

More than just a meal: Inside a church kitchen feeding families in crisis

By Ella Day

My Gran and I arrive at the church, a modern build with an angled roof and windows that run down the length of the building. It's our local market town, and my Gran, who has been a regular for years, says it has a tight-knit community feel.

We're here to help at its Saturday Kitchen which provides a free hot meal to families, specifically those hit hardest by inflation from the cost-of-living crisis. For three years, it has run on Saturday between 12:30pm and 1:30pm.

Though I don't identify as a Christian, I admire the Christian teaching to help others less fortunate than themselves, and my Gran is exemplary of this. I'm keen to get involved with more community work like she does. I've only ever been to church a few times, so I look forward to helping out in a new environment.

My Gran leads me into a small kitchen full of other volunteers similar in age to her. There's Helen, head cook, Bryan, who does the washing up, and Judy, who I'm told makes the best crumble around. Swatting away the compliments, she says, "the crumble is just a simple flapjack recipe!".

As the volunteers return to food preparation, I help lay the tables in a hall adjacent to the kitchen, which are arranged in a square formation so that attendees can talk with each other easily.

Deborah, who organises the event, arrives. She seems very at ease and explains, calmly: "It's so gratifying knowing that we give people a decent hot meal and provide a safe space."

I ask how visitors respond to the kitchen. "Oh, they're all extremely grateful" she says, "many are from the nearby asylum hotel and they're so hungry they often eat two meals worth in one sitting."

As soon as it strikes 12:30, families with excitable young children arrive. A young girl runs over to where Deborah and I stand and is immediately fascinated by the newcomer. She tells me that her favourite food is chicken dinosaurs and asks Helen if they're being served today.

Visitors choose between jacket potatoes with a variety of toppings including chicken dinosaurs, of course. As they eat, there is lots of chatter around the table; it seems that families have become friends over the course of visiting.

Deborah shows me the toys on offer, which fill the hall's cupboards like a toy shop. One boy is particularly keen on racing cars, so she has got them out for him this week.

With fewer people than anticipated here this week, there's food going spare and I'm offered lunch. As I eat, a thirty-something year old lady walks over to join me. She walks over cheerfully, her curly hair swaying behind her. With a warm smile, she introduces herself as Emily and her company is immediately friendly.

"Food is just so expensive right now, and my kids are guaranteed a filling and healthy meal here, often with more to take home." Two of her children circle around her, excitedly showing off the toys they're playing with.

Emily and I agree on how good Judy's crumble is. "You out-do yourself Judy!", shouts Emily, and Judy chuckles from behind the counter.

As the hour draws to a close, I see one of Emily's boys is reluctant to leave the racing cars he is playing with. Emily assures him that Deborah will be happy to share them again next week. With his shoulders slumped, he reluctantly agrees to leave the toys.

Before heading off, Emily thanks me for speaking to her. She says: "It's really important that we keep talking about the cost of food; just because it isn't in the news as much, doesn't mean that it isn't still happening to people."

We pack up the tables and toys, ready for next week. As I walk out of the now empty hall, I feel warmed not only by the jacket potato, but by the gratitude of everyone I met. I think I'll ask my Gran if I can come along again soon.