# The Effect of Volunteering upon Volunteers' Christian Faith: Food Poverty and Holiday Hunger

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**Abstract**

Volunteers have been increasingly important in responding to rising UK poverty in the last decade in the context of austerity and the retracting welfare state. Faith-based organisations in particular have played a vital role in this response but whilst there has been attention to how religious faith can motivate people to volunteer, this paper is one of the first geographical pieces to specifically focus on how volunteers' religious faith is affected by volunteering. Inspired by the geographies of religion, it conceptualises faith as fluid and relational. This means faith cannot only be understood as a motivation at the start of volunteering, and therefore how faith is affected by volunteering needs to be understood. This paper is based on the experiences of volunteers at a participatory research project 'Lunch' responding to UK children's holiday hunger. Engaging with volunteers' journeys at Lunch drew out two dominant ways in which volunteers' religious faith was affected: encouragement and challenge from volunteering at a faith-based project without explicit faith content, and secondly, the challenge of giving an unconditional welcome to volunteers and children at Lunch. Overall, I argue that whilst religious faith can motivate people to volunteer, this is not a unidirectional relationship because volunteers' faith can also be challenged by their experiences which can not only affect their motivations and whether they will persist in volunteering, but can also fundamentally change their understanding of their religious faith.

## 1. Introduction

Volunteers have been increasingly important in responding to rising UK poverty in the last decade in the context of austerity and the retracting welfare state (Alston, 2019) with nine in ten UK households accessing services provided by voluntary sector organisations (NCVO, 2020a). Faith-based organisations in particular have played a vital role in this response. For example, the Trussell Trust which accounts for 60% of foodbanks in the UK (IFAN, 2020) and has a Christian ethos, distributed 1.9 million food parcels 2019-2020 (Trussell Trust, 2020b), and in addition to this over 50% of independent foodbanks in the UK are run by a faith group (Loopstra et al., 2019). There has been attention in the social sciences (often quantitatively) to how religious faith can motivate people to volunteer (for example Einolf, 2011, Forbes and Zampelli, 2014), but a lack of attention to why people persist and how their religious faith is affected by volunteering. To respond to this gap in understanding, this paper is one of the first geographical pieces to specifically focus on how volunteers' religious faith is affected by volunteering.

To do this, the paper follows my previous engagement with how volunteers at a faith-based holiday hunger project 'Lunch' were motivated by their Christian faith to volunteer, and how they persisted in volunteering (*author citations*). In those papers I argued that persistence in volunteering is a continual cycle of motivation, action, and reflection, and developed an understanding of religious faith as fluid and relational rather than static. As I argue in more detail in *author citation*, first, to understand religious faith as fluid is to emphasise how a person's religious faith can change over time; Holloway (2011) argues that faith is differentiated spatially and temporally. This is foregrounded in the geography of religion's attention to action as inherently important to faith (for example inspired by Caputo, 2005), with faith and action being throughout people's daily lives rather than exclusively in sacred spaces (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009, Brace et al., 2011, Olson et al., 2013). Secondly, to understand religious faith as

relational is to recognise that a person's religious faith does not exist in isolation from other aspects of their daily life, and that fundamentally religious faith is about the relationship between an individual and their belief in the transcendent (Brace et al., 2011).  The work of Sutherland (2017, 326) is apt here: he uses the term "theography" to bridge geography and theology through how people with religious faith produce theologies in how they act in daily life (for example through volunteering) in relation to their belief in the transcendent.

When religious faith is understood in these terms as fluid and relational then it is not enough to focus only on how religious faith can motivate people to volunteer.  This is because if faith is not a static motivation at the start of a volunteering experience, but rather must be continually renewed if a person is to continue volunteering, then it follows that a person's faith will be affected by their experiences.  Therefore, to complete the understanding of volunteering as a cycle of motivation, action, and reflection, in this paper I question how the volunteers' religious faith was affected by volunteering at the holiday hunger project.  I argue that whilst religious faith can motivate people to volunteer, this is not a unidirectional relationship because volunteers' faith can also be challenged by their experiences which can not only stunt or reaffirm their motivations and whether they will persist in volunteering, but can also fundamentally change their understanding of their religious faith.

For understanding the effect of volunteering upon volunteers' religious faith at a holiday hunger project in the UK the wider context of this voluntary sector response cannot be ignored: austerity.  UK austerity began over a decade ago following the 2008 financial crash and has been not only an economic and political policy to reduce government spending, but also a personal condition that affects people's everyday lives (Hall, 2019).  This frames the paper within the geographies of austerity and volunteering, and through its attention to the effect of volunteering upon people's religious faith it makes

a novel contribution for understanding the process of volunteering as a continual cycle of motivation, action, and reflection. Furthermore, such understanding contributes to the voluntary sector for volunteer retention strategies: in any volunteering context volunteer organisers need to understand how their volunteers and their motivations are affected if they are to retain their volunteers, and therefore be able to sustain activity that relies upon volunteers. Whilst understanding the effect of volunteering is needed in a variety of volunteering contexts, this paper examines the effect of volunteering on volunteers' religious faith because a significant proportion of voluntary sector projects responding to UK poverty are faith-based (Cinnamon Network, 2017). I focus on religious faith in terms of Christianity due to the empirical context, but encourage this to be taken forward in relation to other faiths.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first the question of the effect of volunteering upon religious faith is framed within the geographies of austerity, voluntarism, and secondly the geographies of religion. Thirdly, I expand upon the participatory methodology utilised at a faith-based project responding to holiday hunger, before addressing how volunteers' faith was affected at the project: I argue that volunteers' faith was affected by volunteering as encouragement and challenge from volunteering at a faith-based project without explicit faith content, and from the challenge of giving an unconditional welcome.

