

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 Initiative¹, 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