



Walking Humbly

Encouraging participation
Forming churches where everyone can belong

trussell.org.uk/churches

Endorsements for Walking Humbly

“

I warmly commend this resource to church leaders, serving in all contexts. Rooted in the wisdom of Christians who know the realities of hunger and hardship first hand, it offers both practical tools and spiritual insight for building truly inclusive congregations. When every person is welcomed and valued as a member of Christ's body, our shared witness becomes deeper, stronger, and more faithful to the gospel. This resource helps us all towards that vision.

”

Martyn Snow

Bishop of Leicester and the Lead Bishop for Poverty

“

This is an outstanding resource for any church seeking to strengthen its support for people experiencing the heavy burden of poverty—both within the congregation and in the wider community. It offers practical guidance, insightful ideas, and meaningful exercises, all firmly grounded in rich and relevant theology.

”

Roger Sutton

CEO, Gather Movement and former Baptist pastor

“

If we are to be a truly inclusive and welcoming Church, then we need to pay attention to the really important subject of lived or living experience of poverty, not just among people in our community who we seek to serve, but also among the community of people we worship alongside. This very practical and accessible booklet is a really useful tool in starting the conversation among leadership teams and the wider church, offering easy ways in which you can notice and reflect on current practice and make real change now. The resource seeks for us to reflect on the culture we need to grow and to nurture as we co-create our communities. The practical ideas can be transferable to multiple contexts of Church activity and Community across the ages.

”

Penny Fuller and Lynne Norman
Faith Formation Officers, The Methodist Church

Walking Humbly

Participation and belonging

**He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.**

Micah 6:8 (NIV)

One of the best things about my work at Trussell is getting to know amazing people who have lived experience of hunger and hardship and are working with us to change the systems that drive people through the doors of food banks. I hear from many of them that being part of a church community brings a sense of purpose and belonging, builds connection and community and sustains faith and hope. I hear from churches that they want to connect with their neighbours and make sure that everyone feels welcome at worship and in their communities. We hope this booklet helps you open your church doors a little wider and gives you the opportunity to think about any unintended barriers to belonging fully for people who face hunger and hardship who are part of your church.

For me, walking humbly means seeing God's image in everyone I meet and knowing that, whoever we are, we are first and foremost sons and daughters of the God who created us, who loves us and who longs for all God's people to know fullness of life.

If you want to reflect on this through scripture, please order our Walking Humbly Bible studies at:

trussell.org.uk/church-items

Jess Foster
Head of Church Engagement



Hannah Fremont-Brown has been working with churches to explore what it means to be justice-seeking for several years, including with the ecumenical Joint Public Issues Team. She recently led Let's End Poverty, a cross-sector coalition to put poverty high up on the agenda at the last general election. She has also worked with The Methodist Church to explore what increasing participation by people with lived experience of poverty looks like at all levels of church life. Hannah wrote this booklet for Trussell alongside our group of lived experience partners - Christians who have used our food banks and support us to craft joint solutions to the injustice of hunger.



Where we're headed in Walking Humbly

An introduction to Walking Humbly **page 7**

What is participation and social justice,
and why do they matter in church? **page 10**

How can we create welcome and
inclusive spaces in our churches? **page 16**

What are the barriers to being included
in a church community? **page 22**

The Ladder of Participation **page 27**

Starting small - your next steps **page 29**

Some final encouragement **page 34**

An introduction to Walking Humbly

When we host food banks or other social action projects in our churches, we are seeking to put God's love into action. In these spaces, we are drawn closer into community with people who are facing the sharp end of poverty, and learn more about what it means to love other people as God loves us.

However, there can often be a gap between what welcome and belonging looks like in a food bank, and in other aspects of the life of the church. Sometimes, we struggle to consider what it means to include people facing hunger and hardship in every aspect of our church communities, or what barriers to participation might look like if you have this lived experience. This can support a false narrative that the impacts of poverty are only felt by people attending the food bank, rather than by people who are active participants in the life of the church in other ways too.

This divide – the idea that poverty is ‘out there’, rather than within our church community – can make church an exclusive and unwelcoming space to people struggling with hardship.