## 2. Poverty, austerity and the voluntary sector

Human geographers have been at the forefront of analyses that recognise how austerity affects people's everyday lives and was a political choice rather than an economic necessity (Hall, 2019, 2020). Yet whilst austerity is political, is it also personal which is important to draw out in research by engaging with people's lived experiences (Hall, 2020), in this paper's context in terms of volunteering. Austerity over the last decade has been a process that has resulted in changes to the welfare

state including cuts and freezes to individual and household state benefits, local authorities, youth services, disability provision, and legal aid (Denning, 2020). Austerity remains contested both in governmental and public discourses. For example, urban geographer Tom Slater (2016) has argued that there has been a purposeful political production of ignorance and stigma amongst UK society to view wider society as broken and the welfare state as not working, and therefore in need of reform. In addition to a narrative from the government of individuals having poor money management skills, poor decision making, and negative lifestyles, arguably this has been used by the government to justify ongoing retraction of the welfare state during austerity (Garthwaite and Bambra, 2017) and an increase in conditionality in the welfare system with increased sanctions and harsher means testing (Alston, 2019). Associated with this, people receiving state or charitable welfare may experience stigma (Garthwaite, 2016). This paper will draw out how volunteers at the holiday hunger Lunch project endeavoured to reduce stigma through an unconditional welcome to children coming to Lunch, but in doing so could be challenged in their Christian faith.

Evidence from across the social sciences and voluntary sector research shows a relationship between austerity measures and increasing UK poverty. For example often cited is the increase in the number of people using Trussell Trust foodbanks – 25,000 food parcels in 2008-2009 compared to almost 1.9 million food parcels in 2019-2020 – with the three highest causes of people needing to use foodbanks being changes the benefits, low income, and benefit delays (Trussell Trust, 2020b). The statistics on child poverty are also stark on changing UK poverty levels related to austerity: in 2017 there were almost 400,000 more children in poverty in the UK compared to 2012-13 (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017). Relatedly, in 2016-2017, 2 million children in poverty were living in families where the adults were working as

much as the government expects according to the age of their youngest child (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018) which counteracts the narrative of 'the work shy poor'.

Therefore, despite politicians' claims to the contrary (for example David Cameron (2009, no page) saying in relation to austerity "we are all in this together"), austerity has not affected UK society equally. Women have been affected by austerity more than men (Hall, 2020), young people more than pensioners (Edmiston et al., 2017), people of Black and ethnic minority groups more than others (Sandhu et al., 2013), and people on lower incomes more than those on higher incomes (Edmiston et al., 2017). This last point is poignant for this paper: those who were already living in poverty have been more affected by austerity than the wealthier in society, and austerity is inherently related to inequality. This can be further drawn out in relation to food poverty. Food poverty is a specific dimension of wider poverty which reflects not only the amount of food eaten, but also the affordability, accessibility and nutritional value of food (Department of Health, 2005). There is inequality in food: the wealthiest UK households spend on average 17% of their income on food, fuel and housing whilst the poorest spend 41% of their income on food, fuel and housing (APPG on Hunger, 2016). Such inequalities can result in social exclusion: Church Urban Fund research found that in 2016 one in ten British adults missed participating in a celebration because they could not afford to take part (Denning and Buckingham, 2017).

With the retraction of the welfare state, the voluntary sector has played an increasingly important role in responding to UK poverty. Whilst it is beyond the remit of this paper to discuss this in detail, the relationship between the voluntary sector and the state, and the question of whether the voluntary sector should undertake social action activities where the state has withdrawn is contentious and has been much debated in the literature preceding and during the current period of austerity (for example Milligan and Fyfe, 2004, Milligan, 2007, DeVerteuil et al., 2019). Whatever judgement is made

of the role of the voluntary sector in recent welfare provision, volunteering at a project responding to UK poverty is an individual action in the context of austerity by providing where the state has withdrawn – whether it is named as a response to austerity or not. Indeed, as discussed by Esther Hitchen and Ruth Raynor (2020), in becoming present in people's everyday lives, austerity as a condition has become both absent and present, and not necessarily named as austerity. Austerity as an economic and political process that continues to endure can result in uncertainty for individuals over how to engage with the inequalities that are resulting from austerity. However, small scale actions have become increasingly important in such a context (Stenning, 2018), with volunteering at a project responding to poverty being one such example. This is also indicative of the shifting of responsibility of the existence of UK poverty from the state to localised voluntary sector provision and individuals themselves who are experiencing poverty (Strong, 2019). However, evidence shows that volunteering is also related to an inequality: in recent years people living in less deprived areas and in high socio-economic groups have been more likely to volunteer than their counterparts (NCVO, 2020b).

Overall, austerity and its associated politics and inequalities as examined in the geographies of austerity and volunteering therefore foreground volunteering in response to UK poverty. I take this forward in relation to faith-based responses to poverty and austerity which I turn to next, in order to extend attention in the geographies of religion from how Christian faith can motivate volunteering to how faith is then affected by volunteering.

## 3. Christian faith-based responses to poverty and austerity

A significant proportion of the voluntary sector response to UK poverty in the context of austerity and the retracting welfare state has been through faith-based organisations and individuals motivated in part by their faith to volunteer. For example, the

Cinnamon Network's Faith Action Audit (2017) found that faith groups contribute more than £3 billion a year to the UK economy through social action.

The geographies of religion are well placed to examine the effect of volunteering on religious faith. They developed during the twenty-first century to examine the social and cultural context of religion, including in relation to inequality (Kong, 2010). By taking forward the aforementioned understanding of faith as fluid and relational rather than static, this paper contributes to the geographies of religion's attention to how Christian faith is acted out in people's everyday lives. Such an understanding is typified by Vincett et al. (2012) who found that young Scottish Christians held that their faith should impact their life every day of the week, rather than only in church on Sundays. Theologically this links to a Christian understanding of discipleship, a notion which is commonly understood as central to the Christian faith (R. Williams, 2016). Discipleship could be understood as the Christian language of acting out faith, with Wells et al. (2017) calling for church leaders to understand social action as integral for discipleship. Therefore, one such way in which people's faith can affect their everyday life is through volunteering in response to poverty.

