



Reflections on a year of challenge and change

March 2021

Graham and Lou Clarke

“I don’t know what I would do without your help”

Bridge the Gap guest

It’s something that we hear every week...from those on furlough...from individuals, parents and families of all ages...from those who are unemployed...from those coping with health, care and financial issues...from those who are homeless or in temporary accommodation...

***Bridge the Gap* is part of Southcourt Baptist Church’s response to a community in crisis.**

Everyone knows that the last 12 months or so have been challenging. The COVID pandemic has taken its toll in so many ways and impacted so many people’s lives. It’s not easy for anyone. But few of us perhaps appreciate the true extent of those challenges for people who are really struggling to make ends meet.

Around this time last year, with the introduction of this new restriction called ‘lockdown’, *Bridge the Gap* stopped providing our alternate Saturday event offering an open door to our guests with food bank, a hot meal, a welcoming venue to meet and chat, and a place to find everything from clothes to toys and books.

However, once it became clear that *Bridge the Gap* could continue as an essential community service, but using a different model, the Southcourt food bank was introduced as a twice-a-week event to distribute food boxes provided by the national foodbank charity, the Trussell Trust. At the same time we have been able to offer food, toiletries and baby products which have been donated by individuals.

“Thank you ALL so much for all the care, support and kindness you have shown me and my children. I will NEVER forget!!”

Bridge the Gap guest

Food distribution is by appointment, and, from the outset, great care has been taken to create a safe and socially distanced operation, but one which can still offer words of friendship and encouragement. Care and kindness need not be hidden, despite the essential face mask!

As a result, and despite all the pressures, restrictions and challenges of the pandemic, *Bridge the Gap* has been able to respond to the very real and immediate needs of many people in and around Aylesbury. In a typical week we help between 50 and 70 individuals and families, reflecting a wide range of very different circumstances and challenges.

Working closely with the Trussell Trust, and helped by much-valued support of grant funders and food donors, the dedicated team of *Bridge the Gap* volunteers has worked to provide a lifeline to those in need. Volunteers come from both inside and outside the church, but the commitment is shared and the team spirit is powerful!

Where we can, we have continued to signpost wider sources of support that may be needed by our guests, such as money management and housing contacts.

We know how much that all this is appreciated. People are genuinely very grateful for the practical help we provide in terms of not only gifts of food but also a listening ear and prayer support. No report can capture the personal stories, or the difference that this support can make.

Our aim is quite simply and literally to ‘bridge the gap’ - to make a difference between hunger and health, hardship and hope. Quality food and balanced nutritional support are vital for everyone’s strength and survival. But they also make a massive difference to the personal and mental wellbeing of individuals and families particularly in this time of pandemic pressures and lockdown realities.

“Thank you very much for your help during these hard times”

Bridge the Gap guest

As the year progressed generous funding has been gratefully received. Organisational donors include:

- Aylesbury Crown Court
- Neighbourly
- the Rothschild Foundation
- Aylesbury Garden Town project
- Heart of Bucks community foundation

Food donations have come from Asda, Waitrose and Tesco stores, and from local schools and neighbourhood collections.

The funding support has enabled us to purchase a former shipping container to store and distribute food. This means that, in addition to the Trussell Trust boxes, we are able to offer top-up emergency food, household and hygiene supplies for those in particular need. This includes many who are homeless and living in temporary accommodation or who are experiencing a different form of life-crisis such as release from prison.

The funding has also allowed us to buy in weekly supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables, and frozen food which are not generally available in foodbank boxes.

Wherever possible we have also wanted to reach out to our guests in a way that goes beyond day-to-day essentials and makes them feel valued and special.

At Christmas we were able to partner with the Chiltern Toybank to distribute some good quality games, books and toys for children of all ages. For Mother's Day this year we are sending by post and giving out a specially designed card of appreciation. For Easter we are creating 'love in a bag' packs of quality toiletries and cosmetics for adults as well as giving Easter eggs to children – again, all thanks to an amazing range of gifts and donations.

“I can't thank you enough for everything you have done for myself and my husband at this tough time.”

Bridge the Gap guest

Bridge the Gap is part of a wider network of support organisations which includes Aylesbury Housing Action Group, One Recovery, Oasis, Vineyard, Aylesbury Food Group and the Healthy Living Centre. Each one is playing its part and making its own special contribution to the community. Each one, too, has its challenges.

For *Bridge the Gap*, the challenges include:

- Continuing to be able to recruit and retain a core group of volunteers
- Keeping pace with demand both during and beyond lockdown
- Maintaining external funding support
- Responding to current and future community and wellbeing needs – we know how far we have come in a year...what will the next year bring? What will 'normal' look like for *Bridge the Gap* going forward?

As we look to the future, and to the uncertainty that COVID-19 still represents for people of all ages and circumstances, our ambition is to continue to support those who are in the greatest need. All this at what may be one of the most challenging times in their lives.

“Thank you for all you do to help support us throughout the year”

Bridge the Gap guest

At *Bridge the Gap* we are so grateful to all who stand with us...as volunteers, donors, funders and prayer partners. In doing so, we stand together with those who we care for in our community.

Above all, we thank God for *His* amazing provision and generosity, and for the privilege of being able to serve in this way.

“Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours”

-Teresa of Avila