If we want to be churches who are helping to end hunger in the UK, this cannot stop when the foodbank closes its doors for the day. It should run right through everything we do: as we prepare for worship, host coffee mornings, meet in small groups, preach, pray and share together.

This means considering what belonging looks like from the perspective of people in our community struggling against poverty, and making changes to the way we approach life together.

This resource is designed to help you consider what could develop in your church to create even more welcoming, inclusive spaces for people who bring their experiences of poverty into the church community.

It is aimed at people in positions of leadership in church life, paid or voluntary. You might want to look at this resource as a leadership team, perhaps carrying out some of the activities as a group.

We include some models and advice from a range of sources, as well as reflections from people who have direct experience of needing to use a food bank about how they have felt welcome (or not) in the churches they are part of. We recognise that everyone's experience is different, and some church leaders will bring their own lived experiences of hardship.

Mostly, this resource is aimed at leaders who do not have direct lived experience of hardship. But it can also be a toolkit to help advocate for changes in your context, if some of the experiences shared here resonate with your own. However, this resource is not about creating an ‘us and them’ divide between people who do or don’t have lived experiences of hardship – completely the opposite. It is an encouragement for all of us to listen more carefully to each other, to understand what belonging truly means.

Each section also has some tips or questions for reflection to help you put ideas into practice, as soon as possible. If you’d like to explore what participation means for our communities in a deeper way, then take a look at our other resources, including our Walking Humbly Bible Studies. You can order these at trussell.org.uk/church-items

Our lived experience partners

Our group of lived experience partners is made up of people who have experience of hardship and needing to use a food bank. They help us to understand how the right kind of support can make a difference, and build just systems that enable everyone to thrive.

It's important to remember that not everyone who has lived experience of poverty and hardship will want to talk about their experiences. Be respectful of people's choices, and never force anyone to share their experiences with others.

What is participation?

Participation means involving people who use a service to shape or lead it. It is about working together, listening, and finding better ways to support one another. This is especially important when we are considering or seeking to address issues that involve a particular lived experience, or affect a specific group of people, such as financial hardship or hunger.

Participation involves exploring possibilities together, and listening to one another's perspectives to find ways of being together that are sustainable, equitable and just. This approach helps everyone feel valued and included.

Working towards belonging and participation for everyone requires humility: to listen to the experiences of everyone in the group, recognise where we might be creating or upholding barriers to participation, and learn what we could do differently to create a shared space. This process involves mutual respect, continuing to walk humbly together, and being willing to try things we would never have thought of alone.

We asked our lived experience partners: what does walking humbly mean to you? Their answers included:

Walking in line with the Word. Being scripture led. Drawing close to God. Accepting fellowship with God. Accepting we don't have the answers. Being open. Humility to accept God. Humility to know I can't do it on my own.

What is social justice?

“

If love is promoted as a substitute for justice, it becomes the enemy of justice.

”

Penny Jamieson

Former Bishop of Dunedin, NZ

God calls us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. This means that when we see our neighbours, we are reminded that they are people similar to us, who have led complex lives, and share our limitations and frustrations. We are called by God to show the same limitless love that God shows to us to other people. Regardless of circumstances, background or abilities, we recognise that God loves all of us and names us part of God's family, giving everyone value and dignity.

However, sometimes as individuals or as a society, we do not treat people as if they have equal value. Knowingly or not, we redefine what is good or acceptable as what we are comfortable or familiar with, or even to our own advantage. This often comes at the expense of people who have less opportunity to speak up for themselves, or who are excluded from power by hardship and bias.

God's calling to us to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly is an invitation to restore the relationships in our lives and wider society so that everyone is treated as loved and known by God, and worthy of dignity and respect.

Sometimes, in order to show this love, we need to acknowledge that people have been affected by this bias, or have had different chances in life, which can make things easier or harder, or just more complicated.

As Bishop Penny says, recognising this means that our love for other people must be interwoven with justice. Otherwise we end up 'helping' people, but accepting the systems which create continued hardship. God's calling to love and justice invites us to come together as a community to uphold and celebrate the image of God in everyone, particularly anyone who has been denied dignity and value by circumstances and experiences of injustice.