The geographies of religion have given some attention to how faith can motivate Christians to volunteer, but this has rarely been extended to the question of how volunteering can in turn affect a person's Christian faith – hereafter referred to as faith. Where there has been attention to faith motivations for volunteering this has more often focussed on one-off volunteering experiences in the international volunteering context (for example Baillie Smith et al., 2013, Hopkins et al., 2015) rather than ongoing UK volunteering experiences. Indeed, whilst focussing on international volunteering, Baillie Smith et al. (2013) also acknowledge the lack of attention in geography to faith in terms of volunteering more broadly. Motivations are complex, and they affect how volunteering activities are undertaken. For example, the work of Cloke et al. (2007) in

the context of volunteers responding to people experiencing homelessness shows how the volunteers endeavoured to perform spaces of care which affected the overall service provided to the homeless people.  In addition, Cloke et al. (2017, 703) take the case of volunteers at a Trussell Trust foodbank, where they found that the volunteers' faith interacted with their hope that the clients' situations would change in the future meaning that they understood their volunteering and giving of food parcels as 'in the meantime'.  What has been given less attention is how volunteering activity then affects volunteers' faith.

A person's faith does not exist in isolation from other aspects of their life: this is important to recognise in addition to there needing to be specific attention to how volunteering can effect volunteers' religious faith.  One exception where research has engaged with the effect of volunteering upon volunteers' religious faith amongst a wider narrative is in relation to politics.  Alongside their aforementioned work on foodbanks in the meantime, Williams et al. (2016) examine the politics of foodbanks, finding that volunteers – many of whom were Christian – could have their political attitudes and ethical beliefs challenged as a result of volunteering.  Taking their argument further, within an overall focus on the geographies of postsecularity Cloke et al. (2019) discuss the political and ethical subjectivities of volunteers and how these can change through encounters at the foodbank, which implicitly addresses how volunteers' faith was affected.  For example, they discuss how one volunteer's understanding of poverty changed through volunteering at the foodbank, which challenged her Christian conservativism to move towards faith as action and to challenge structural injustice (Cloke et al., 2019).  In doing so their work speaks to the critique that foodbanks are a welfare response that do not address the injustice of food poverty because they do not result in structural or political change (Lambie-Mumford, 2017).  Similarly, when I engaged with how volunteers at the Lunch project were motivated by their Christian faith and persisted in volunteering, this drew out the relationship between politics and

faith and wanting to change the existence of poverty, for example in volunteers'
motivations gathering energy in reaction to the 2016 General Election (*author
citations*).  In conceptualising faith as relational, this paper therefore draws out how a
person's religious faith relates to other aspects of their life including politics.

Theologian Chris Allen (2016) characterises Christian approaches to food poverty as
focussing on either charitable giving or social justice.  However, in recent years the
Trussell Trust has increasingly taken part in advocacy as well as provision, for example
through their campaign to end the five week wait for Universal Credit (Trussell Trust,
2020a).  Therefore, linking to the aforementioned debate in section 2 that the
relationship between the voluntary sector and the state is contested in terms of welfare
provision, I argue that it is overly simplistic to refer to faith-based organisations as
taking on the role of the state or a vehicle of resistance, and rather there is the
potential for foodbanks and other faith-based organisations to do elements of both
which can be developed at an individual level through the experience of volunteering.
Theologically, this links faith to understanding poverty as a structural inequality that
must be addressed (Shannahan, 2019), meaning that direct food provision alone is not
a sufficient response because in both faith and non-faith settings poverty is considered
a matter of injustice, for example with all having a right to food (Dowler, 2014).  How
then can taking part in social action in response to poverty affirm or challenge
volunteers' own faith?

In what follows I draw out how volunteering affected volunteers' religious faith through
the specific case of a holiday hunger project in order to ground a response to this
question within people's lived experiences.

## 4.  Methodology

The empirical context for this paper is a project 'Lunch' that I established and ran in an inner city church in one of the most deprived areas of the UK to respond to children's holiday hunger; food poverty in the school holidays (Feeding Britain, 2017).  Lunch ran three times a week in the school holidays through the UK charity MakeLunch (now a part of TLG - Transforming Lives for Good).  Like MakeLunch, Lunch had a Christian ethos to support the most vulnerable with non-judgemental compassion, but at Lunch there was no religious content for the children who attended, nor a requirement for them to be Christian or worshipping at the church.  Any local primary school aged child who lived in the local area could attend Lunch, and they came for an hour of play and then sat down with the volunteers to eat a free hot lunch.  I ran Lunch from July 2015 to September 2016 before handing the project over which continued to run successfully – this was important to the ethics of establishing the project (Pain, 2004).  Lunch therefore combined ideas of participatory geographies and ethnography in its methodology by aspiring for positive social change (Brydon-Miller and Hilsen, 2016) and working with a local community to respond to a problem (Wynne-Jones et al., 2015), and built upon the work of Miriam Williams (2016) in understanding volunteering practices through participating in the action of volunteering as ethnography.  Where the research departed from the ideals of action research was that the Lunch participants were not involved in the development of the research questions or subsequent analysis.

Between July 2015 and September 2016, Lunch served 774 meals to 103 children in the school holidays.  Each day at Lunch there were around thirteen volunteers; three cooks, and approximately ten volunteers in the play team.  Over the period that I ran Lunch there were seventy-five volunteers, the majority of whom were Christian and predominantly Anglican, and who broadly understood their faith as the relationship between themselves and God (Brace et al., 2011).  Being Christian was not a

requirement to volunteer at Lunch although volunteers were asked to be sympathetic to Lunch's Christian ethos.  Over two thirds of the Lunch volunteers opted in to participate in the research element of Lunch by writing diaries (110 entries from twenty-eight volunteers) and/or being interviewed (eighteen volunteers).  Diary writers were asked to write about their motivations, experiences and reflections at Lunch, with the shortest diary covering a day, and the longest being written over fifteen months.  The longitudinal diaries were advantageous for understanding people's volunteering journeys at Lunch, with a purposefully wide remit to capture variety in experiences and to not predetermine responses: the emphasis on religious faith is emergent from volunteers' diaries rather than assumed in advance.  This empirical analysis builds upon two Lunch papers (*author citations*) which examined how the majority of Lunch volunteers were motivated by their faith to volunteer, and how their persistence in volunteering was 'a continual process of motivation action and reflection in which factors from the past, present and anticipated future feed into volunteers' motivations to persist in volunteering or not'.  This paper therefore engages with the specific element of volunteers' Christian faith in terms of how this was affected by volunteering at Lunch, which fed into volunteers' ongoing faith motivations, reflections and persistence in volunteering.  It is likely that volunteers' faith was affected by experiences other than at Lunch, however, this paper draws on instances where volunteers' narratives drew out how volunteering at Lunch affected their faith.

