

church of the poor?

a call to action for
churches in the UK



Church Action
on Poverty

Edited by Liam Purcell and Sarah Purcell

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a poor church for the poor?



Niall Cooper, Director of Church Action on Poverty, invites you to join us on a new journey.

Pope Francis has said that he wants “a poor Church, for the poor” but what does it actually mean to be a Church of and for the poor? Here in the UK, are our churches doing enough to stand in solidarity with people in poverty?

This is a question which Church Action on Poverty has wrestled with for more than 30 years, but one which we will be pursuing with renewed vigour over the coming months, as we launch our new ‘Church of the poor’ programme.

What is our shared vision of a Good Society, and where do people struggling with poverty or other forms of marginalisation or exclusion fit within it? How can we enable the insights and gifts of people living in poverty to be recognised by wider society, and those with power and influence – both in the churches and in wider society?

But above and beyond this, what would it truly mean for the Church to become ‘a poor Church, for the poor’?

As Al Barrett puts it on page 7 :

“Not just a food bank for the poor, a debt advice project for the poor, a campaigning organisation for the poor... A church for the poor.”

It surely can’t be left up to what are typically small and struggling churches in poorer neighbourhoods to shoulder the burden of responding to the challenge. What priority does the wider Church give to the task of becoming a Church for the poor?

The Bishop of Burnley (page 8) puts the challenge in the sharpest of terms:

“I am sick and tired of hearing pompous tosh about the ‘Church’s prophetic voice’ or the ‘church in the public square’ whilst at the same time we are busy abandoning the people we purport to represent by closing their churches and withdrawing their clergy.”

Do we really believe that God can be found at the margins; do we really believe in a countercultural church of and for the poor; are we prepared to let go of our own power?

There are positive stories to be shared from across the churches, some of which we highlight in the pages of this report. But few, if any, other denominations have gone as far as the Church of Scotland, which for more than a decade has been committing substantial resources to supporting ministry in the poorest communities across Scotland: communities which it describes as ‘Priority Areas.’

As the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland said as long ago as 2001:

“Priority for the poorest and the most marginalised is the gospel imperative facing the whole Church, not just the Church in the poorest places.”

Over the past decade and more, that has translated not just into warm words and worthy reports, but specific action in relation to buildings, structures, leadership, worship, youth work, and developing some of the most innovative approaches to tackling the causes of poverty in the UK.

Are other churches and denominations up for following this example?

For Church Action on Poverty this report is only the start. Over the next few months we will be developing further materials and resources to enable churches to discover together what it means to truly be a ‘church of the poor.’ I look forward to you joining us in this journey!

What is our shared vision of a Good Society, and where do people struggling with poverty fit within it?

How can we enable the insights and gifts of people living in poverty to be recognised by wider society, and those with power and influence?

the **option** for the **poor**



John Battle, former director of Church Action on Poverty, is helping Catholics respond to Pope Francis' call to be a church for the poor.

A recent conference at Leeds Trinity University explored what Pope Francis could mean for us by calling us to become “a poor Church for the poor”.

Father Michael Czerny SJ came over from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace to set out what Pope Francis has in mind. Julia Unwin of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation responded from the context of what we understand poverty to be in modern Britain. Fr Czerny spelt out the need for us to really “open our eyes” to the reality of poverty and to make sure we did not seriously “overlook” or simply ignore the poor by reducing them to non-persons in our midst. He suggested that there could well be two conferences going on at the same time: ours discussing what poverty means, and another gathering in another part of the city, of the poor trying to cope with the challenges of survival themselves. He suggested it was time to merge the two conferences into one.

To some extent pope Francis' challenge could be lost in the translation of prepositions; are we to be a Church “of the poor”, “for the poor” (speaking on

their behalf), or “with the poor”? These distinctions could prove crucial in practice.

Actually at the same time as the Leeds Trinity conference with its workshops and speakers, there was a get-together in an inner-city community centre of people and families driven to food banks by sanctions to their benefits and cuts in their family income support. They discussed the extension of the local credit union to displace the loan sharks.