We can love and act justly by seeking equality and equity in all of our relationships, as well as seeking to change the systems and structures that cause hardship and injustice.

This isn't always easy, and often requires humility as we recognise how we may have been complicit in injustice ourselves. This is the beginning of working together for equity, justice and compassion.

Why does participation matter in our churches?

It matters for building community

A reflection on community leaders from Acts:

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Acts 6: 3-4 (NIV) read verses 1-7 for the full story.

Here, the disciples are trying to support a growing community. They are faced with the challenge that the resources of the community aren't being distributed fairly, and some people are being left out. Their solution? To choose seven new leaders from within the community, to help make things fair and ensure everyone has enough to eat. They build up leaders from the community, for the community. And guess what? The community continues to thrive.

In this pivotal moment in the life of the early Church, we see the disciples choosing a new, fairer way forward. They know that to continue to flourish together, everyone's voice must be heard.

Building up leaders from communities facing the challenges of injustice doesn't just mean making sure people with lived experience of hardship and injustice are 'in charge' (but this is good too!). It means making sure everyone's voice is heard in shaping what life as a community looks like, so that it is a welcoming space for all. In the passage from Acts, the disciples listen to members of the community about what they are struggling with. They then change the structures to ensure this inequality does not continue. Ensuring the full participation of people who have experience of poverty and hardship at every level of church life enables us to notice where unbalanced power might mean we are doing things in unhelpful ways, that are holding up unjust power and unfair systems. In doing so, we can create just, fair and loving communities that reflect God's kingdom.

“

If all who come to the table acknowledge that they hold only their own partial truth, then discerning the next steps for the community requires careful listening and learning to complete the picture.

”

Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle
Texas Methodist Foundation

It matters for knowing God

“

... to know God is to do justice.

”

Elsa Tamez

Theologian

In scripture, we see Jesus attending to people who are forced to the edges of society. Jesus seeks their flourishing and challenges the injustice that stops people from living life to the full. Jesus invites us to do the same, but sometimes we fail to see people who have been made ‘invisible’ by their powerlessness, or we feel invisible ourselves.

“

What are we not seeing?

”

Al Barrett and Ruth Harley

Being Interrupted

What are we not seeing, of God, one another, of our community, or of ourselves, when we do not pay attention to people who have been made invisible by injustice?

The Bible points towards a God who is present and can be encountered alongside people who are excluded. By building church communities that include everyone, our eyes are opened to God in a new way. God often has a way of surprising us. We may be surprised when someone we presumed had little to offer points us towards God, or when our own voices are made visible for the first time.

How can we create welcome and inclusive spaces in our churches?

Watch our short film:



trussell.org.uk/welcoming-churches

We asked our lived experience partners what made a difference for them when they started to go along to church. Here's what some of them had to say:

“

People came and spoke to me, and they were friendly and kind. That was a year and a half ago. If people didn't show me the kindness and love I wouldn't have stayed there.

”

John

“

I became part of the tech team at church. I was asked if I wanted to be the food bank champion. This felt like they were saying "we recognise your skill set and your experiences are valuable to us". It wasn't taking advantage of this, but respecting it.

”

Steve

“

I walked into church on harvest breakfast. I didn't realise this and it was significant as I hadn't eaten for a few days. I also had a great welcome and people spoke to me. The sermon was the parable of the mustard seed, and this really spoke to me. All I needed was a tiny bit of faith. The church opened opportunities for me and I was encouraged to take them and now eight years later I am still there... I want to greet new people in the same way I was greeted.

”

Jean

Small steps

It's not always the big things that make a difference. Sometimes, small gestures that help us to reach out to people can be all it takes to make sure someone feels seen. These gestures can make church more welcoming for people from all circumstances. Here are some small steps that our lived experience partners said make a difference for them.

Speak to me – Talking kindly to someone new helps them to feel part of the church. This simple action can be the first step towards community.