I also kept a diary throughout the process of establishing and running Lunch which I analysed thematically alongside volunteers' narratives, noting the convergences and divergences in our experiences.  As I explore elsewhere including in relation to my own motivation for establishing Lunch, my positionality at Lunch was multifaceted: I was the Lunch co-ordinator, a researcher, Christian, and not from the local area (*author citation)*.  I therefore recognised that I influenced how Lunch ran, resulting in varying power relations between myself and other volunteers (*author citation).*  Following

theologians Muers and Britt's (2012) call for more qualitative engagement with religious faith and volunteering, this participatory approach of volunteering alongside the Lunch volunteers was advantageous for understanding their experiences: it facilitated a greater shared understanding between myself and the volunteers from shared experience, and helped in working towards a thematic analysis that interpreted volunteers' narratives in a way that was true to their journeys and positionalities but also presented challenges of being an 'insider' with Christian faith yet an 'outsider' as not a member of the Lunch host church congregation (*author citation*). In particular this was important for understanding how – or if – volunteers' faith was affected by volunteering at Lunch because not all of the volunteers explicitly referred to this in their narratives, but effects could be drawn out from their narratives through analysing how they reflected on their volunteering experiences more widely. Whilst this paper quotes nine volunteers, through the thematic and cyclical analysis – building on the research's action research foundation (Cahill, 2009) – the paper is influenced by the entire range of volunteers' experiences. Throughout the paper pseudonyms are used to maintain volunteers' anonymity.

## 5. The effect of volunteering at Lunch upon volunteers' religious faith: Findings and discussion

Volunteers' narratives showed that volunteering at Lunch affected their faith in two dominant ways: first, the encouragement and challenge for volunteers of volunteering at a faith-based project where there was not explicit faith content for the children attending the project, and secondly, the challenge for volunteers and myself that through a faith motivation the project aimed to welcome people – volunteers and children – unconditionally. These themes are focussed on in this paper due to their prominence in the thematic analysis of volunteers' narratives and as a result of the Christian ethos of the Lunch project to not have faith content for the children, and to aim to welcome people unconditionally. The remainder of this paper will take these

themes in turn to examine how volunteering affected Lunch volunteers' faith, and therefore affected their persistence in volunteering.

### 5.1. Faith-based volunteering without explicit faith content: encouragement and challenge

Faith-based organisations can take a wide range forms, with variety in the extent to which the faith element is explicit (Sider and Unruh, 2004). Lunch ran in an inner city Anglican church with predominantly Christian volunteers from the host church and other Anglican churches. Volunteers' narratives showed that the majority of volunteers were motivated to volunteer at Lunch to act out their faith and respond to people in need, rather than to give Christian teaching or to convert people to Christianity (*author citation*). Lunch took place in the church hall which was adjoined to the main church building and shared a street entrance with the church. In this context of visually looking like a church project, it is important to reiterate that there was no religious content for the children attending Lunch. This lack of religious content for the children affected volunteers' faith in two ways: as encouragement, and as a challenge.

Volunteers who were encouraged in their faith by volunteering at Lunch predominantly understood their volunteering – and hence the acting out of their faith – as an expression of God's love. For these volunteers, their experiences at Lunch reaffirmed their faith motivation which encouraged them to persist in volunteering. These volunteers specifically perceived the lack of evangelism (evangelism being a sharing of one's faith with the aim of converting people to Christianity) as positive and it would have been problematic for them if the project had then had religious content when it had not been advertised as doing so. In this respect, Daniel, reflected on how volunteering had affected his faith:

> It feels totally with integrity that you can do that sort of activity [Lunch] for the
> sake of giving the kids a good time, giving them a good experience, giving them

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some food, without having any sort of preachy element to it at all, but that whole

activity in itself is an expression of the Gospel in action.  So I felt the impact

upon my faith was to feel reassured it was a really good expression of my faith.

Daniel perceived it as positive that there was no explicit religious content at Lunch.  To

place Daniel's reflection in context, he was a leader at another church in the city in a

wealthy area which contrasted to deprivation around the Lunch host church.  Before

volunteering, Daniel had been concerned on how appropriate it would be for him to

come from a wealthy area to volunteer in an area of deprivation, saying that he and

others from his church had not wanted to come across as "seeming patronising or

we're doing good-goody works" (Interview, September 2016).  Without naming the

context of austerity, Daniel recognised the existence of inequalities – which can be

associated with austerity (Hitchen and Raynor, 2020) – and how his church and

community had not been affected in the same way as the children in poverty around

the Lunch host church.  Daniel's reflections shows that he felt that volunteering at

Lunch with a purpose of providing play and food for the children was with "integrity" as

an acting out of this faith.  The specific effect on his faith that Daniel mentions is to feel

"reassured" in his faith and action.  This echoes Wells et al. (2017) that taking part in

social action is integral to a person's faith.  Therefore, the activity of Lunch matched

Daniel's preconceptions of faith as action, framed in terms of social action as opposed

to evangelism, and his experiences also matched his expectations from Lunch which in

turn in his wider narrative reaffirmed his faith motivation and encouraged him to persist

in volunteering at Lunch.  Broadly speaking, Daniel's reflections typify the dominant

experience of Lunch volunteers and the effect on their faith, although the remainder of

this paper draws out further subtleties and challenges for faith.


