

How some churches are working to alleviate period poverty

Menstruation supplies are expensive—and stigmatized. So many people just go without.

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [January 12, 2022](#) issue



A Free. product drive last spring (Courtesy photo)

It's widely believed that Johnson and Johnson introduced the world's first commercially produced menstrual product in the late 1890s.

Lister's Towels—named after Joseph Lister, the British pathologist who developed antiseptic surgery—were disposable pads made of cotton and gauze, meant to replace the sheets, rags, and sheep's wool people collected at home.

But Lister's Towels were a flop.

For one thing, menstruation was highly stigmatized, and no one wanted to be seen buying period products in public. Furthermore, commercially produced pads were too expensive for the average household, so most people kept using homemade pads.

Today, commercially produced period products—pads, tampons, menstrual cups, and so on—are a multibillion-dollar global industry. Yet some core facts remain unchanged: menstruation is still highly stigmatized, and commercially produced products are still too expensive for many people.

According to a popular online calculator built by two Polish scientists, the average menstruating person spends \$1,946 on period products over their lifetime. That does not include the cost of other period-related items like new underwear, heating pads, or medicine for pain management.

In the United States, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that public aid for purchasing groceries or health care cannot be used to buy period products. In fact, according to the US Department of Agriculture, trading food stamps for tampons or pads is a prosecutable offense.

Kenzie Blackwell, a parishioner at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church in Hingham, Massachusetts, was astounded to learn how many people were going without period products just in a small radius around Hingham, a town of about 24,000. Blackwell had gotten the idea to fundraise for period products at St. John's after touring a nonprofit organization that provides hygiene items to Boston youth. There was plenty of deodorant, soap, and shampoo, but organizers told her the demand for period products was so high they could not keep them in stock.

Figuring there might be a similar need in Hingham, Blackwell started calling local organizations last spring to gauge their level of interest in accepting period products collected by St. John's.

"Within a few phone calls, I had 700 people in our immediate area that needed supplies each month," Blackwell said. "I had to stop calling."

Period poverty is the term used to describe inadequate access to period products, and it's a global issue. Exact numbers are hard to come by—both because menstrual health has historically been ignored by researchers and because menstruation continues to be a source of shame, so period poverty often goes unreported.

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However, the World Health Organization estimates that "hundreds of millions" of women, girls, transgender men, and nonbinary people are unable to get the period

products they need each month. A 2019 study out of St. Louis, Missouri, found that 64 percent of women with low incomes reported that they had been unable to afford period products at least once in the previous year.

In addition to causing stress, shame, and social ostracization, a lack of access to period products makes people sick. Resorting to unsanitary, makeshift period solutions or extending the use of available items often results in an infection of the reproductive or urinary tract.

Period poverty also causes people to miss work or school when they are menstruating, which in turn can lead to loss of income, loss of employment, and underperformance at school. Early research suggests that some students who stay at home during their periods fall so far behind at school that they end up dropping out entirely.

When Blackwell saw how prevalent period poverty was in Hingham, she immediately switched gears. She wasn't going to coordinate a onetime fundraiser at St. John's, she was going to start a permanent ministry dedicated to getting period products to the people who need them.

At first, some of Blackwell's fellow parishioners were visibly uncomfortable talking about menstruation in church. But the idea quickly caught on. In its first seven months, Free. (pronounced "free period") collected and distributed more than 82,000 period products and inspired a second chapter at a church in Providence, Rhode Island.

Blackwell describes her dining room as a veritable period pantry. "We eat at the kitchen island now," she said. "When my kids have their friends over, it's like, 'Oh, there's 5,000 pads in the house. OK! Whatever!' It's just a thing now."

And because Blackwell would like to see the ministry spread nationwide, Free.'s minimalist, robin's-egg-blue-and-white branding is available to any congregation that wants to use it.

"Period poverty should not be an unmentionable issue in the church. When we give voice to the reality that it exists, we are normalizing menstruating bodies," Blackwell said. "The fact that many will ask for food and not pads deserves attention. Why? How can we, as communities of faith, address this shame and create change? Our bodies are divinely created, and every function is intentional. . . . There is no shame

in creation.”

Other churches around the country have also taken up the period poverty mantle. In Alpena, Michigan, All Saints Catholic Parish runs a program called Time to Help, Period, which provides free period products to the local high school. When COVID-19 closed the school in 2020, the program continued providing period products at school-based food distribution sites.

In April 2021, Anointed Faith Family Church in Tomball, Texas, partnered with an organization that usually provides free prom dresses to Houston-area high school students to distribute free period kits.

Benjamin Rabjohns, an Anglican priest in South Wales, told the Century he was inspired to start setting out free period products, including reusable period underwear, inside the main doors at St. Winifred’s Church last summer after the village council donated some period products to a local nonprofit. He thought the church would be an ideal place to house a free period store, because it’s open all day and people can come and take what they need without having to ask anyone.

He gets his supplies through a partnership with Hey Girls, a UK-based nonprofit that provides sustainable period products through a buy one, donate one model.

The village of Penrhiwceiber, where St. Winifred’s is located, is a former coal mining town that has never fully recovered from the loss of that industry in the 1980s, Rabjohns said. He knew that poverty was widespread. Still, once he started the free period store, he was surprised at how prevalent period poverty in particular seemed to be.

“We weren’t sure whether anyone would either become aware of it or actually use it if they were,” he said. But items began disappearing quickly. The response on social media was equally robust.