Food! – Creating opportunities to share a meal together turns food from a hand-out to a shared space where community can be built. This could even simply be some food on offer with tea and coffee after the service, or having a free community meal after worship.

Listen – Make time in services to hear from people with different life experiences, where they are willing to share them. Make sure situations of injustice like homelessness and poverty aren't hidden away, or only talked about as an issue outside of the church community.

It's OK to say you are not OK – It's easy to put on a brave face. But sometimes, we all need to hear that it is OK to bring our challenges to church, and that God and our community will be with us in the struggle. Leaders modelling this from the front, during services, can be an important first step. When leaders speak about their own struggles, e.g. mental health, this can indicate to others that church is a safe place to share. Of course, this needs to be done safely, when leaders have already had space to process their challenges with support, and offer trigger warnings where needed.

Help me out – Sometimes, people with few resources can be left in difficult situations with nowhere else to turn. This might include being evicted, with nowhere to store your things, or having immigration challenges. Being responsive to practical requests for help, and making it clear that people can bring these challenges to the church community who are willing to support them, can mean that church offers a safe, supportive environment where people feel included.

Who's up at the front – When considering who leads parts of the service, do the people 'at the front' reflect everyone in the church? Encouraging diverse leadership is an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the difference within our communities.

Getting help

If someone in your church is facing hunger and needs support, you can find information at:

trussell.org.uk/emergency-food

or call 01722 580 180

Standing in solidarity – Many churches have statements of welcome and inclusion outside the door or on the website. What about statements showing that we want to see an end to poverty too?

Using relatable examples – Illustrations and examples in sermons can be a good way to make a tricky passage from scripture more relatable – it is what Jesus often did! But how often do we take time to consider if they are relevant for everyone, or if someone might feel excluded if an example is not relatable to their lived experience?

Timing – Church can be a very formal space, and it can feel embarrassing if you arrive late or have to leave early. However, for some people who are not used to large group settings, or need to prioritise family or work around a church service, being able to be flexible is an important part of making them feel welcome. Indicating that it's okay to come and go as you need can give people permission to attend in the way that works for them.

Are you OK?

“

I am a single dad so there's a lot of things I can't do at church, as I have to look after my daughter. People from the church call me to ask how I am. They don't call to say, 'where are you?' but 'are you OK?'. When I do go to church I feel belonging, as they do seem to care when I am there. This would be good to replicate.

”

Tunde

Lived experience partner

Sometimes, church can be so busy that we forget to stop and ask: are you OK? Checking in with someone shows care, and helps to build belonging, as we create an opportunity to be honest with one another about how things are. Often, this requires us to get past an initial, surface level answer and take time to ask someone how they are really doing.



What are the barriers to being included in a church community?

Our lived experience partners shared some of the things that became barriers to their participation in church life.

Language

Some of the language used in the Bible and Christian tradition about people struggling with poverty can be challenging.

When Jesus quotes Isaiah to say: “I have come to bring good news to the poor”, he is beginning a ministry that is relational, where he eats with and lives alongside people facing adversity. However, phrases such as “the last, the least and the lost”, “the poor” or “the broken” are often used in our prayers, worship songs and liturgy as a shorthand or snappy phrase. They do not come with this relational emphasis, but instead label people struggling against hardship as one group without recognising their own individual identities and circumstances.

When using language this way, it can set up a binary, suggesting that “the poor” are elsewhere, outside of the church, rather than recognising that people who are part of our community might be struggling financially. It suggests that people who are ‘saved’ are not poor or broken. Or the opposite – that people who are poor are more broken in some way, and are not saved by God. This language can be dehumanising and stigmatising. Having a relationship with God is not dependent on the challenges we are facing – God is with us, and wants to know us, even in the most difficult times.

“

The phrase the last, the least and the lost really irritates me if I am being honest because people are facing poverty and food poverty, that's a fact, but to describe people as the last, the least and the lost is I feel a bit demeaning. We are all equal and we are all human.

”

Laura

Lived experience partner

Instead, we can use more nuanced and compassionate terms, like “people experiencing poverty” or “people struggling financially”. We can talk about people as human beings, with complex lives and identities. Using language around trauma and adversity recognises why people are struggling, rather than labelling them as broken.

