

Story of the Little Free Panty

People in the North Avenue community face uncertainty. After 90 years of serving the community, North Avenue United Reformed Church closed (as a church) in 2018. Not long after the closure they were informed by Food Bank Chelmsford that North Avenue Christian Centre (NACC) was going to be closed as a distribution centre. The Jubilee Community Café (JCC) team, who worked with Food Bank Chelmsford at NACC, were very disappointed by this final decision.

North Avenue is one of the most deprived areas in Chelmsford. People's needs for basic foods and personal care items are high. Following the closure of the Food Bank, people carried on knocking on the NACC's door to get foods and essential goods. The JCC team supplied the community's needs as much as they could by serving hot meals at a reasonable price twice a week at NACC. Nevertheless, I wanted to tackle the poverty-related social issues such as child poverty, hardship in lone parent households and mental health-related isolation. The team and I were keen to find effective ways of continuing to support the needs of our community.

Our neighbourhoods in North Avenue are literally trapped in a cycle of deep poverty. According to a Public Health England report in 2017, life expectancy is 6.7 years lower for men and 2.9 years lower for women in the most deprived areas (e.g. North Avenue) of Chelmsford than the least deprived area. In terms of Child poverty, 28% of all children, in the UK, are living in poverty (Child Poverty Action Group 2013/2014 statistics).

After a long discussion with the team, I found an interesting project called, the Little Free Pantry (LFP). It began, in 2016 in the United States. I contacted the founder, Jessica McClard who kindly explained how she started the project. LFP is a grassroots initiative and the concept is free for anyone to implement in whatever way they choose. I told Jessica about North Avenue's situation and she encouraged me to use LFP for my own context and to create the principle according to the community's needs.

LFP at North Avenue is for neighbours helping neighbours. It is a safety net for the community. The original LFP is stocked organically. For example, if you have an extra tin of soup, you can leave it in the pantry, and then someone who needs the soup can take it. It is simple; you do not need to bring a voucher and there is no time limit to using the pantry. You can access it whenever you want. The scheme will be managed by the JCC staff.

During the planning stage, concerns were raised about the possible misuse of the pantry, vandalism by young people for example and the potential for it to be used as a drug box, since the area has some drug-related issues. Although these are legitimate concerns, it was reassuring to find that, during the three weeks prior to the launch day, the prepared space was not damaged at all.

We had a launch event on 10th December 2019 with the local Church of England members and local residents. I shared the passage, from 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, about generous giving. A blessing was made over the pantry and we left the shelves full of useful items.

I went back the following day and was surprised to find the pantry was almost empty, realising that those who used it must be in a desperate situation. I found an envelope in the back of the shelf which said, 'Thank you' and there was £1 coin in it. I felt overwhelmed. I am convinced that this kind of gesture shows a little step forward to building a happier community, because this community knows how to live co-operatively.

When I discussed this new project with the JCC team, we decided to use Butterflies as a symbol for the LFP. The story of how the caterpillar transforms into a butterfly is a metaphor for the process of transforming states of consciousness from one dimension to another.

I pray that LFP at North Avenue may be used as a tool for transforming an area where, in spite of poverty, people care for one another, give generously for the needy and develop a positive sense of community.

Please check the website below, if you would like to know more about the Little Free Pantry project.

<http://www.littlefreepantry.org>