Every Friday morning at the New Wortley Community centre, our men's walking group sets off on an ‘urban walk’ to get out of the local tower blocks – which gained notoriety as the centre of the highest male suicide rate in the country. We walk round for a couple of hours together, and then go back to the community centre to share a midday meal. Our group is informal. All men are welcome but particularly those at home, unemployed (and from all backgrounds of work and skills) and with challenges of mental health, drugs or drink, or simply trying to survive alone. As we have



There is no true commitment to solidarity with the poor if one sees them merely as people passively waiting for help ... The goal is not to become “the voice of the voiceless” but to help those without a voice find one

Gustavo Gutierrez, Peruvian liberation theologian and Dominican priest

walked and talked, friendships have developed, we have initiated other activities such as music and cooking groups, and moved into practical advice and support work in the community centre. It has become a mutual supportive group which is still extending. Moreover, it is good fun and keeps us human.

In his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spells out “why I want a Church that is poor and for the poor”. He writes:

“Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programmes of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilises is not an unruly activism but above all an attentiveness which considers the other in a certain sense as ‘one with ourselves’. This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, in their ways of living the faith.”

This theme of the need for “loving attentiveness” linked the “Poor Church of the Poor” conference to the Wortley Men’s walking group for me. It reminded me of the inspiring words of Jean Vanier:

“If you enter into relationship with a lonely or suffering person you will discover something else; that it is you who are being healed. The broken person will reveal to you your own inner hurt and the hardness of your heart, but also how much you are loved. Thus the one you came to heal will be the healer. If you let yourself be moulded thus by the cry of the poor and accept their healing friendship, then they may guide your footsteps into community and lead you into a new vision of humanity, a new world order, not governed by power and fear but where the poor and weak are at the centre. They will lead you into the kingdom Jesus speaks of.”

There is a world of difference between praying *for* rather than *with* the poor. The ‘option for the poor’ surely means taking up the cause of the poor and oppressed in ways which respect them as agents of their own liberation and ours.



The gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor

Dorothy Day, US Catholic journalist and activist

There must come a point at which the scale of the gap between the very wealthy and those at the bottom of the range of income begins to undermine the common good. This is the point at which society starts to be run for the benefit of the rich, not for all its members.

The Common Good and the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching
(Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, 1996)

overview: the Catholic Church and poverty

Catholic Social Teaching is based on the belief that God has a plan for creation, a plan to build a kingdom of peace, love and justice. Our part in this plan isn't just limited to our spiritual life, it also involves every aspect of our lives, from the things we pray about, to how we live as responsible global citizens. Our part in this story is a kind of vocation for the common good, a call to treat everyone as sisters and brothers in something that we all share. Catholic Social Teaching is the tradition of papal reflection about how we live this vocation for the common good in our world.

"The Church's love for the poor ... is a part of her constant tradition. This love is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, of the poverty of Jesus, and of his concern for the poor."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2444

One of the themes of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is Human Dignity: humans were created in the image and likeness of God. Regardless of any factors or reasons we can think of, individuals have an inherent and immeasurable worth and dignity; each human life is considered sacred. The principle of Human Dignity can guide how we think about global inequality and it is from this idea that the 'preferential option for the poor' developed within CST.

The phrase 'Preferential Option for the Poor' was first used in 1968 by the superior general of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupe, in a letter to his order. The term was later picked up by the Catholic bishops of Latin America. In its early usage, particularly, the option for the poor referred especially to a trend throughout biblical texts, where there is a demonstrable preference given to powerless individuals who live on the margins of society. The liberation theology movement fully embraced the concept, particularly when they closely associated the poor and vulnerable with Jesus himself, citing Matthew 25: "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

In practice:

the National Justice and Peace Network



The National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) welcomes all who share a vision of a world in which people live in peace and harmony, where our common humanity is respected and all are able to contribute freely to the common good. Founded in 1978, NJPN seeks to encourage work for justice and peace by promoting communication and shared action between members, supporters and partners.

Many Catholic dioceses have Justice and Peace Commissions or Committees which campaign on both UK and international issues of social justice and poverty; a number of dioceses have dedicated justice and peace fieldworkers.

www.justice-and-peace.org.uk

In practice: Caritas Social Action Network



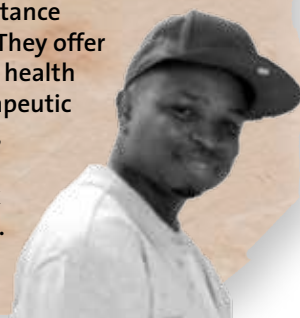
Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) is the official agency of the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales for domestic social action. CSAN comprises

over 40 Catholic charities and a growing number of Caritas Dioceses who work across England and Wales, providing support to families and children living in poverty, prisoners, victims of crime, refugees, older people, disabled people and travellers. Rooted in Catholic Social Teaching, CSAN works with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in England and Wales.

www.csan.org.uk

Caritas Anchor House in London (www.caritasanchorhouse.org.uk) is one of those projects: a homelessness charity; a residential and life-skills centre for single homeless adults, and a community empowerment hub in the local area. Their mission is to ensure that those who walk through their doors grow in confidence and move towards leading independent, self-fulfilling lives by providing education, guidance and personal rehabilitation.

