

COMMUNITY STORIES

Rosie Buxton

Continuing a series hearing from Church-Related Community Workers, **Rosie Buxton** tells the story of creating financial inclusion in Huddersfield

Church-related community work (CRCW) is about meeting people in whatever their situation and enabling networks to develop.

Church-Related Community Workers are all very different, in very different projects. What we have in common is that we are professionally trained as well as theologically educated, so we don't only have relationships with churches, we work professionally in community development. That's very important. If we just meant well but were not being properly trained, we could do a lot of damage.

What people value is my independence. I can work with the charity sector, with the local authority, with community groups, with challenging youngsters. At the moment I'm chairing a group called Dalton Together, which is about local people being responsible for local services. Local people, community groups, professionals, schools and local businesses all come together under that umbrella. It was just about to be launched when Covid happened, so we've had to adapt, but it's been extremely successful, because it was local and people trusted it.

In the summer, we gave 960 meals out in six weeks, two days a week, packaged and ready to heat up, to people who couldn't afford food. There were people who had been furloughed, families who'd just been put on universal credit, adolescents who had been asked to leave their homes. A local charity ran it on a Tuesday and a local business on a Thursday, so it enabled the charity to



'People on the fringes are being ignored'

bring its cooks back from furlough and helped the business to function better as well. It's about that kind of inventiveness in the way we think. We started with just feeding youngsters, but when people came and talked to us we realised it was much wider. Because we are not an authority, we can react and adapt quickly. So we were able to do an awful lot for quite a lot of people.

The CRCW project here works with schools and local residents. We've had lantern parades, bauble parades, and we made the church garden into a community garden. In 2019, we grew cabbages, cauliflowers and peas, and people could come and pick their own.

That was taking off nicely, but of course Covid happened.

During lockdown, we've found people who have never been on a benefit in their lives have lost their job overnight and are having to negotiate universal credit. The fact that that system is centralised now and not local, makes things really difficult and uncomfortable. There are also people who don't manage very well with money at the best of times, through no fault of their own. And we've got a lot of problems with loan sharks. It seemed to me a shame that the loan sharks were the one's saying: 'If you've got a problem, I can help you,' so we are looking at enabling people to be mentors in the area of financial inclusion. They aren't giving advice, they're giving support, but they know who to ring. We met this morning with people from the council and from charities, finding out exactly what's already happening - we don't want to reinvent the wheel. The idea is that we will have a localised financial help system, making things accessible, helping people manage money. The schools are on board, so we'll be teaching children about money. We've also got an online project just about to be launched about learning how to cook.

People often talk about people being on the fringes of society. I think differently: people aren't on the fringes, they're in the middle, they're just being ignored. They're in the middle of gang wars, they're in the middle of housing, in the middle of drug dealing, in the middle of everything.

CRCW is a unique ministry. I feel passionately that it should grow and thrive because it fills a gap in what churches offer. It educates the churches as much as it helps the communities. It's about working in partnership to create a glimpse of the kingdom of God, where we all have one common goal. Sometimes that happens, because you're doing something together and every single person feels they can contribute to it, and they're all doing it for the same reason - because they care. That's one thing Covid's taught us: people do still care about each other. ●

i **Rosie Buxton** is a Church-Related Community Work minister at Moldgreen, Waverley and Brackenhall United Reformed churches, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. She was talking to Stephen Tomkins