“Seeing people who’d never responded to a church post before by liking it or commenting on it—seeing how people engaged with the sharing of it on social media was interesting,” he said.

“Our bodies are divinely created,” says Kenzie Blackwell. “There is no shame in creation.”

Like Blackwell and Rabjohns, 91-year-old Larry Apperson in Princeton, New Jersey, thinks churches—with their community connections and reserve of volunteers—are well positioned to address period poverty in their cities. The Princeton Period Project, which Apperson took over in September, is an offshoot of Princeton United Methodist Church and has been distributing period products to local schools and women's shelters since 2018.

"I think it's something that any church might consider," he said. "Here's a specific need—and I would guarantee that it's a need in every city in America—and here's what we can do about it."

But ultimately, no matter how well-stocked, well-funded, or well-staffed they may be, period poverty ministries can only address the symptoms of a larger issue deeply rooted in gender inequality. As many advocates like to say, menstruation is a basic biological function for roughly 1.8 billion people on the planet. It would seem only logical, then, that in public spaces, period products would be as available as toilet paper.

"We don't expect people to walk around with rolls of toilet paper on them," Free the Tampon founder Nancy Kramer once said on NPR. "I don't think we should expect people to walk around with tampons and pads."

Instead, not only are period products less freely distributed than toilet paper in most US states, in 27 states they are also taxed as nonessential items—generating \$117.9 million in revenue for those states, according to Period Equity, a legal organization dedicated to making tax-free, nontoxic, and environmentally friendly period products available to everyone.

The conversation about the so-called tampon tax is a nuanced one. To be clear, period products do not incur a special tax. States simply decline to exempt them from sales taxes, categorizing them differently from "essential" items like groceries. And the tampon tax is distinct from (but not totally unrelated to) the pink tax, which is the tendency for products marketed toward women to be more expensive than similar ones marketed toward men, a problem that compounds the gender wage gap.

Currently, 15 state legislatures are considering bills that would end the tampon tax, but it's unclear how much that will actually help. In 2020, Ziyue Xu, a doctoral student studying public economics at the University of Texas, analyzed data from

point-of-sales systems in Illinois—specifically looking at sales and price trends for period products before and after the state made them tax-exempt in 2016. What she found was surprising. With the tampon tax gone, she had expected to see consumer prices drop and purchases increase. But it was just the opposite. Pretax prices for period products increased by about 1 percent, while sales dropped by about 2 percent.

In an interview with the University of Chicago School of Business, Xu said she wasn't certain why this happened, but she offered a guess: period product manufacturers likely assumed that purchases would increase due to the repeal of the tampon tax and wanted to maximize their profits by slightly upping prices. Meanwhile, Xu said, it's possible that with period product prices down in general, Illinois consumers began opting for higher-priced items that offer more protection—and thus didn't need to buy as many products.

Her final conclusion was that repealing tampon taxes isn't an economically efficient solution to period poverty. "Getting rid of the tax is having economic repercussions that seem to provide some minimal benefit to retailers and manufacturers, but there's no evidence to suggest it's creating more access in those segments of the population where the need is greatest," Xu said.

This may be why many advocates, while still supporting tampon tax repeal legislation, now have their eyes on a bigger prize: free period products in designated spaces, especially public schools and universities.

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In 2016, Period Equity worked closely with the New York City Council to pass a measure putting free period products in the city's public schools, prisons, and women's shelters—the first measure of its kind in the United States. In 2018, a law was passed requiring the rest of the state to provide free period products in public middle and high schools.

That same year, advocates worked to get free products in federal prisons, and by 2021 they had also secured them for students in California, Washington, New Hampshire, and Virginia. In November, Ann Arbor, Michigan, became the first city in the US to require free period products in all public restrooms.

While no federal legislation has been introduced in the US, nationwide policies do exist elsewhere. In Kenya, New Zealand, and England, period products are free for students. And in 2020, Scotland became the first country to make period products free for everyone. “A proud day for Scotland and a signal to the world that free universal access to period products can be achieved,” tweeted Parliament member Monica Lennon after her colleagues unanimously approved the measure.

The way the Scottish program works is that local municipalities and education providers are required to make period products available to anyone who needs them. Municipal councils can decide for themselves where to make them available. Additionally, FareShare Scotland, a nonprofit that redistributes surplus food, serves as a distribution center in many localities.

The Scottish government estimates that its universal program will cost taxpayers the equivalent of US\$32 million a year.

The importance of these policy issues is not lost on Blackwell, despite her ministry’s focus on direct service. She said Free. supports a Massachusetts bill that would require free period products in public schools, homeless shelters, and prisons, and it was part of a coalition that successfully lobbied Hingham’s state senator, Republican Patrick O’Connor, to endorse it.

Tim Schenck, the rector at St. John’s, said that Blackwell once told him that her goal was to put Free. out of business. “Through advocacy and making change through legislation, the need for such an organization would fade away,” he said, “because access to menstruation supplies would be seen as a right, not a privilege.”

In the meantime, the churches that are trying to meet this need in their communities keep plugging away.

Apperson chuckles when asked about period poverty legislation and policy. At 91, he said, that’s not really where his focus is. It’s enough for him to ask local shelters and schools what supplies they need and then make the Amazon order to make sure they get them. Occasionally he has to tap the wider Princeton United Methodist network for additional funds, but that’s rare.

“I am not a politician,” he said. “I am a religious person. And the person I believe in taught me—at least as his words are recorded—that there will always be hungry people. Go feed ’em.”

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