Caritas Anchor House works with people affected by homelessness, offending, mental health, substance misuse, domestic abuse and unemployment. They offer a holistic programme which addresses health and wellbeing, recreational and therapeutic activities, maintaining relationships, financial management, education, volunteering, training, back to work preparation and independent living.



turning the world upside-down



Al Barrett is an Anglican priest living on an urban 'outer estate' in the West Midlands. You can read his reflections on faith and community at www.thisestate.blogspot.co.uk

A church for the poor? Now that would be a good start! For those for whom life is constantly precarious, a daily struggle to make ends meet? For those whose tightly-limited spending power means their voices seem to count for little, whose defences against life's shocks have often worn thin? For those who live on ill-served council estates and densely-populated inner-city streets? For these first and foremost – and not primarily, unquestioningly, for those who can afford to pay the piper and call the tune, for those who are cushioned by the defences bought with a bit of money in the bank, for those who can navigate comfortably the coffee shops and corridors and social connections where power moves and decisions are made? Because a church whose default position is for *these*, will be a church that works against the poor, whatever its 'good intentions'. So a church for the poor? Yes, that would be a good start.

But a church for the poor. Not just a food bank for the poor, a debt advice project for the poor, a campaigning organisation for the poor, an ESOL class, a financial literacy session, a cooking group, a gardening club for the poor... A church for the poor, where the holy of holies is rent open, where middle-class norms don't prevail and exclude, where middle-class anxieties aren't the driving force and the criteria for making decisions. A church where all are welcomed and embraced. A church for the poor would be challenging, disturbing, in a society that prefers to keep the poor at arm's length, if not out of sight and out of mind.

But that little word 'for' is troubling. Because who is to set up this 'church for the poor'? Who is to plant it, and grow it, and water it? Who are the 'we' who are 'for' these 'others'?

So how about we redefine our economic imagination? Instead of imagining that 'contributions' must primarily be financial, why not discover the wealth of riches in stories, and experience, and bodies, and the vulnerabilities that open us to each other as members together of the body of Christ? Instead of starting with the roles that need filling, why not start with the gifts

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– sometimes the awkward, troubling, difficult gifts – that people bring, even the gifts they are barely aware of, or can barely imagine might be gifts? Instead of spotting gaps in the 'service provision market' as 'golden opportunities' for the church to find its place, what about a church that discovers its resources, its centres, its leadership and its voice in the non-places that have been pushed off society's maps? What if there's a power, greater than the power of money or might or media influence, bubbling up from those places, among those people, between those bodies, within those stories? The power of God – how foolish! – that will turn the world upside-down.

The real story of a people is not written by the manipulations and coercions of those in power, ready to sacrifice people to economic theory and national security. It is written by the emerging hope and involvement of the poor. Which is our story? There is an option, but for Christians there is simply no choice

Professor Hilary Russell, (taken from *Poverty Close to Home: a Christian Understanding*, Mowbray, 1995)



putting the poor **first**



This is an edited version of a speech given at a 2016 conference on 'estates evangelism' by **Philip North**, the Anglican Bishop of Burnley.

The Church of England faces vast problems on our outer estates. Clergy feel isolated and personally responsible. Church Councils feel the guilt of being told they are subsidised. There are difficulties calling and equipping confident lay leaders. The challenges of sustaining growth. I could go on and on. The figures show the scale of the problems:

- 3.4 million people live on social housing estates in England.
- If the national Church of England attendance figure of 1.7% applied to the estates, then 58,000 would attend an Anglican church. The actual figure is 28,000. The 'missing' 30,000 is equivalent in size to the Diocese of Liverpool.
- Decline in attendance is nearly four times faster on the estates than the rest of the country.
- The Church spends £8.00 on average per head across the country on ministry. On the estates it is £5 per head.

We have a crisis. Within 10 years the Church of England will have abandoned many of the poorest parts of the country. This is not the result of strategic decision-making, it is not particularly anyone's fault. It is simple neglect, the combined effect of countless decisions made at different levels by different people who are setting spending priorities in tough times. Ministry to the poor is increasingly being seen as a luxury that we can no longer afford.