Stigma

Just because we are part of a Christian community doesn't mean we are immune to some of the more harmful and stigmatising narratives about people experiencing poverty and hardship that are in the media, online or expressed in our communities. This can affect us subconsciously, and we may not realise that we are carrying presumptions about what life might be like for people struggling with hardship, or the decisions they have to make. Equally, we may not realise how our own privileges might be framing our view of people in stigmatising ways.

It's important that we ask ourselves whether our behaviour towards someone is based on assumptions, or on the things we really know about their life. Does our language reflect stigmas about certain groups of people, or is it compassionate and generous?

The first step to breaking down stigma is getting to know someone for who they really are. Taking time to understand the skills and gifts, experiences and interests someone brings helps us to see people for all of who they are, rather than making presumptions about their lived experience.

Joining in

Sometimes, the way that we ‘normally’ do things in church can be a barrier for people to feel welcome or able to join in. Here are some things our lived experience partners said they found challenging:

Money – The collection plate, or a box for donations towards tea and coffee, can feel like a barrier. When a collection plate is passed around, it can feel as though you’re being watched, and judged if you can’t contribute. Talking about the different ways people can contribute to community from the front of the service is a good first step to broadening out messages around giving. You could even consider whether you could have a discreet box for donations at the back of the church, rather than a plate passed around during the service.

Reflective question

Val, one of our lived experience partners, reflects:

Have you ever forgotten to take any money out to the shops, and not realised until you were at the till to pay? How did it make you feel? For people living without sufficient money, some of the feelings from that moment are normalised everyday experiences, and it clouds their lives.

Not having enough to pay for a hot drink or put something in the collection can feel disproportionately shameful and retraumatising.

Church or project? – Several of our lived experience partners went along to a Sunday service at their church because they had first been to a mid-week activity or project in the building, like a food bank or drop-in café. However, on some occasions the language in church services created a gap between these spaces. For example, people talked about ‘the church’ to indicate those who came on a Sunday, and ‘the project’ as people who used the building during the week. This made people feel as though they didn’t belong. What if we considered ourselves one big church community instead, and changed our language to show this?

Pressure to volunteer – Some of our partners loved being asked to volunteer or serve on a team at their church. It felt like a great way to get involved, and use their skills. For some, it felt like another pressure when they were already struggling. It’s important to take time to get to know someone, and to understand the pressures in their life at the moment before asking them to volunteer. Finding out about their interests and skills, and exploring options to contribute together, helps to take the pressure off.



The Ladder of Participation

The Ladder of Participation was first used by Sherry Arnstein in 1969. It shows how different kinds of participation redistribute power. At the bottom of the ladder, people participate but the power structures already in place don't change. At the top of the ladder, participation looks like new kinds of collaboration that build agency and dignity for all involved.

	Participation – A range of people are in positions of leadership, and are able to set the conditions for decision making.
	Delegated power – A range of people have accountability and influence in making some decisions.
	Partnership – There is shared decision making between different people, where everyone has some influence.
	Managed participation – People are handpicked to join the decision-making group but have limited influence.
	Consultation – People's opinions are invited, but there is no guarantee that they will influence the final decision.
	Information – There is a one-way flow of information from a small group of leaders about decisions that have already been made.
	Education – People are only involved so that they can be influenced to support what has already been decided.
	Manipulation – Involving people is only aimed at building support for someone else's ideas.

Activity

Take some time to look at the ladder. Use the space below to write examples of where this type of participation is already happening in your church. If your examples are all focussed in a particular place on the ladder, imagine...what could it look like if you moved up to the next step?

Reflect on these questions

- Where are you now on the Ladder of Participation?
- Where do you see participation going in your church?
- What are the barriers to moving up the Ladder in your context?

Starting small – your next steps

“

We are a broken people in a broken world; we all fall and stumble. But we all do it together... Just as God walks with us, we are called to walk with others.

”

Lived experience partner

Participation is more than just a survey, or asking people's opinion every now and then. But that doesn't mean that participation has to involve turning everything around straight away.

