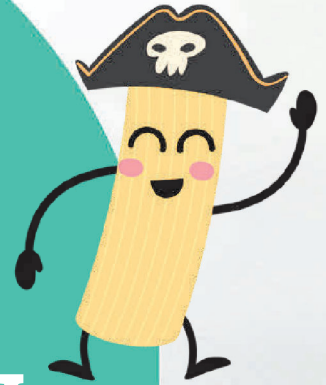
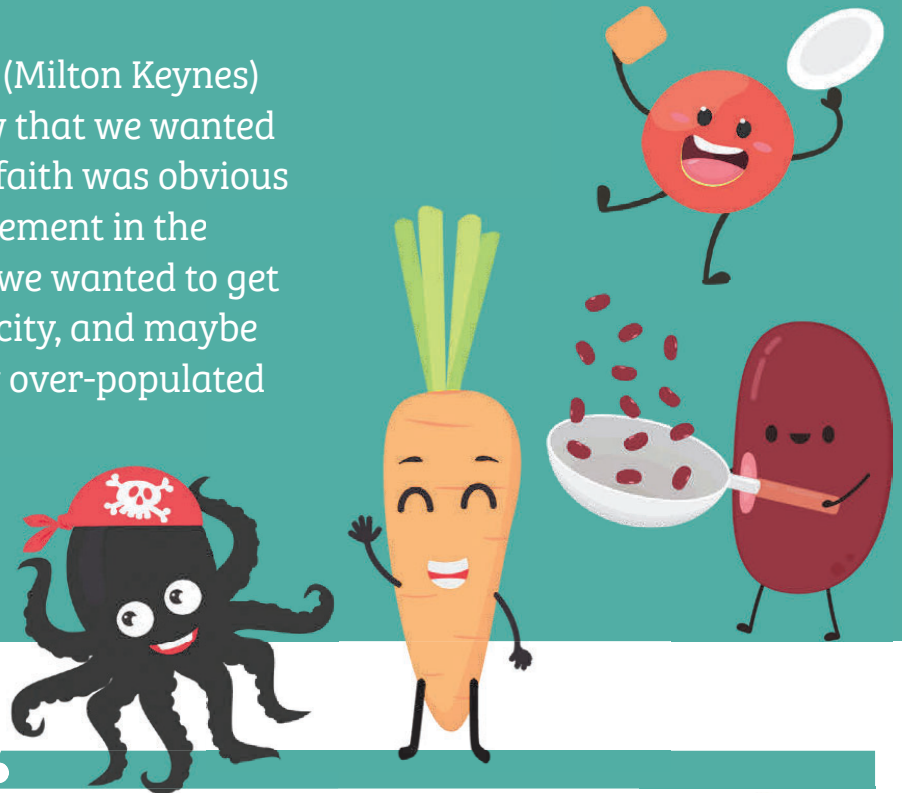


St Mark's Meals: when theology meets practice

By Paul Oxley



When we planted St Mark's MK (Milton Keynes) in the summer of 2012, we knew that we wanted to be the kind of church whose faith was obvious through our actions and involvement in the community. We also knew that we wanted to get involved with live issues in our city, and maybe in spaces that were not already over-populated by people doing brilliant work.



That autumn, a report was released about Milton Keynes which stated that one in five children in the city lived in poverty (2012). This was a shocking statistic to us. The *number* of children was disturbing, but also, to be honest, so was the fact that child poverty as an issue was still common in the lives of modern children living in the UK.

Wondering if God might be leading us to involvement with this reality, I found myself in a school canteen early one morning. As the supervisor reached up to unbolt the lock on the door to let pupils into the breakfast club, she paused and told me to watch how fast the children would run into the hall. I asked her why they would run. 'Because they have not eaten anything since I gave them lunch yesterday,' she replied.

