kingston Pantry and other Pantries around the UK have been taking part in art projects, as part of the Let's End Poverty campaign. Pantries used grants to amplify the voices of people with experience of poverty, in a wide range of ways.



Members at Kingston Pantry produced multi-layered portraits exploring life's challenges and hopes and dreams, and also produced and sold Christmas cards.

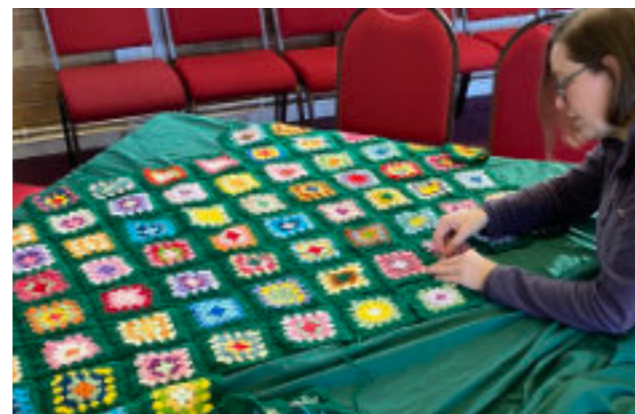
At Greenhouse Pantry in Edinburgh, members shared stories and ideas for a mural design, then a local artist brought it to life on their shutters.



At The Core Pantry in Macclesfield, members and an artist have been working on a mosaic.



Members at Oasis FaB Foundry Pantry in Birmingham made their own pots, decorated with personal stories.



At Coley Park Pantry in Reading, members crocheted an intricate and unique Christmas tree, which was fitted over a custom-made wooden frame.



Places of Hope – read more

The impact of the Your Local Pantry network continues to grow.

In September, we launched our new report, *Places of Hope* (available at www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/social-impact-reports).

It showed that across the UK, Pantries have now saved members £10.5 million in the past two years – and also brought huge non-financial benefits.

Members talked about new friendships, renewed community connections, access to other opportunities and services, and more varied diets.

We also heard about the rising number of Pantries growing their own food, with beautiful and bountiful gardens springing up, from Scotland to the south coast. One Pantry, in Kent, even managed to grow its own watermelons last year!

There are now 121 Pantries around the UK, with more opening all the time. If your church is looking to bring its community together through food, to make great things happen, then email info@yourlocalpantry.co.uk

Swept off my feet by wave of hope



Revd Chris Howson, Chaplain at Sunderland University, has found hope even amidst some of the darkest times.

I love sweeping up. It's hard to explain why I take such pleasure from it, but I'm willing to give it a go. It is my first act on a Monday morning, sweeping the kitchen floor in preparation for scrubbing the lino. I cannot begin the week's activities without this chore completed. It is the last thing I do at my church on a Friday as I prepare for Sunday's services, sweeping the leaves and mud brought in by wind and traveller. Perhaps it is the simplicity of the task, perhaps it is the sheer physicality of the act, repetitive, arduous, a way of 'breaking sweat' similar to the endorphins released when jogging or going to the gym. But I believe that when we sweep, we are doing something much more profound, I believe that we are acting out the theology of hope. For me, hope is a doing word, an action that believes that things can improve, things can be made better. It is looking at the mess we are in, rolling up your sleeves and getting on with it. It is impossible to do if you have no hope, if you believe that nothing you do can make a difference.

During the summer, Britain faced one of the ugliest challenges of recent years. Angry, violent mobs were determined to wreak havoc on the streets of many of our cities and towns. The tragic



deaths of three young girls at the hands of a 17-year-old boy were seized upon by far-right organisers as a way of stirring up religious and racist attacks. The peaceful vigil of the grieving people of Southport was turned into riot, as people were encouraged to attack the police, lay siege to Muslim places of worship and workplaces, and even burn down the housing of people seeking asylum.

Even though the lies and misinformation put about by the far right were quickly exposed by the police and Government, the organised riots continued to build. After Hartlepool exploded in violence, those of us living in Sunderland began to hear rumours that our city was to be next. There were plenty of meetings with the police, and plans were put in place. However, none of us predicted the ferocity of what came next.

I was posted as a monitor in one of the pubs that they were organising in. It was full of 'Tommy' chants and experienced 'street fighters' sharing tales of how they did things in Hartlepool and Southport. At 7pm precisely, over 1,000 people, young and old, were led from the pubs on a cleverly planned march aimed at striking terror in our Muslim communities. I witnessed it all. The burning

"Hope is resurrection after the destruction. Hope is in the sweeping up."



cars, the police lines taking a battering as they tried to stop mosques being burnt. Shops looted. Bricks narrowly missing my head as we stood defending a local Muslim community centre. In the worst moments I had to chase rioters out of my church graveyard as they tried to kick down old headstones to make missiles to pelt the police line just below the church. It was truly one of the worst things I have ever witnessed. It was hard to be hopeful amid the broken glass and burning vehicles.

