

Grassmarket Food Bank

This is the second in what we are planning will be a series of articles on the groups that use St C's hall. It is not the 'official version', just the impressions of one volunteer.

The food bank is a 'pop-up' which appears in the hall on Tuesdays and Fridays. To say it 'pops up' would elicit a wry smile from any of the volunteers, as it is heavy work to shift around forty crates of food from the plant room, via the lift, to the hall. Officially, St Columba's sponsors (in the sense of not charging 'rent') the Grassmarket branch of the Edinburgh Food Project, itself a part of the Trussell Trust. What clients, for want of a better word, find is four rather obviously retired volunteers in green tee-shirts, helpfully supplemented by an advice worker at a table in a corner. The team leader for the day sits at a desk, equipped with lap-top and mobile, and checks each person's referral (from GP or support service). Sometimes, complications arise and long conversations are had on the mobile to confirm or initiate a referral. Seats are laid out and another member of the team 'meets and greets' with tea and biscuits – and occasionally tomatoes from the Quiet Garden – while also explaining the process and trying to keep the queue in order. This is not the easiest task as most afternoons see over twenty clients, the majority of whom arrive in the first half-hour – if all is ready, opening ten minutes early can help relieve the pressure.

Once past the desk, clients are offered a nutritionally balanced crate of food: long-life milk, fruit juice, pasta, rice, sauces, tinned fruit and veg, tinned meat or fish, breakfast cereal, coffee, sugar and a packet of biscuits or bar of chocolate (they also receive a £5 Sainsburys or Farm Foods voucher at the desk). Much of the food has been donated in kind by supporters. This means there is a degree of randomness that usually extends to the day's wacky item – we have had a carton of maraschino cherries and a tin of stuffed vine leaves. As well as the 'standard' crate, microwave, vegetarian and vegan versions are available. Very few clients take the whole crateful and a 'swaps' boxes is created for people to rummage through. The Grassmarket food bank is the only one in the city centre and single men make up around 75% of the clientele, while other food banks around the city cater mainly for families. The men often have limited cooking facilities – or skills or inclination – so a lot of the pasta and rice is left. As

a consequence, anyone who looks as if they can cook may be surprised to find themselves the centre of attention.

In theory, one volunteer looks after the toiletries, sanitary products, toilet rolls, dog and cat food and cleaning stuff at the end of the 'counter'. The reality is a little more chaotic as volunteers dodge about trying to deal with several clients at a time. Some clients are obviously living in poverty, some mention mental or physical health problems, and some are hard to 'classify'. For the volunteers, being friendly, non-judgmental and helpful is a given: offering a listening ear can result in conversations that range from the heart-breaking to the hilarious. There is an occasional 'kick-off', but almost all the clients are polite and friendly, while a few offer great stories or observations, even recipes. Language can be an issue and I was greatly impressed by a colleague suddenly speaking French to a young North African man before switching to Italian to usher out a couple of bewildered tourists who had wandered in from the garden.

I had met homeless people (in the wider meaning of the term) in past voluntary roles, but I was moved on meeting war refugees for the first time. My image of the Russian attack on Ukraine became a tiny blonde woman at the advice worker's table, her little girl kept amused with a biro and a scrap of paper. Late in one session, a Ukrainian couple in their seventies arrived. The man did an excellent job with Google Translate on his phone at the team leader's desk. Meanwhile, I tried to speak to his wife. 'Ukraine?' A nod and the name of one of the bombed cities often mentioned in the news at that time – then a gesture of a hand across her throat. Their family should be very proud of how they are coping at their age in this nightmare situation, but dear knows what is happening to the younger members – or the little girl's father.

What food banks do is, sadly, open to attack from both left and right. All I will say is that the people who use the food bank come of their own volition, often from a distance, and most look to me to be in need of some kind. We acknowledge them, listen to them and offer them food that other people have donated. Whatever professionals and politicians may say, that seems right and good to me at the simple, human level.

Donations of stuff are welcome and can be left in the box in the church. Poly bags are worth their weight in gold. We send a ton of baked beans and chopped tomatoes back to the depot after each session (maybe they are more popular at other food banks in the city), but tinned meat and fish, 'super noodles' (the little

blocks that can, apparently, be cooked in a kettle), chocolate, biscuits, cleaning products, men's deodorant, shower gel and shampoo are particularly welcome. Edinburgh Food Project is having to buy an increasing amount of food, so for how best to make gifts of cash, and for more information, see the Food Project's website, edinburghfoodproject.org.