A minority of Lunch volunteers' narratives showed that they were challenged by the

lack of explicit religious content for children at Lunch.  These volunteers tended to

come from more evangelical backgrounds than the majority of other Christian volunteers who were encouraged by the lack of religious content.  In particular, volunteers who were challenged by volunteering at a faith-based project without explicit religious content were challenged over whether there needed to be Biblical teaching in the play activities for the children attending Lunch in order for it to be a faith-based activity:

> And so I used to question is this really doing what I'm meant to be doing here? Am I really saying God's name enough here today, to these children? To make them understand? And someone went "no Anna you're missing the point. You're actually doing something and that's seen as God's work enough", do you know what I mean? Just because you're not reading the Bible out to them it doesn't mean you're not doing God's work.
>
> (Anna, volunteer, interview October 2016)

Anna volunteered at Lunch as part of her position within the host church leadership, and so her reflection is caught up within the question of how she interpreted her role at the Lunch host church.  Sixteen months after she started volunteering at Lunch, Anna shared in an interview how she initially had been challenged in whether the activity of Lunch was how she should act out her faith, and indeed whether it was an action of faith if she was not reading the Bible to the children.  She shared that over time and with prompts from others – whose identity remains unknown – her understanding of her faith changed to comprehend holiday hunger provision as acting out her faith which fed into encouraging Anna to continue volunteering.  This reiterates how faith can be fluid and affected by experience, as well as affecting actions that are undertaken as discussed by Sutherland (2017).

Another volunteer, Henry, commented in his diary that "I wouldn't know it [Lunch] was a Christian event if I was an observer".  The context of Henry's observation in his diary frames this as negative; he would have preferred it to be obvious to an observer that it

"was a Christian event". Henry lamented in his diary that there had not been prayer for the children before eating together, which he wrote "is a big part of the Christian tradition (table fellowship) and not too heavy for non-Christians but it sets a tone." From his reflection, Henry appeared to place more importance on the faith aspect of Lunch than on the food provision which iterates the variety of forms of Christian social action and how one value statement will not represent all of the volunteers involved (Cloke et al., 2005). As the Lunch organiser, I did not want Christian content for the children – including prayer – because the purpose of the project was to respond to holiday hunger for all local children in the area. A significant proportion of the local children were Muslim and for some Muslims it could be highly problematic to partake in Christian prayer – in their Bradford case study Power et al. (2017) highlight the lack of uptake from people of other faiths of food provision by Christian organisations. Whilst in the time that I ran Lunch only a small number of Muslim children attended, had the Lunch project included Christian prayer then this could have further deterred Muslim families from attending and meant that Lunch not only gave a free lunch, but placed expectations on children attending in terms of their religious participation in return for food. Relating how volunteers' faith is affected by their volunteering experience to the question of whether they will persist in volunteering, Henry did not volunteer again after this occasion, partly due to his own childcare arrangements, but his diary shows this was also likely due to Lunch not meeting his expectations for a 'Christian' volunteering experience. Neither Anna nor Henry expanded on why they were uncomfortable in faith not being explicit at Lunch, but it seemed to be tied up in the idea that for it to be a faith-based project, they held it as necessary that faith should be explicit.

It would be easy to leave this discussion with a dominance in volunteers' and my own narrative that the purpose of Lunch was not about evangelism, and that this reaffirmed the majority of volunteers in their faith who persisted in volunteering, and challenged a minority. However, the longitudinal nature of volunteers' diaries, and the way in which

some volunteers embraced this method to share passing moments presents a further challenge.  Olivia reflected on one such occasion:

> I was in the church this morning… and one of the children from Lunch (and his Dad) was there.  Obviously there's a little bit of overlap between the different areas of church ministry but this was new.  And (mostly out of earshot) the vicar was saying how good this was, like some hidden goal of helping people is "bums on seats" and evangelism.  This has got me thinking – Does anyone ever do anything for truly altruistic reasons?

<div align="right">(Olivia, volunteer, diary August 2015)</div>

Olivia's positionality was complex: she was a volunteer at Lunch in her twenties along with her sister and Mum, and they all attended the host church for Sunday worship.  However, Olivia did not worship regularly and was uncertain about her faith and beliefs: in theorising faith as fluid, this paper shows how faith is not simply something that a person has or does not have but rather is affected by experience and changes over time.  In this vein she wrote on the effect of volunteering upon her faith that "my whole belief system is way too indecisive for me to even notice [an effect on faith]".  This said, her above reflection shows a questioning of the possibility of faith and altruism.  This inverts once again the role of faith-based provision in the context of austerity: the desired effect on people's faith from project leaders can be one of religious conversion, which shifts the emphasis away from social action as welfare provision for the sake of responding to need (Cloke et al., 2019).  Prior to reading Olivia's diary, in the planning Lunch, the vicar – Paul – and I had not spoken about Lunch in terms of evangelism, and in March 2016 in an interview he confirmed that his goal was "combined social action and evangelistic" despite the official line of Lunch remaining that there was no religious content for the children.  When asked directly if Lunch had affected his faith, Paul reflected that it played a part in his experience of ministry at the church but "I didn't get a flashing light" by which he meant he had not suddenly been converted to another way of thinking – a reference to the conversion of St Paul (Bible, Acts 9:1-19).

This is an important point for theorising faith: volunteering can affect faith in subtle, sometimes intangible ways that feed into one's overall thinking and world view, and this cannot necessarily be verbalised as a specific effect. For Olivia and Anna, as well as myself and other volunteers, the effect of volunteering at Lunch on our faith was to challenge us in what it meant to act out our faith – both in terms of reaffirming and changing our pre-held conceptions of faith and action which affected our ongoing motivations for volunteering.