So today we must act, because this is a crisis that matters. Our task as the Church is the transformation of a nation in the name of Christ. And if we are serious about that transformation, we have to put

the estates right at the heart of any strategy. First, that's because every effective renewal movement in the history of the Church has started with the poor. When people see a Church that practises what it preaches, that listens to the cry of the poor, that challenges the values of the world, they sit up and listen. Second, that's because a Church that abandons the poor has abandoned God. If we quit the poorest estates in the country, we renounce all authority to proclaim the Gospel anywhere. We become a church of shabby hypocrites, lazy, complacent and self-indulgent. A Church that is serious about renewal puts the poor first, not last.

We want to renew the estates because that is the only way to renew the whole Church, because a Church can never grow if it is deaf to the cries of the poor. To quote Jim Wallis, if our Gospel is not Good News for the poor, it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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A theological challenge

What is the Good News in this setting? I am not suggesting here that the gospel changes from place to place. But Jesus started every encounter not with proclamation, but with questions. He then spoke Good News into the context into which he was speaking, meeting the needs of the person he was addressing. If we want to be taken seriously on the estates, we need to hear, understand, and then answer the questions that people are asking. Prepackaged gospel messages lifted from other contexts won't do. If you are living in a damp house, dependent on payday loans or food banks, trying to make ends meet on a zero-hours contract, or worrying about the behaviour of your children, what is the Good News? Unless we can answer that, our evangelism is bound to fail because no one will listen.

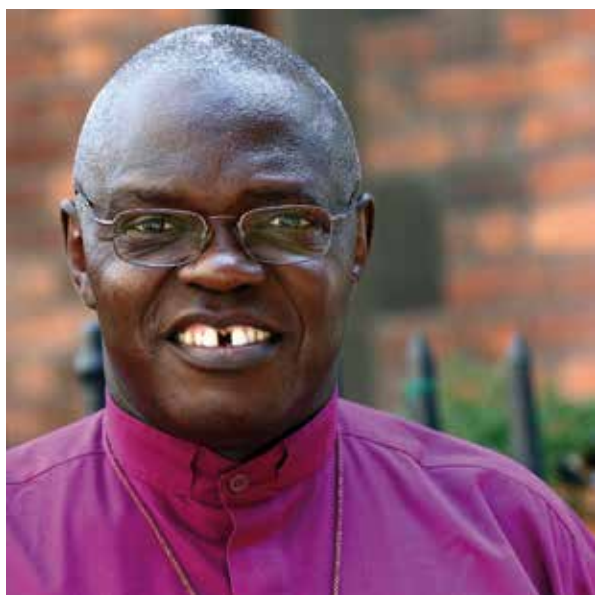
A vocational challenge

The problems associated with identifying, training and supporting lay leaders leave many clergy feeling isolated, and contributes to the fragility of estate churches. And if we want good lay leaders

When the Church speaks for the poor, people see the real Jesus

Justin Welby,
Archbishop of Canterbury





We found a stark divide between decision-makers and the people they claim to represent... Our evidence shows that at the root of poverty is powerlessness. Genuine participation is a human right and if things are to change, people living in poverty must have a real voice in the decisions that affect their lives

Archbishop John Sentamu, Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000

we need good clergy, yet finding the right leaders for estates parishes, especially in the North, is an enormous challenge. I am a big fan of the church planting movement, but it is odd that God seems to be calling large numbers of pioneers to work in Zones 1 and 2 in London but hasn't yet called anyone to Brambles Farm or Grange Park or countless other estates. Or maybe it's not God. Maybe he's calling, but we're failing to respond.

A cultural challenge

Why do so few vocations to the priesthood come from the estates? The answer is the white, executive, middle-class culture of the Church of England. When talking to ordination candidates I often find myself asking not, "Is this person called to the priesthood?" But, "Can I really put this person forward for a selection process which basically comprises three days in public school, a system which rewards eloquence and educational attainment rather than call, faithfulness and experience?"

We are deaf to the cries of the poor because we have effectively left them out of our decision-making processes

The rules of representation at synods favour large, wealthy parishes, so the tiny number of voices speaking up for the estates in General Synod are clerical ones. The result is, for example, that a Church which claims to be present for all can introduce a hike in fees which prices the poor out of its ministry with only two votes against. We are deaf to the cries of the poor because we have effectively left them out of our decision-making processes.

