

## **Kathy Germain - report interview for primary schools**

*Food banks are small charities that give out emergency food to people in need. All of the food comes from donations given by local people and businesses. Kathy Germain is an unpaid volunteer in a team running a food bank in Newcastle-upon-Tyne that was started by her Anglican church in 2013. She is a keen Christian who also serves her community as a Reader (lay preacher). This interview took place in January 2017.*



### **Kathy, how did your work in the food bank begin?**

If I were to go back to 2006 when I first became a Christian, I asked myself, 'Hold on, what should I be doing, as a Christian?' You think, 'Where's God going to lead me in this new life?' Because it is a new life, it's a new beginning, a new start.

Five years ago, I had mentioned to our vicar at the time that something on the horizon worried me. 'The changes in benefits are not going to be right. I'm worried about how people are going to survive, food-wise.' And he said, 'Funny enough, I've been thinking exactly the same thing.' We'd been getting people turning up in church, asking for food. We'd go to the garage next door to get them a sandwich. But then the following year – bang! People were getting their benefits cut because of new government rules, so they now needed food to live.

We started our food bank in a tiny office at the church hall that was about 2 by 2 metres square. We stocked the food there, but after six months, we realised that this was not going to work! We had to find new larger premises, because we were inundated with the number of people who came. Some had jobs and were working and getting benefits, but still not earning enough to feed their families.

### **So when you run a food bank, how does being a Christian make a difference to how you treat people and see what's going on?**

I'm not blind to the ways of the world, if you know what I mean? I'm not somebody who just falls for anybody's blarney. But as a Christian, God shows me the ones who are really desperately in need. Also, I'm able to feel if somebody is really suffering. I think it is God's gift to me, that makes me able to know when somebody's got mental health problems. We still get people in food banks who no longer come for food, but they come because they have a need to talk to somebody who understands their need. Sometimes they need other things, like prams and cots, or bedding and coats, or warm hats and scarves, which are not covered by food banks.

### **So what do you do about that?**

I put my feelers out. I talk to everybody I know. 'Have you got this, have you got that? Can you try and get me this, can you try and get me that? Ask your friends, have they got a spare one of these?' And that's what I do. I've the gift of the gab as you can tell! God's given me that gift to motivate people, I think I've always had it, but God just went, 'You've got that ability.' And I can be strong. I feel for them, yes, but I won't be walked over. They know that too.

## **How did you become a Christian?**

I'd believed in God my entire life. I was two and a half when I first thought about it, after my sister took me to church. I heard the words in the service saying, 'Do not fear, for the light of Christ comes into this world...' and I remember a special candle being lit. Perhaps it was Christmas.

But I had a horrendous upbringing. I suffered all sorts of abuse. Once, at the age of three, I was thrown in the coalhouse and the door was locked and it was pitch-black. I was terrified. But then I remembered the church, and the words: 'Look for the light.' Then I saw a chink of light under the door, and suddenly I wasn't scared. The fear went away. I suddenly realised I wasn't on my own. Christ was there in the room, with me, and I was no longer afraid. There were two of us in there.

So I've always believed in him, as somebody who was there. And then in 2002, Dave, my husband, passed away. By 2003 I didn't know if I was coming or going. I hated God and I told him that. I was cursing him on the beach, but I knew it wasn't real. Because once you have him in your life, he can't, he won't let go. You might think he's not there, but he still is. And a year later, I said... 'I give up! I know you're still there, and I still feel it. I'll come back and see where things go.'

So I walked around, and went into the church near where I lived, and inside I met a lady. She said 'Come and have a seat. What do you need?' That was such a strange way of putting it. I said I needed to be alone, but felt that was God asking me that question. She said 'Go and sit down there at the back.' So I just sat there, crying and crying, asking God, 'Why have you left me alone?' And suddenly I felt so peaceful, but it was more than that. It was the kind of peace that passes all understanding.

I felt so wonderful afterwards. I found God was actually in me, he was part of me. I mean, there's no hiding from the fact now, is there? On that day, I was looking for more. But I believe somebody was meant to be there for me that day, when I went into that church. Now, I would rather lose every penny I've got and be homeless on the streets, than to be without God.

## **So – some years later, what made you want to become a Reader?**

I knew it was going to be hard, because I'm dyslexic. But I felt God kept pushing me somewhere, and I didn't know where. I felt I needed to know more. So I put in the application for training as a Reader. I went, and it was wonderful! I learned so much about my faith, about people and about me! And I feel now I'm in the right place, as a Christian, and that people know I'm a Christian. Some ask, 'Can you do a prayer for me?'

Sometimes, people want to talk. There was a lad that no one would sit and talk to, because he was 'all over the place'. I sat with him and said 'Let's talk', and he started rabbiting on for half an hour. Then I said, 'Let's get to the crunch of it. What's causing you to feel the way you're feeling?' He had severe mental problems, but we sat and talked for an hour. And after that, he said, 'Thank you very much. You made me feel human.'

And that's the crux of it. That's putting the humanity back. It's making people feel 'You're human'. That's what God put into me, and that's what he gives me to do. He said, 'These are my people. I love them. You love them too.' And that's the top and bottom of it. Then they come back and say to you, 'I took that next step. Thank you very much.' It's a wonderful feeling.

It's not about me. You don't pick your life, but you try to make the most of it. God gave me a gift, and I use that gift.