## 5.2.    The challenge of an unconditional welcome

As the majority of volunteers understood their volunteering at Lunch in terms of practically acting out their faith and this action as an expression of God's unconditional love, this had implications for how people were welcomed at Lunch – both volunteers and children. These challenged volunteers in their faith, which affected how they reflected on their volunteering experiences, and therefore the cycle of motivation, action and reflection for persistence in volunteering. In this section I take these in turn, starting with the (im)possibility of an unconditional welcome between volunteers.

As the leader of Lunch, inspired by my faith and specifically Christian teaching on unconditional love (for example in the Bible, John 13:34), I aimed to welcome and value volunteers equally, and to appreciate that each person had different skills and capacities but each could contribute to the life of Lunch. This was most commonly played out in terms of older volunteers' limited physical capabilities, for example I encouraged one volunteer on the play team to leave early when he experienced back pain, but reassured him that the time he could give was valued. However, whilst I held this as an ideal, my own diary reflection shows this was on occasion more challenging in practice:

> An elderly lady emailed me offering to help cook at Lunch. I felt a pang of guilt
> when I received her email because despite her volunteering before I hadn't

included her in the email to ask for volunteers for half term.  This was partly

because she had said to me she might help again in the summer holidays so I

thought she would not for half term.  However, if I am honest it was also

because of her manner… I felt remorse for discounting her and replied saying it

would be great to have her on the team.

<div align="right">(My own diary, February 2016)</div>

Faith was affected at Lunch from encounters with other volunteers, not just the

traditional social action 'recipient' of the children eating lunch.  It was easier to say that

I valued different volunteers because of my Christian faith than it was to uphold this in

practice.  In terms of the volunteer mentioned in my diary, she had a blunt manner, was

somewhat out of her comfort zone in volunteering in the inner city, and complained at

the amount of washing up, so she created additional effort on my part for volunteer

management and to keep positive relations in with the other cooks she was

volunteering alongside.  When she then volunteered unexpectedly, I was challenged in

my faith aspiration of an unconditional welcome and realised that I had not truly

enacted this by excluding her from the call for volunteers.  My faith was therefore

affected in that I needed to reflect on the practical reality of my original motivation and

amend my actions accordingly.

I was not the only one at Lunch to reflect on volunteers' capacities in terms of their age

and reflect on how I might have misjudged people.  Violet, a skilled cook and middle-

aged volunteer, reflected in her diary on relationships in the kitchen with another:

Ivy is a remarkable women… [but] in the context of the kitchen she's very slow

and not terribly mobile, and at times I was aware of having to rein in my

frustration at that… the irony of my frustration is that as I was getting the pizzas

out of the oven, these lovely creations the children had made, I dropped some

of the them (rushing, probably).  Had it just been ordinary food, I'd have spun it

out and if we'd been short I'd have not eaten, but these were individually named

<div align="right">20</div>

pizzas.  Big problem.  So she stood, hiding me and whispered to just pick them

up…  In the end she saved my bacon (to say nothing of the children's lunch and

their feelings if their special pizza had been the one to go) – another person

might have insisted they had to be binned.

(Violet, volunteer diary, October 2015)

Violet knew Ivy before they volunteered together at Lunch because they worshipped at

the same church.  Violet held Ivy in high esteem, but in the context of Lunch she was

frustrated that Ivy was slower – until the moment that Violet dropped the pizzas that the

children had made and Ivy helped to rescue them.  The effect on Violet's faith from this

and other experiences at Lunch was shown subsequently in her ongoing commitment

to volunteer at Lunch, and in her diary when Violet reflected on the developing sense of

community at Lunch she called it "a real foretaste of the heavenly banquet" where each

person was valued and welcomed.  However, not everyone who wanted to volunteer

could be welcomed due to safeguarding concerns for the children: a man who arrived

one day wanting to volunteer, but was drunk, could not be allowed to volunteer or meet

the children.  Therefore, from an ideal stemming from our shared faith that volunteers

should be welcomed at Lunch, there were challenges in practice of how this could, or

could not, be actioned.  The effect on our faith was that we reflected on what it actually

meant to welcome volunteers unconditionally in practice and in terms of the

relationships between people.


The complications between an ideal of an unconditional welcome in theory and

practice were played out further in volunteers' reflections on their interactions with the

children at Lunch.  When a person started to volunteer, I made them aware that other

than the children's age (primary school years) there were no eligibility criteria for a child

to attend Lunch.  There were no eligibility criteria for two reasons.  First, the aim of the

project was to respond to holiday hunger, and nationally approximately only one in

three children in poverty also receive free school meals (Feeding Britain, 2017).

Therefore, as over 70% of the local children received free school meals, and as the area was in the top 5% of UK deprivation, it was likely that Lunch welcoming any local child would mean that it predominantly served children in some level of need. Secondly, following discussion with the church leadership, we did not feel it would be appropriate in this context to impose eligibility criteria because this could further increase stigma that can be associated with living in poverty (Garthwaite, 2016) which would be contrary to the project's Christian principles of God's unconditional love.  This lack of eligibility criteria for children attending Lunch resulted in a particular challenge for volunteers over the implications of acting out unconditional love from Christian faith in terms of how to give unconditionally at Lunch.  Returning to Violet's narrative, she referred to this as a learning process when she had been at Lunch a year and volunteered one day in the kitchen with two new volunteers who like Violet came from one of the wealthiest parts of the city:

> As ever, there's a bit of cultural snobbery to be gone through, the explanation as to why it's important the carrots and cucumber are served separately resulting in the usual "when I was growing up, we had to do…" and "if you're hungry, you'd just eat it" comments.  It's all part of the learning curve, though, and I ignore it and get on with making burger patties.

