The role of the church in the local community: Food banks

What is the Church?
If asked to define the word 'church', many answer that the church is where Christians worship. This is correct, but it is not the sense in which the word 'church' is used in the Bible. The word 'church' comes from the Greek word 'ekklesia' which is defined as an assembly, or a gathering of Christian people. The root meaning of 'church' is not that of a building, but of people. Originally the early Church did not have a special building and Christians met together in peoples' homes. The New Testament explains that the Church consists of a group of believers under the leadership of Jesus. First and foremost the Church is made up of the followers of Jesus in the local community.

And God placed all things under his (Jesus') feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body. Ephesians 1:22–23

What does the Church do?
The church as a building provides a location where Christians from the local community can meet, worship, pray, obtain spiritual guidance and socialise. Often events take place on weekdays as well as worship on the Christian holy day of Sunday. Some activities are specifically for Christians such as prayer meetings or bible studies; others fulfil a need in the local community, for example a mothers and toddlers group or youth club.

The role of the Church is not confined to the building. Throughout its history the Church has been a major source of social services like schooling and medical care, it has been an inspiration for art and culture and it has campaigned for justice and championed the neglected. In modern Britain the Church has become involved in projects that help the local community, such as food banks. This works fit with Christian teachings to act with compassion to those in need.

‘For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Matthew 25:35–36

Objectives
- Understand what is meant by the Church.
- Understand what help the Church provides for local communities, e.g. foodbanks.

Key terms
- Church: 1) The holy people of God, also called the Body of Christ, among whom Christ is present and active. 2) A building in which Christians worship.

Activities
1. Explain what is meant by the Church.
2. Explain what the Church does.
4. Describe how foodbanks operate and the work of the Trussell Trust and the Oasis Project.
5. ‘There will always be a need to feed hungry people in Britain.’ Evaluate this statement.

The Trussell Trust
Founded in 1997 by Carol and Paddy Henderson, the Trussell Trust foodbanks provide emergency food, help and support to people in crisis in the UK. Founded on Christian principles, shown, for example, in the parable of the sheep and goats, the aim is to bring people together (religious and non-religious) to work towards ending poverty and hunger in Britain. Rising prices, cuts in welfare benefits, redundancy, family breakdown, and unexpected expense may all contribute to an emergency situation.

Non-perishable food is donated to the food banks by churches, supermarkets, schools, businesses and individuals and is sorted by volunteers, including making sure that it is within date. Care professionals such as doctors, health visitors and social workers identify people in crisis and issue a food voucher. In exchange for their food voucher, three days of nutritionally balanced food is provided. Some of the foodbanks provide courses designed to help people make ends meet.

The Oasis Project
The Oasis Project of the Plymouth Methodist Mission Circuit is a community hub with an internet café, creative courses, a job club, training opportunities and a base for meetings. It also runs a Foodbank. Paid staff are supported by volunteers and session tutors. Around 200 people use the centre each week and spiritual and practical support is given to those who need it because of ill health, learning disability, domestic violence, substance abuse, low income and housing problems.

Research activities
1. Read Matthew 25: 31–46 (the parable of the sheep and goats). Explain how this parable may inspire Christians to provide for those in need.
2. Find out if there is a food bank in your local area.

Summary
You should understand that the biblical interpretation of the Church is the followers of Jesus who have a Christian duty to show love to the community and support the needy, for example through foodbanks.

Study tip
Learn teachings which encourage Christians to help the needy and understand the work of foodbanks.
2.9 The role of the church in the local community: Street Pastors

Why should Christians be involved in the local community?

The teaching of Jesus, for example in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31–46), shows that Christians should not ignore the needs of society because showing agape love is part of the Christian way of life. Churches should practically respond to the needs of their local communities. These needs vary, for example they might include a lack of facilities for young people, insufficient care for the vulnerable, the problem of gang culture or people feeling frightened on the streets. Churches have tried to meet these challenges with local projects such as Street Pastors.

Street Pastors

Reverend Les Isaac started the interdenominational network of Street Pastors in Brixton, south London, in 2003 with 18 volunteers. It was an initiative of Ascension Trust, a Christian charity, where Christian adults receive training in order to voluntarily patrol the streets in urban areas. They do not have the power to enforce the law but provide a reassuring presence in local communities.

Initially the main aim was to challenge gang culture and the use of knives and guns in some areas of London. As Christians elsewhere began their own groups, the focus widened to include responding to drunkenness, anti-social behaviour and fear of crime. Street Pastors aim to help and care for vulnerable people in practical ways, working closely with councils and the police in their local communities. Wearing a blue, reflective ‘Street Pastor’ uniform, their aim is not to actively preach but to provide a positive service to their local areas. Their work includes listening to peoples’ problems, giving guidance regarding agencies which might be able to help and discouraging anti-social behaviour. They are backed up by prayer partners (Prayer Pastors) who pray for the Street Pastors and the work they are doing. Sometimes they communicate with each other via mobile phones.

Since 2003 Street Pastors has grown rapidly and they now operate in nearly 300 locations worldwide with around 14,000 trained personnel.

School Pastors

A sister organisation, called School Pastors, was set up in 2011 with the aim of reducing anti-social behaviour, illegal drug use and bullying. Within school, they mentor young people and they patrol within and around schools to help prevent behaviour problems. There recently has been the development of College Pastors, Rail Pastors, and (in the event of a disaster) Response Pastors.

Other Christian organisations that help in the local community

The mission of the church includes trying to make a positive contribution to the local community and being a good neighbour. This idea is summed up in James 2:

> faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:14–17

This has resulted in organisations such as the Neighbourhood Prayer Network, the Boys’ and Girls’ Brigades, the YMCA, the Salvation Army and projects designed to help peoples’ physical well-being such as Parish Nursing.

Parish Nursing

Parish Nursing Ministries UK is a Christian charity which supports whole person healthcare through the local church. In Walton Parish, Felixstowe, three churches partner a project that provides registered parish nurses to promote well-being in body, mind and spirit. Their work includes diagnosing early signs of health problems, training and coordinating volunteers to help alleviate loneliness or provide support during times of crisis, and giving additional help to the NHS. They encourage healthy living through exercise and a healthy diet, and provide education and health advice. Their focus is on the person rather than just their medical condition, and they will listen to problems, give reassurance, pray with them if asked and direct them to specific services if required.

Activities

1. Explain the teachings that encourage Christians to take action to help people.
2. Give two examples of how the Church works to support the local community.
3. ‘Street Pastors are a great support for the police.’ Evaluate this statement.
4. Do you think having school pastors is a good idea? Explain your opinion.

Discussion activity

‘Every Christian should do something practical to help their community, including praying for their neighbours.’ Do you agree?

Extension activity

1. Use the Internet to find out about other Christian community caring projects, such as the Neighbourhood Prayer Network, the YMCA and the work of the Salvation Army.
2. Find out if there are any community caring projects, such as Street Pastors or Parish Nurses, in your local area.