We have unquestioningly swallowed suburban methods of measuring success in church life based

purely on the criteria of money and numbers, which leave estates churches looking like they have failed. We remain addicted to service-provider models of community engagement based on the rich doing something for the poor, and have been slow to foster local leadership, create space for community-based solutions, and help to challenge the culture of dependency that so afflicts many of our estates. We are hooked on an outdated model of thinking we are doing some good by shouting at government from on high, rather than seeking locally-based solutions. I am sick and tired of hearing pompous tosh about the 'Church's prophetic voice' or the 'Church in the public square' whilst at the same time we are busy abandoning the people we purport to represent by closing their churches and withdrawing their clergy.

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There is a real risk that the Church could withdraw from the most deprived parts of the country because that is where decline is fastest, where "subsidies" are highest and where growth is hardest. Such a withdrawal would be an utter catastrophe. To argue that poorer parishes are subsidised by richer ones is to replace the gospel with consumer economics. In fact it is the poor who subsidise the rich, for it is the poor who recall the Church to its purpose and to the vocation of Christ himself who came to preach good news to the poor. Our primary task today is to remind the wider Church of this truth and encourage them to act on it. If we abandon the poor, we abandon God.

overview: the Church of England and poverty

In the autumn of 1985 the report *Faith in the City: A Call to Action by Church and Nation*, was published by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas. The report came in the wake of much concern about what was happening in British inner city and outer council housing estate communities. *Faith in the City* was crucial in sparking new awareness of the emerging gaps in society. Sadly, it is as relevant now as it was then.

The Church of England maintains a presence in every community through their parish system; this presence allows the church to engage with the lives of people in villages, towns and cities in both rich and poor neighbourhoods. *Faith in the City* called for the Church of England to identify its 'urban priority area' parishes (according to levels of unemployment, overcrowding, households lacking basic amenities, pensioners living alone, ethnic origin and single-parent households) and pay attention to clergy staffing levels in these areas.

"It provided the churches of the inner city with a voice, and the voice was to articulate what was being felt and experienced by some of the poorest and most disadvantaged communities in Britain."

Revd Graham Smith, Dean of Norwich (2005)

Poverty is not only about shortage of money. It is about rights and relationships; about how people are treated and how they regard themselves; about powerlessness, exclusion and loss of dignity. Yet the lack of an adequate income is at its heart.

Faith in the City, 1985 report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas

In practice: To Your Credit

To Your Credit is the Archbishop of Canterbury's initiative to create a fairer financial system focused on serving the whole community, where everyone has access to responsible credit and savings and other essential financial services. It is a grassroots movement of local churches and individuals committed to seeing economic change, supported by the voices and resources of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Archbishop's Task Group, the Church of England and partner organisations.

One of two main initiatives to come from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Task Group on Responsible Credit and Savings is the Church Credit Champions Network (now being rebranded as the Just Finance Network), designed to provide hands-on support to help people manage their money better and access responsible sources of credit.

In practice: the Church Urban Fund



The Church Urban Fund (CUF) is one of the main legacies of *Faith in the City*: "a church Urban Fund should be established to strengthen the Church's presence and promote the Christian witness in urban areas." It has been the Church's main anti-poverty programme since 1988 (though it is now organisationally separate and not directly funded by the Church of England).

"We are passionate about bringing God's love, hope and justice to the poorest and most marginalised people in England, empowering them to transform their lives. We believe the local church is uniquely placed to make this happen."

CUF has also provided more than £70 million of grant funding to churches. It works at national and local levels, bringing churches and Christians together to tackle poverty "where we are, right now".

The Together Network is central to CUF's work: a network of joint ventures between dioceses and CUF, aiming to develop capacity for action and strengthen people's capacity to tackle poverty.

www.cuf.org.uk

The **Next Step Shop** is an example of a project supported by CUF. Set up through Together Middlesborough and Cleveland (a joint venture between the diocese of York and CUF), it offers a 'next step' for food bank clients, helping them to get back on their feet after a crisis period. It is a members' shop, a project of Footprints in the Community. Members pay £2 per week and can visit the shop once a week to select 10 items of groceries with a retail value of approximately £10. Food is sourced from local stores and supermarkets, and from FareShare.



God among the margins



Revd Raj Bharath Patta is a Lutheran liberation theologian studying for a PhD at the University of Manchester.