(Violet, volunteer diary August 2016)

As I have written elsewhere (*author citation*), Violet's faith was intrinsically intertwined with her left-wing political views, including an acknowledgement that as Sarah Marie Hall (2020) argues, austerity is personal as well as political, and as a middle-class White adult she had not been as negatively affected by austerity in the way that the children at Lunch of different ethnicities in area of high deprivation had been affected. Violet's diary showed that she had reflected on her experiences at Lunch to challenge what she called "right-wing mythologies", which she understood as central to her faith, but on the above occasion in the kitchen she did not challenge the new volunteers on their first day – by implication waiting for them to share her experiences and learning,

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and to be affected themselves by their encounters, although as Cloke et al. (2019) found in relation to foodbank volunteers, such a transformation of faith was not guaranteed.  The volunteer who commented "if you're hungry, you'd just eat it" when the children expressed food likes and dislikes was, like Violet, from a middle-class wealthier area of the city.  His comment links to poverty discourses around deservingness and undeservingness, implying that the child should be grateful for any food (Garthwaite, 2016).  This put more emphasis on the responsibility of the child to eat what they were given and individualised their responsibility rather than questioning why inequality existed and placing responsibility with the government and welfare state (Strong, 2019).  Derrida's (2000) notions of conditional and unconditional hospitality are useful here: conditional hospitality is when there are limits and criteria which a person must meet in order to be welcomed.  In turn, despite its prefix, for Derrida (2000) unconditional hospitality is relational to the conditional because there is still a gift being given.  Derrida therefore argues that the idea of an unconditional gift is impossible because of the possible expectation of something being given in return (Shryock, 2009).  This means that there is not an equal power relationship between the person giving and the person receiving, potentially to the extent that receiving is humiliating (Korf, 2006).  This was one reason that Lunch ran as a holiday club with play and food, rather than just providing food to be taken away by the children, but there remains a question over whether it was indeed possible to welcome a child unconditionally at Lunch.  In this respect the effect on volunteers' faith was twofold: Violet and others like her were challenged in aspiring for this unconditional welcome, reflected on this, and continued to volunteer with affected faith and preconceptions, whilst some volunteers – such as one of the new volunteers Violet referred to – did not move beyond the idea that hungry children should eat what they are given, and so his faith ideals were somewhat removed from his practical experience and he did not volunteer more than two days.

Therefore, the idea of aspiring through Christian faith to welcome children unconditionally in combination with this reflection on the questionable possibility of an unconditional welcome results in a question over what expectations were put upon the children attending Lunch.  Section 5.1 examined this in terms of religious participation. In addition, drawn out from volunteers' narratives is a question over what they expected to 'find' or a child to look like at Lunch and in its response to holiday hunger. For volunteers both from inside and outside the host church's local area, they each had expectations over what they expected a child in 'need' to look like, and the reality did not always meet their expectations – for example, a child could be overweight but experiencing food poverty due to high calorific foods being cheaper than fruit and vegetables (Daniel, 2016).  This relates to the politics of food poverty: it is not about having anything to eat, but having nutritionally valuable food that is easily accessible (Department of Health, 2005).  Likewise, the ethos of MakeLunch projects was not simply to give any food for lunch, but rather a hot and healthy meal.  The term 'holiday hunger' which I used in volunteer recruitment to explain the purpose of the project is perhaps not helpful in understanding the issue, resulting in reflections from volunteers on whether the children were literally hungry.  Jack reflected on this after volunteering:

> I discovered within myself a hint of false virtue… It was too easy beforehand to magnify the need. Doing Good to poor children. Yikes!!  It wasn't like that. It was more the pleasure of getting to know individual children and enjoy their company.

> (Jack, volunteer diary, August 2015)

Jack's wider positionality and narrative places this reflection within his Christian faith. As discussed elsewhere (*author citation*), Jack was outside of his comfort zone in volunteering at Lunch but was motivated to volunteer by his Christian faith.  The effect on his faith from his experience was to downplay the relationship between giver and receiver, and to put more emphasis on the relationships that he established during play with the children which in combination with his faith encouraged him to continue

volunteering in summer 2015 despite being outside his comfort zone.  Sharing food
and play with the children at Lunch therefore reflects how Davies and Evans (2019) call
sharing a social process which is both transactional and relational: the primary purpose
of Lunch was to respond to holiday hunger, and yet the volunteers and their faith were
affected by the experience and there was a social value to sharing food beyond the
physical value of eating – a point I expand on in *author citation*.  This is a subtle
difference to the effect on volunteers' faith explored by Cloke et al. (2019) at the
foodbank because although the overall emphasis at Lunch was on food provision, this
was less about emergency food provision than a foodbank and more about play and
personal relationships which is shown in the effect on Jack's faith.  In the context of
social exclusion associated with experiencing poverty and inequality (Denning and
Buckingham, 2017), such participation was particularly important and in turn affected
Jack in reflecting on his faith through his experience at Lunch.

In addition, when Lunch was being established, some key members of the host church
congregation expressed concerns that the offer of a free hot lunch could be taken
advantage of by families in the local area who did not 'need' a free meal.  This links to
the increasing conditionality of the welfare system within austerity reforms, and the
move from state responsibility to individual responsibility for one's circumstances
(Strong, 2019).  Camilla, a regular volunteer at Lunch, heard this being mentioned and
reflected on it in her diary several months later:

> My immediate response was that Christian faith is all about being taken for a
> ride – in the sense that when you offer things with no strings attached perhaps
> others will take advantage, but that shouldn't stop you from doing it if it's what
> your faith requires of you.

> (Camilla, volunteer, diary August 2015)

The key members of the congregation with concerns did, a year later, fully support
Lunch once they had seen its positive effect: as found by Cloke et al. (2019) at the

foodbank, the effect on individual volunteer's faith could spill over to affect the understanding of faith in a wider church setting.  However, they did not volunteer at Lunch and so methodologically I do not have access to their reflections for the possible effect on their faith.  In this vein, another volunteer who worked at the host church, James, reflected in an interview (August 2016) that when he had heard negative comments about Lunch, this was predominantly from people who had not attended Lunch which he felt meant they may not have an accurate perception.  For Sara Miles, a writer and founder of a church-based food pantry in San Francisco, USA, the question of whether free food can be taken advantage of is intrinsically connected to the question of whether there are conditions attached to the giving of food (Miles, 2014).  Camilla's reflection builds on this and is in direct contrast to austerity politics of conditionality: she recognised that not all of the children may be physically in need of free food, but she reflected that volunteering at Lunch was what her faith required of her (and by implication, of others – including those she heard discussing "being taken for a ride" which is a comment fitting with narratives of people in poverty being seen to exploit welfare and take advantage of the welfare state and charity which helped to justify austerity policies (Slater, 2016, Garthwaite and Bambra, 2017)).  In her diary, Camilla does not directly relate this instance to an effect on her faith.  However, throughout her fourteen months of diaries, Camilla consistently emphasised the importance of social action to respond to need, and pushed me as the project leader to work towards including more Muslim children at Lunch – for example through offering Halal meat and re-emphasising the lack of religious content – to more accurately reflect the demographics of the local area.  Camilla was therefore hugely aware of the challenge of an unconditional welcome but believed that her faith called her to aspire for this (im)possibility and to continue to volunteer.