Duncan Craig (with help from Bob Gould)



(Ready for business – photo supplied by Bob Gould)

Personal Reflections on Attending United for Peace



I write this the morning after attending this 'Multi-faith service' hosted by our Episcopal Cathedral. The gathering was organised by EIFA and The Oxford Foundation and happened as a result of individuals meeting at a conference earlier this year: people prepared to take a step of faith that the idea would come to fruition. The idea was of course very timely and perhaps overdue.

I wasn't able to see very much, such was the size of the congregation and despite some difficulty with the amplification system, I heard and read many contributions, from people of faith and none, offering insights, prayers, dances and songs.

During our ministry in Leeds, I was very involved with the Interfaith network and I always attended the Annual Peace service there. One of the proudest moments of my Christian life was representing the city's Christian community by lighting a candle at the table covered by a tablecloth I had worked on in our Women Piecing Together project. However, in West Yorkshire we also experienced Anglican authority unable to endorse prayers of other faiths in our church. Remembering that hurt, I was so pleased to see

the cathedral and Bishop John fully involved in this 'service'. I have one reservation about the service, which was that there were so many rounds of applause (I feel that applause blurs the line between performance and spiritual offering but that is a personal view).

Others from St Columba's attended and they might well carry away different impressions and highlights. Here, though, are the contributions which particularly touched me:

- Mike Haines, founder of Global Acts of Unity spoke of how he has learnt to converse with people of different traditions and backgrounds. Mike's brother David was a humanitarian worker who was kidnapped for 18 months, treated appallingly and finally killed by Isis, with the video distributed on the Internet. GAU takes its counter-radicalisation message to schools and places of worship.
- Some beautiful, pure songs accompanied by guitar from our Bahai community and from Mike Delaitre, a Mauritian living in Burntisland.
- Dr Jayanthi Santhanam and Anjelic Khan, offering their colourful and expressive dance to Lord Shiva.
- Tim Maguire, Humanist Chaplain recalling the story of *The Oresteia*: 'What did Athena do? She forgave Orestes. Aeschylus recognised that civilisation depends on our ability to overcome our desire for revenge and learn to forgive ... The Israelis and the Palestinians, the Russians and the Ukrainians all have reasons for what they're doing but reason is not what we need right now.'
- The Edinburgh Ukrainian choir Oberih sang, from the heart. You could see it in their faces and hear it in their full-throated voices.

To conclude the service, Amina Ahmed from EIFA invited the congregation to stand and speak a pledge which not only rounded off the event but made us all participants in this important shared ministry:

We have come together today
As citizens of Edinburgh and the United Kingdom.

We pledge to stand united
Against those who propagate hate and violence toward others.
We pledge to stand united against all forms of violent
extremism.
We pledge to live by values that are inherent within our
traditions -
Values of compassion for the needy, love for the neighbour
And respect for one another.

We pledge to do all we can
To promote understanding, respect and mutual love for all.

The service order ended with these words:

*Please enjoy the refreshments and do make a point of introducing
yourself to someone you do not know.*

I hope I have been able to convey some of this rich and beautiful
cultural/religious evening, which helped me, at least, to re-connect
with the importance of interfaith dialogue in troubled times.

Jenny Paton-Williams

(dove image used here was taken from the service sheet)

Hull Children's University

One of the lesser-known but very regular users of the hall is Hull Children's University. It aims to offer children from very disadvantaged backgrounds in the Hull area (DPW's birthplace) an opportunity to experience time away in another city with all the opportunities this provides. They come almost weekly at times, arriving by train on a Wednesday lunchtime, dump their bags in the hall and head off into the city centre. The night is spent in sleeping bags (plus roll mats that live in the cupboards as you enter the hall from the stairs). After breakfast on the Thursday (we provide an industrial strength toaster for them!) they are off again until around lunchtime when they return home. This is a very good earner for the church but even so, the community rate they pay makes possible for them what would otherwise be impossible. This recent feedback shows just how valuable this opportunity is:

'I just wanted to say a big thank you from everyone at our charity for your support in making our Edinburgh Overnight experiences so loved by Primary School children from Hull & East Yorkshire. For the children we work with, this may quite literally be a once in a lifetime experience - many have never travelled outside the Hull boundary and sadly some may never again.

With your help we have shown them that their world doesn't have to be small, that there are many exciting things for them to experience and aspire to. I hope you realise the difference you are making in these children's lives.

We hope you enjoy reading a few comments about this trip and we look forward to working with you in the next academic year.'

David PW



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It's been an absolutely incredible opportunity for the children. They have learnt so much and enjoyed every second. It's opened their eyes to the world!
-a teacher

It was the best thing ever! Two days I will never forget
-a child

I think it was the best trip ever and I don't want it to change
-a child

I have loved the whole experience, getting to know the kids and watching them experience new things has been wonderful.
-a volunteer