

# Safe Car Wash

*Hand Car Washes may seem innocent enough but some disguise the scourge of modern slavery. **Bishop Alastair Redfern** shows how the church's investigation led to The Clewer Initiative, the Church of England campaign against modern slavery. They went on to produce an App for use as you have your car washed, to see if modern slavery might be at work.*

It's a sunny Saturday morning and you are driving to the supermarket for your usual weekly shop. On the way you notice a newcomer to the area: a hand car wash has appeared on the forecourt of the disused petrol station round the corner. Your car hasn't been washed in a while, and they're offering a full wash for five pounds so you decide to go for it. They're efficient, and you're in and out in twenty minutes, with a sparkling car and your wallet only five pounds lighter. So what's the catch? You, and thousands like you up and down the country, may have just paid to have your car washed by a slave.

One man, speaking about his experiences of working in a hand car

wash, told the BBC: "I had to work eleven hours a day, non-stop. I had no breaks. The employer does not buy any protective gloves, the shampoo is quite strong. While washing the cars it keeps corroding the skin."

How can this be possible - that people are being exploited on British high streets, hidden in plain sight? The Clewer Initiative<sup>1</sup>, the Church of England's response to modern slavery, of which I am Chair, decided to find out. Our research has led us to understand that an unnoticed scourge of modern slavery seems to be lurking among our nation's hand car washes, and so we resolved to do something about it.

Ten years ago there were very few hand car washes on British high streets. A bucket and sponge on your drive or the automated car wash at your local garage would have been your only options. But following the recession, in an environment where there has been very little regulation and supervision, compounded by a rising number of very vulnerable people, Britain's informal hand car wash has grown exponentially. Now no one knows how many there are scattered across the country. Estimates suggest upwards of ten thousand, and some have said there could be as many as twenty thousand in car parks, on garage forecourts, and on the sides of roads.



Photo: Lauren Sommer/KQED

Of course, many are legitimate, taking advantage of a flexible economy and a ready supply of low-skilled labour to corner a gap in the market. But unfortunately the glossy sheen of a newly shining bonnet can hide a dark underbelly. Police around the country have found modern slavery at hand car washes, and connections also to serious offences such as organised crime and money laundering, as well as more minor crimes like tax avoidance and environmental damage.

The familiarity of hand car washes on high streets means that the public are often unaware that they are possibly encountering modern slavery each time they have their car washed.

Yet perhaps it is a willing ignorance.

Once one considers for a moment the economics of a hand car wash that is charging £5 for a full valeting service, where you have the cost of paying the minimum wage, paying for premises and water, materials, and all the other day-to-day costs of running a business, it is clear that somewhere corners are being cut.

In an interview earlier this year, DS Gareth Smethem of the Derbyshire Constabulary spoke about his own frustration with the general public, who he finds generally prefer not to ask questions if the answers might be inconvenient.

As part of a strategy of targeting businesses with a high risk of modern slavery, his team conducts visits to hand car washes in Derbyshire, often with partnership agencies such as the Environment Agency or the Fire Service. They check the working conditions of the hand car wash, as well as the welfare of the employees. While there they often speak to those queuing up to get their car washed.

“We visited a couple of car washes recently; one of them was only charging £3 and there were more people going to that. When you try and explain that they can’t legitimately wash a car without something being cut, whether that’s the safety of the workers, or their wages, people don’t seem to care. All you get is ‘well they do a good job and I’m happy’.”

Police units like DS Smethem’s are working hard across the country to shut down illegitimate hand car washes, and to prosecute those who exploit or harm their workers. Their colleagues in other statutory agencies are also doing their part, and more could of course be done. However, it became clear to us at The Clewer Initiative that tackling the issue of modern slavery in hand car washes cannot be left to the government agencies alone, and needs the participation of the general public. After all, they are only there because people frequent them. Without an eager market of thousands of people happy to pay pennies for a service that should cost pounds, this national scandal wouldn’t even exist.

The exploitation of people working in hand car washes is a symptom of the broader problem of modern slavery in the UK. Estimates of the number of victims of slavery in the UK range from the Conservative government figure of 13,000 to an astonishing total of 136,000, worked out by the Global Slavery Index, which measures the occurrence of modern slavery

**The Bishop of Blackburn and Canon Ed Saville from Pendle launching the Safe Car Wash App for Lancashire last June**



Photo: Diocese of Blackburn

worldwide. However many victims there are, the obvious conclusion is that there are too many. How have we, in our developed nation, come to be in this situation?