MOVED TO ACTION

This moment is the perfect example of when theology meets practice. We all know that justice, fairness and righteousness are important foundation stones of our faith. We know that God has always provided through the worshipping practices of his people for those who did

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THESE BOXES ARE A FANTASTIC APPROACH BECAUSE THE WHOLE FAMILY CAN GET INVOLVED. OUR FAMILIES HAVE SENT US PHOTOGRAPHS OF THEMSELVES COOKING TOGETHER AND SHARING A REALLY POSITIVE EXPERIENCE. THE CHILDREN JUST LOVE GETTING INVOLVED.

Local teacher.



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not have enough. The Levitical codes allow for the hungry to pick grain and grapes from the edges of fields and vineyards to prevent starvation. Jesus teaches the value of children, and the importance of giving cups of water to the thirsty and food to the hungry. James tells us that faith without works is dead, and that true religion is to look after widows and orphans (in other words, families with no other form of provision).

This is all great theological knowledge, but it doesn't fill tummies. For that, we needed to act, and become a part of the solution.

We did some research and learned all about the effect that hunger has on educational attainment, the social stigma of not eating, the

anxiety caused by empty cupboards, the increasing demands placed on family budgets, and gaps which exist in welfare provision. As our understanding grew, our goal became crystal clear: no child in Milton Keynes should have to go to bed hungry.

After learning, listening, experimenting, praying, raising money and buying a thousand cardboard boxes, we started what we now call St Mark's Meals. We created a few simple meals that could be made with long-life ingredients. We made up some boxes, designed a recipe card and a bright sticker to decorate the boxes, and lined a few shelves in the garage at the vicarage. Our local school kept some to distribute to the children they thought could be going hungry



“ WE ARE KEEN TO SHARE WHAT WE KNOW TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR CHURCHES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN IN THEIR COMMUNITY. ”

and got in touch when they needed more. We started this in just three local schools and our teacher friends loved having a resource to help the children who so clearly needed some food support.

Word got out. Teachers told other teachers. We started fundraising and publicising what we were doing, and more schools heard about what we were offering. We very quickly grew from three schools to 40. During the pandemic, that number jumped to 70 as we continued to support the vulnerable children who were at school during the lockdown. We now serve 100 schools, nurseries and children's centres all over the city, delivering at least 4000 Meals boxes every year. We put some systems in place, and had better stickers designed so our boxes looked even more welcoming. We made websites and developed online ordering software. We designed puzzles and colouring activities to go in the recipe cards. People from all across the city started to volunteer money, time and skills, or just shared what we were doing with their own networks. The project has connected St Mark's MK with so many kind people both inside and outside of the church community, whose support we truly value.

REPLICATING A SUPPORTIVE MODEL

Having built such useful tools, we wanted to make it easy for other churches to feed local children through their own Meals programme. So we put everything we learned together in a pack, along with access to our software, artwork, and website, so that churches could use it to get started in their church, with our support. A friend in north London thought their church might be able to start. We had a few Zoom calls to talk through how to get started, built them their own website, and called their project 'St Andrew's Meals' so that anyone who receives a box or hears about the project can see that it comes from their local church. They support two or three local schools, with orders for 10-20 boxes when the schools feel they are needed. We call them the first Meals Network Hub.

Since then, we've shared training and resources with two other churches, one in Bromley and one in St Helens. Three churches are now Meals Network Hubs, with a few boxes packed on garage shelves and regularly given to a few local schools to keep their store cupboards full, with good meals for children and families who need a bit of help getting

dinner on the table. It was never our intention to grow a charity, but whilst we know that children need it all over the UK, we are keen to share what we know to make it easier for churches to support children in their community.

As church leaders, we all, in our moments of honesty, know how hard it is to meet the needs of our local community with the stretched resources that we have. There is a finite amount of money in the bank, time in the day or volunteers who are willing! What I love about the Meals model is that it is relatively low on volunteer burnout... we have been guilty of this in the past. It is relatively easy to do, incredibly easy for the local community to understand (and fund), and has an immediate and direct impact in the lives of families. It really is a win-win!



Paul Oxley

Rev Paul Oxley is the Vicar of St Mark's MK and founder of St Mark's Meals. Find out more about the Meals here www.stmarksmk.com/meals