Then the next day, hope sprang out of the ashes. Generated by social media and word of mouth, the brooms came out. The sweeping began.

Hundreds turned up with brushes, dustpans and shovels. Local people, determined to show that the far right did not represent them, came out on the streets and started sweeping up the mess. Pubs opened at 8am to serve teas and coffees to all the volunteers who turned out.

This happened up and down the country. Muslims, Christians, people of no faith and some faith got together and began to clean up the mess. Hope became a 'doing word'. Hope was found in the sweeping.

As so often comes after the riots, after the flooding, after the house fire, people come together after unimaginable tragedy and make hope real.

One of my favourite images from the New Testament is of God sweeping up. In Luke 15:8 we come across a woman who has lost something very important, a precious gold coin. She feverishly sweeps until the coin is found, then rejoices with the community when it is found. Like the story of the lost sheep and the prodigal son that surround the story, she represents a God who never gives up but is always searching for us in hope. God sweeps, and God does not give up hope. Even when everything looks very bleak indeed.

After the largest earthquake, in the wake of cities torn apart by endless bombing, after every riot, hope comes when we are finally able to pick up a brush and imagine that the horrors of humanity can be overcome. Hope is resurrection after the destruction. Hope is in the sweeping up.



Church Action
on Poverty
Sunday

**DREAMS &
REALITIES**

On 2 March 2025, we invite you to share hope in your community. Give, act and pray with churches across the UK.

There's still time to get involved if you haven't already.

Sign up today, and we'll send you a pack full of worship materials, and tips for raising funds so that you can support work that's reclaiming dignity, agency and power.

We also have all kinds of extra materials to help you make it a success – including prints of the 'Dreams and Realities' portraits (see page 6), specially made recordings of hymns, video clips and presentations, and more.

Sign up now at
www.church-poverty.org.uk/sunday



Let **justice** roll like a river, **righteousness** like a never-ending stream

Stef Benstead is a disability rights activist and researcher; a Poverty Truth Commissioner; and a trustee and expert adviser for Church Action on Poverty. Her new book analyses the principles for a just society given by God in the Bible, and explores how those principles might be reflected in the UK today.

A great resource for anyone who wants their church to reflect the gospel concern for poverty and justice more deeply in its life and worship.

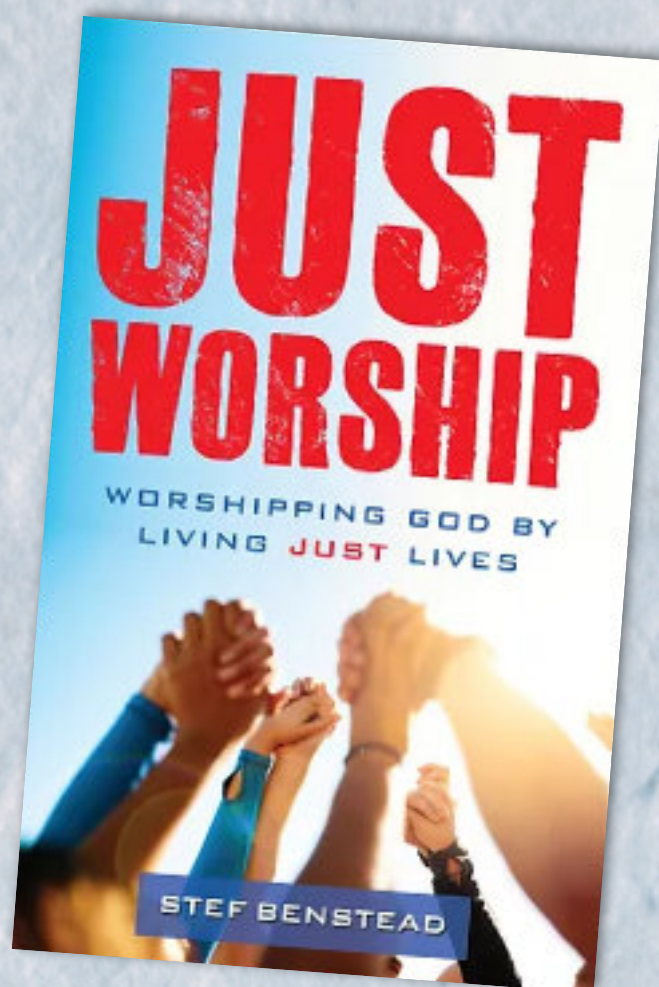
“A book which brings together the radical teaching of the Bible with the reality of life in unequal Britain today”

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Stef Benstead



I would like to see Christians take

seriously the command of God

that we all pursue justice

for the poor and oppressed