



How “pre-loved” clothes might help to save the planet

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Galatians 6:9

We are constantly being asked to help save the planet by separating our rubbish, choosing sustainable options over disposable, and not polluting our oceans. We try to reduce our dependence on use single use plastic and to carry cloth bags with us to the shops, while fast fashion is constantly under fire from campaigners. How many of us actually believe we can save the planet and be good stewards of it with “hand me downs”, or “pre-loved” as is now the preferred description?

Pre Covid, in Sittingbourne a community wardrobe consisting of second-hand clothes was launched by Murston Anglican Church under the leadership of the Revd Lesley when she became aware of the basic needs of people for expensive school uniform. The community wardrobe was also part of a larger project to help people in need with practical issues such as sorting out debt. This project grew and was very popular until Covid hit. The school uniform which had been collected was put in storage and by the time it was possible to start up again Lesley had moved to another parish and the volunteers had found new roles elsewhere. The stored uniform couldn't be ignored, so as the Methodist Church we agreed to host an event to get the uniform out to

people. That was two summers ago and we have gone from strength to strength. Initially, as a very excited individual, I asked Church Council if we could use the hall to host the one-off event. This quickly changed because as people came and took uniform, they donated twice as much. I tentatively asked if we could store it short term. It was quickly obvious that this wasn't going to be a “one-off”, short term project. As word spread that the community wardrobe was back up and running, people were eager to make use of it. The solution was clear, we needed a permanent, downstairs, space where things could be organised, easily accessible, and readily available. Another report to church council and a space was found!

Where are we now, and how are we helping to save the planet?

When we took it over, Community Wardrobe was renamed to save any confusion since the original project had offered more than just clothes. We have a Facebook page “Free, Preloved School Uniform Hub - Sittingbourne Methodists” with nearly 250 followers and our posts have reached almost 950 people. Every Friday for two hours we open the doors to people who want to come and donate uniform or see if we have what they need.

Donations come in all shapes and sizes of course, and thankfully we have

people in the church, on hand, willing to wash clothes, sew buttons on and repair blazers. A stitch in time not only saves nine stitches but can also save £35 for a secondary school blazer. Not everything can be saved despite our best efforts, but if you didn't realise, polo shirts make lovely cleaning cloths and nothing goes in the bin with its buttons still attached!

Now that we have a regular time and space, people are more used to it and we get regular and one-off clients, and people are passing on the message to each other. I often see a comment on a Facebook post stating “This is what I was telling you about”. We do a little more in the school holidays and this July we are planning a three day event with long hours to try and catch everybody, since a common and very fair complaint is that people work Friday mornings. Apart from the fact that we are able to help people in genuine need, what I love most about the hub is the sense of community. Our church based volunteers are always welcoming and ready to listen, as well as sort through piles of trousers to find a good fit, and for the most part those parents and families would never have set foot in our church if it weren't for the uniform hub and we wouldn't have had occasion to meet them.

We are determined for it not to be another charity, organised for people who feel ashamed of their status. Part of the advertising I do through Facebook and schools makes the



point that we are helping to save the planet by recycling, reusing clothes that still have plenty of life left in them. Also I want people in financial need to rub shoulders with people who can afford to buy new but choose not to, and neither will know the others' motives for being there. Helping shouldn't give us the right to feel better than others and receiving help shouldn't make us feel like less worthy human beings. One thing we found amazing, especially during the summer events, is the way things work out so well. One year a lady came, asking for uniform for the boys' grammar school. We couldn't help her, we didn't have what she needed. As we were saying this, another lady came in with a huge bin bag of donations full of boys' grammar school uniform. More than once we have chased after someone to tell them to come back because we suddenly have what they wanted. We also try and work with the schools, asking them to advertise our hub and finding out if they do anything themselves. Knowing what schools do,

such as PTFA uniform sales, means that we can point parents in the right direction if we can't help. I have had to reassure one or two school secretaries that we are not handing out bibles with the polo shirts, but in general they are happy to help, appreciate what we do, and give us a generous amount of lost property in the summer.

Are we reaching people for Christ?

Not directly. We haven't had anyone join the church because of preloved school uniform. We are reaching people as a community though, far more than we ever did before we did the hub and we have wonderful conversations. 1 Peter 3:15 comes to mind *"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,"* and if anyone asks, we tell them!

Running the hub has taught me so much for which I am thankful. Not least how many schools there are in Sittingbourne and the surrounding villages and how many variations on a school sweatshirt you can come up with! Meeting people, sharing what we do, making connections, realising that a stranger on Messenger is actually a neighbour when they come to donate a bag of clothes. Finding a strong community spirit underneath it all, supported by prayer on an ecumenical level. My regular volunteers are truly lovely too. Together we present an ecumenical, Christian team of support for those that need us, and hopefully we are making a difference, one school skirt at a time.

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