Everything we do can involve an element of participation. Small steps can begin to build trust, and create relationships that allow deeper connection and transformation.

Crucially, participation is something we have to do. Listening and reflecting is an important part, but change won't come just from thinking about what participation looks like. We can begin best by taking a small action, and making the commitment to ongoing reflection and review.

Next steps exercise

- Pick three different areas of your church life. This could be part of a worship service, like the prayers or preaching. It could be a community activity that you run.
- Next, consider if there is an idea, resource or story from the life of Jesus that is inspiring you to work on this area.
- Finally, choose one small step that could make this area more inclusive for people experiencing hardship. Write it in the box below. Have a look at some examples on the next page.

Area of church life	Inspiration for change	Your next step

Not sure where to start?

Some early stepping stones could be...

- Inviting someone with lived experience of hardship to lead the prayers
- Asking a few people to share their favourite Bible passage and why
- Invite someone to 'audit' the illustrations used in services, and feedback on how inclusive they are
- Bringing a conversation together of volunteers in a community project to explore how it could be more welcoming to all people
- Take a Bible verse or passage and write a new translation together – this is what Micah 6:8 looked like when Trussell's Christian panel of lived experience partners thought about what it meant to them:

God has shown us all how to live: do what is fair and just with all people, show God's resilient and persistent love and live in humble fellowship with God and all God's creation.



Invitation vs co-creation

“

It is good for you to invite me to the table, but it is even better for you to invite me to the kitchen.

”

Ghanaian proverb

Good participation is about everyone having an equal part in shaping community life together. This is often called co-creation, where we work together to build a space that works for everyone. Sometimes, when you're stepping into a new place bringing experiences of hardship, there are more barriers to overcome to feel welcome.

Like the proverb above says, when the table is already set, the meal prepared and everyone invited, people have very little opportunity to shape or influence the gathering in a way that creates a sense of belonging. Co-creating spaces help us to listen to what these barriers are for different people, and to work together to move them. You never know what you might cook up together!

Activity

In many ways, we won't be able to know what co-created spaces look like until we have shaped them together!

But there are some characteristics which encourage a co-created approach. Consider some of the potential characteristics of invited vs co-created spaces in the table below. Can you identify where some of these features are already present in your church, and where you could build in more co-creation?

Invited space	Co-created space
Formal and structured	Informal and facilitated
Issues set in advance	Issues emerge through the process
Agenda driven	Discussion based
Papers, reports, minutes	Conversations, feedback, flipcharts
Boardroom style	Circles
Titles and formal/professional roles	First names and human to human
Presentational	Deep listening

Imagine Walking Humbly together exercise

Imagine what your church community would look like if everyone could participate fully. Take some time now to reflect and imagine, writing down your vision for what a fully welcoming, inclusive church community would mean for you.

When I walk into a service, I can see:	
... I can hear:	
... I can feel:	
When we start a new project or idea, we make sure that we:	
I am excited about this change because:	

Some final encouragement

“

The first thing that makes church go-able to, is God!

”

Our lived experience partners

We do not do any of this without God's help, inspiration and strength. Take some time now to pray, and ask God for support in this journey, and guidance for the way ahead.

“

May our church community be a sanctuary of love, acceptance and a deep sense of true belonging. Where every voice is heard and every heart is cherished, and every person feels seen.

”

Toni

Lived experience partner

A prayer in our hands

Use your hands to help you pray for change. Begin by holding out one of your hands in front of you.

Touch or focus on the palm of your hand: Pray that God would help you to centre a desire for welcome and participation in the life of your church community.

Touch or focus on each of your fingers in turn: Pray for five different areas of church life where you hope for better participation and inclusion.

Clench your hand together as though you are holding something tightly: Ask God to help you hold onto the most important values as you approach this journey together.

Order more church resources

You can order a range of materials including our Walking Humbly Bible Studies at:

trussell.org.uk/church-items

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Unit 9, Ashfield Trading Estate,
Ashfield Road, Salisbury SP2 7HL

churches@trussell.org.uk
trussell.org.uk/churches

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