

To retain volunteers, voluntary groups need to understand volunteers' motivations and volunteering experiences

Dr Stephanie Denning

About the research

Food poverty in the UK has reached unprecedented levels. Faith groups and volunteers are playing a crucial role in responding to food poverty from food banks and children's holiday groups, through to collecting evidence and campaigning for change. When a person is motivated by their religious faith to volunteer and respond to poverty, this shows the importance of faith beyond worship spaces, in people's daily lives, and in wider society.

How are people motivated by their faith to volunteer?
How do people keep on volunteering? This is important to understand if projects relying upon volunteers are going to be sustainable over time.

This research addresses these questions in the context of a Christian group responding to holiday hunger; children's food poverty in the school holidays. From the researcher running a project responding to holiday hunger, the research makes use of volunteers' diaries and interviews on their motivations and volunteering experiences. The research explores how faith motivates volunteering at the holiday hunger project, and how volunteers persisted in volunteering over time.

This research examines how volunteers can be motivated by religious faith to volunteer, and how they persist in volunteering over time

Policy implications

- If voluntary work is to be sustainable, then voluntary groups need to give as much attention to volunteers as to those a project is serving.
- Understanding volunteers' motivations, expectations and volunteering experiences will help voluntary groups to develop positive relationships with volunteers and gain their longer term support.
- It is vital that volunteers feel appreciated and valued, otherwise it is likely that they will stop volunteering or seek a different opportunity.
- Maintaining a personal relationship with volunteers is as important as volunteer recruitment.



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Key findings

- Religious faith can be a key motivation to volunteer, but people's motivations are also affected by their volunteering experiences.
- When a person is motivated by their faith to volunteer, the experience - such as giving food - can have more meaning to the volunteer than is represented in the action itself.
- Motivations must be continually renewed if they are to keep on volunteering: it is not guaranteed that a person will persist in volunteering. Volunteering can therefore be understood as a continual process of action and reflection.
- Volunteers are affected by the experience of volunteering, not just the traditional 'recipient'. For example, volunteers at the Lunch Kitchen were impacted by the experience, not just the children attending. How volunteers are affected can be positive and negative, change over time, and what seems like a passing moment can have a lasting impact upon the volunteer and their perception of the project.
- A faith motivation does not make volunteers immune to being challenged by their experiences, and so a sense of enjoyment, satisfaction and feeling appreciated are important for a person to want to continue volunteering.



Image by Beth Waters, 2018

Further information

This research took place with the national charity 'MakeLunch' (now part of 'TLG') as part of Stephanie Denning's ESRC funded PhD at the University of Bristol.

'TLG' is a Christian charity with Lunch Kitchens responding to holiday hunger by providing a free, hot and healthy meal in the school holidays. Holiday hunger is when children do not have enough to eat in the school holidays, partly due to the lack of free school meals outside of term time.

Over 20 months Stephanie established and ran one 'MakeLunch' Kitchen in a church and highly deprived UK inner city area. The Lunch Kitchen served local primary school aged children and relied upon volunteers to run. Sustainability beyond the research period was important, and so from the start the researcher gained funding for the project for 2-3 years with further funding options available in the future. The Lunch Kitchen has now been handed over and continues to run successfully in the local community.

For more information about 'TLG' visit <https://www.tlg.org.uk/your-church/run-a-programme/make-lunch>

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