## 6. Conclusions

The social sciences have engaged more with the question of why people volunteer, rather than why people continue to volunteer and how they are affected by volunteering.  In the context of faith-based organisations and people of faith playing an increasing role in welfare provision in the UK in response to rising poverty levels it is problematic that the effect of volunteering on people's faith has been neglected because neither faith nor motivations are static and both are affected by experience.

In response to this gap in understanding, this paper has analysed how people's religious faith was affected by volunteering at a Christian based project responding to holiday hunger.  Overall, volunteers at Lunch were affected in their faith in two dominant ways: first, as encouragement and challenge in their faith from volunteering at a faith-based project without explicit faith content, and secondly, volunteers' faith was affected through a challenge of aspiring to give an unconditional welcome to other volunteers and to the children attending Lunch.  Therefore, whilst faith can motivate people to volunteer, volunteers' faith can be challenged by their experiences.  This feeds into understanding volunteering as a continual cycle of motivation, action and reflection (*author citation*) which means that the effect of volunteering on volunteers' faith can stunt or reaffirm their motivations and whether they will persist in volunteering.

Four further insights and implications follow this argument, which in the closing of this paper I take in turn.  Whilst the paper has focussed upon volunteers at a specific holiday hunger project in the UK, these insights and implications extend beyond the food poverty and UK context to volunteering, poverty and austerity more widely.

First, in attention across the social sciences – and specifically from this paper in the geographies of religion and voluntarism – there is a clear need to further address the gap in understanding of how volunteers' religious faith is affected by volunteering.  This

is key for conceptualising both faith and motivation as fluid not static, and affected by experience.  This paper has begun that extension by moving beyond the foodbank context, but to more fully understand the effect of volunteering on faith this needs to be extended to other volunteering contexts, and to other faiths besides Christianity.  In doing so, I encourage more engagement with qualitative and particularly participatory approaches which meet people in their volunteering experiences and follow their volunteering journeys over time.  As shown by the Lunch volunteers' narratives and subsequent analysis, engaging with volunteers and becoming a volunteer can provide insights into volunteering journeys that would not be as easily identified quantitatively or with more restrictive qualitative methods.

Secondly, this paper has specific implications for discussing religious faith and volunteering in the context of austerity.  I have discussed this in the UK context but the questions raised here are applicable beyond the UK, for example particularly to the USA and it's more institutionalised model of food aid (Riches, 2018).  Volunteers' experiences at Lunch raised the challenge for their religious faith of endeavouring give and share unconditionally, which they and I found was not always possible or realistic.  As discussions of austerity have shown (for example by Strong, 2019), the UK welfare state is increasingly conditional for entitlement to benefits, with shifting discourses of responsibility for poverty from the state to the individual.  Whilst some volunteers at Lunch actively worked to make their response to holiday hunger unconditional, and their religious faith was challenged by doing so, others consciously or not were intertwined with concerns of austerity conditionality for example with the concern of "being taken for a ride".  This raises questions for voluntary sector responses in the UK and beyond, and in faith contexts and otherwise, of whether responses are intentionally conditional or not and how this fits within an organisation's values.  As poverty levels continue to rise but resources are finite, this question is becoming increasingly urgent and cannot only be answered practically, but must also be responded to in terms of

organisations' ethical values. This implication therefore extends beyond the geographies of voluntarism and religion to wider social and cultural geography and to voluntary sector practice in terms of austerity, conditionality, and organisational ethics.

Thirdly, and building upon the previous point, if faith motivations, volunteering, and the subsequent effect of volunteering on people's faith is taken one step further then what do volunteers want the result of their faith and actions to be? This paper has raised questions around the balance between social action and evangelism, but one area that did not appear in volunteers' narratives was the issue of challenging structural injustice. This is particularly important when poverty and austerity are understood as intrinsically linked because if structural causes of poverty are not addressed then social action projects in terms of provision will struggle to result in long-term change in people's lives. Political theologians are engaging with poverty as a form of structural violence that must be addressed (Shannahan, 2019) so what are the implications of this for the geographies of religion, voluntarism, and austerity in terms of faith-based volunteering? More empirical engagement is needed with faith groups and volunteers in order to respond to this question.

Finally, this paper has implications for voluntary sector practice in terms of volunteer management. I have already argued that voluntary sector organisations need to understand how volunteers are affected by their volunteering experiences if they are going to retain their volunteers. This is particularly important in the context of faith-based volunteering when volunteers can be motivated – in varying ways – by their religious faith to volunteer. If their religious faith is affected by their experiences volunteering, then their religious faith motivation to volunteer will also be affected. As the experience of Lunch volunteers has shown, this can be both in terms of encouragement and challenge, but faith-based organisation leaders and volunteer managers need to engage with their volunteers on their volunteering and faith journeys

if they are to remain alongside and retain their volunteers.  Faith-based organisations therefore need more resources to engage with their volunteers in relation to religious faith – both in terms of motivation, and how their faith is affected by volunteering – as well as resources for the social need which a project is responding to.  If faith-based organisations, and indeed the voluntary sector as a whole, are to continue to play an increasingly important role in welfare provision, then more attention and resource will need to be given to engaging with volunteers.

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