In my opinion, modern slavery has been allowed to flourish because of what Pope Francis has called the 'globalisation of indifference'. Satisfied with our own lives, content to stay in our social media bubbles and more and more removed from the people around us, our indifference to those around us has indeed reached global proportions. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the Priest and the Levite see the injured man lying at the side of the road and choose to walk on by. Would we, walking down the street staring at our phones, even see him in the first place?

The Clewer Initiative was born out of a wish to see a change to this indifference, asking churches and faith groups to say 'we see you' to the victims of exploitation who are in our midst, washing our cars, painting our nails and picking our vegetables.

Our inspiration can be seen in so many places in Jesus' ministry but

what has been called his 'Nazareth manifesto', found in Luke 4:18-19<sup>2</sup>, gives us a clear mandate as Christians for calling an end to slavery in all its forms.

As Jesus Christ declares in Luke 4, he came to bring freedom to the captives, and as his followers we should be intent on following his mission. But how do we do it? Modern slavery in all its forms, including that at hand car washes, is sometimes linked with organised crime. So we certainly do not want to be suggesting that any church member should be confronting the manager of a hand car wash! And yet we knew that practical help was needed, and that many people were passionate enough about the issue to get involved.

That's how we arrived at the Safe Car Wash App. Working with partners from law enforcement like the National Crime Agency and the Gangmasters & Labour Abuse Authority, we came up with a list of indicators<sup>3</sup> of modern slavery in a hand car wash, all of which could be noted just by looking for them, and wouldn't need any 'investigation'.

Using those indicators we created an app called the Safe Car Wash App. It is available for free on Android and Apple phones and designed to be used when you are at a hand car wash. It will pinpoint your location and then ask you a series of questions about the indicators of modern slavery. They range from practical details - such as whether workers have protective clothing like gloves to protect their hands from harmful chemicals - to behavioural clues, such as whether they appear withdrawn. If the answers indicate a high likelihood of modern slavery, you will be invited to call the Modern Slavery Helpline on 0800 0121700 to report what you have seen. Regardless of whether you do so, the data will be anonymised and shared with our law enforcement partners, to help them map hand car washes across the country.

Since we launched in June 2018 we have seen a huge growth in the awareness of the general public about modern slavery in hand car washes. Over 8,000 people have downloaded the Safe Car Wash App, but many

Pope Francis commissioning ambassadors with the message to 'collaborate in counteracting the globalisation of indifference'




## The Safe Car Wash App

Photo: The Clewer Initiative



more have been made aware about the problem through media coverage. We hope to see thousands more downloading the App in the months and years to come. The Safe Car Wash App is one way

that Christians and people of good will can begin to turn the tide against modern slavery in the UK. There are many other ways, as you can see by going to The Clewer Initiative's website [www.theclewerinitiative.org](http://www.theclewerinitiative.org).

If we can join together in refusing to accept exploitative working conditions in hand car washes, then in time we might be able to say 'we see you' to victims of every kind of modern slavery. 

- 1 The initiative forms part of the Church of England's approach to eradicating modern slavery and is funded by the Clewer Sisters, an Anglican order of Augustinian nuns founded in 1852 to help marginalised, mainly young, women, who found themselves homeless and drawn into the sex trade, by providing them shelter and teaching them a trade.
- 2 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'
- 3 Do the workers have access to suitable clothing? Look out for gloves and boots; Is there evidence of workers living on site? Can you see a caravan or bedding? Does anyone appear controlling or intimidating? Does the body language of the workers appear withdrawn or fearful? Do there appear to be minors working at the car wash? Did you pay less than £6.70 for the car wash? Does the car wash only accept cash? Did they offer a receipt? Did you have to pay the manager?



***The Rt Revd Dr Alastair Redfern** is the Chair of The Clewer Initiative, the Church of England response to modern slavery. He recently retired from his role as the Bishop of Derby, a position he held from 2005 until August 2018. He first became involved in the fight against modern slavery in his capacity as one of the 26 Lords Spiritual who sit in the House of Lords, where he took part in the Legislative Commission for the Modern Slavery Bill, which was enacted in 2015. Through his work in the House of Lords the value of partnership between external agencies and the Church to eradicate slavery became apparent, and a model of joint working began.*