Unemployment continues to be a huge concern globally, and in the UK it was reported in April 2016 that about 1.7 million people are unemployed due to various factors, resulting in growing poverty. Why people are not employed is a question that comes to the fore time and again.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard as found in Matthew 20: 1–16 tells of the land-owner who hires workers at six in the morning, at nine in the morning, at noon, at three in the afternoon, and at five in the evening. Those that were strongly built, who were well experienced and had a very promising CV, were employed in the very first round of interviews. Those that were less qualified, but who had some other strengths, were later employed at the next hour; those that had even lesser qualifications, but probably had some other skills like communication and so on, were later employed by the employer to work in his vineyard. In verse 6 we see the studious land-owner goes into the marketplace even at five in the evening to see some people standing around to seek some work for the day. He then asks them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” and in verse 7, they reply, “Because no one has hired us.”

Why is no one hiring these people? What could have been the reasons for their not being employed? Probably these people standing at 5 pm were not able to compete with the competitive world around, for those with higher class and society define merit and thereby determine the norms for merit, describing these ‘idle people’ as incapable of work. Probably these people who are still standing eagerly to be employed even at 5pm were people with disabilities and people who are mentally challenged, for no one wants to employ them because of their disabilities, for all those able-bodied were preferred and given work in the earlier hours of the day. Probably these people still standing eagerly to be employed even at 5pm were women, branded by patriarchal society with gendered stereotypes and prejudices as incapable of working in hard jobs. Probably these people still standing eagerly to be employed even at 5pm were undocumented persons with no sufficient papers to work, for no one wants to employ them because of their asylum or refugee status or because they cannot communicate well in English. Probably these people still standing eagerly

to be employed even at 5pm were people from ethnic minority communities, for they are denied chances of employment in many cases. The writer of the parable in verse 7 even brands these people standing at 5pm as “idle”, implying the rest of them who were employed earlier seem to be smart and meritorious. In such a context, the land-owner challenges tradition, and exercises equity and justice, by not only employing these people who are still standing at 5pm but also by giving equal wages to all of those that have started to work from the first hour till the last hour, even though it upsets those that came early. Economic justice is ensured, based on equity and equality.

In our times today, where the mantra of globalisation is sheer profit without any importance for human worth, where forces like patriarchy, caste, class, war, race, violence, and fundamentalism rule as principalities and powers preferring those with so called capabilities and employing them at early hours, the parable calls us to stand alongside those that are still standing at 5pm, waiting to be employed and recognised. In the changing landscapes of the church and society, the calling for all of us is to shift our focus to those that are standing at 5pm eager to be employed, for no one hires them because of the stigma and discrimination they face. The call for us is to look and locate God among those that are waiting still at 5pm, and recognise the worth of life that has been equally granted by God to all. Unless we shift our focus to those friends and communities on the margins and make them the epicentre of our mission, our faith may not have its savour and relevance. We must therefore rise up to the occasion of affirming life in all its fullness among those that are being pushed to the margins by the forces of class, caste, gender, etc and strive to break down these cruel forces, for God stands among those that are still waiting at 5pm to be employed and to receive equal wages like others.

By locating the divine among the margins, we are challenged to address the needs of these people who are pushed into unemployment and poverty, for a Church *with* the poor is possible only by our becoming a church *of* the poor.

a fierce heart for the poor



Rachel Lampard is Vice President of the Methodist Conference 2016–17.

John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism in the 18th century, was uncompromising in his personal commitment to people living in poverty. When asked by a tax official to declare all his silver plate on which he should be paying excise duties, he replied: “Sir. I have two silver teaspoons at London, and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present; and I shall not buy anymore while so many around me want bread.” He really was a man who put his money where his mouth was.

Wesley had a fierce heart for people in poverty and said some things which are deeply challenging to us, to our politics and our Church today. He said that “one great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them.” And, by the way, a person was “rich” by Wesley’s standards if they had “food and raiment sufficient for himself and his family, and something over”. Wesley’s faith was rooted in the often countercultural belief that God’s love was for absolutely everyone, and early Methodism appealed strongly to those who were poorer.

Early Methodism’s roots in the poorest communities led Methodist people to be at the heart of many of the important and empowering social movements of the day – most notably the rise of the Trade Union Movement and campaigns to treat workers fairly and safely.

Wesley’s faith was rooted in the often countercultural belief that God’s love was for absolutely everyone

Through its later history Methodism hasn’t always reflected its early formation. But it has maintained its commitment to challenging poverty. Methodists usually get stuck in – there are over 7,000 examples of local churches around Britain being involved in community projects, many of them supporting people who experience poverty or are marginalised. The Methodist Church is reviewing the grants it offers to ensure that money aimed at poverty and justice projects reflects the reality of poverty in Britain today, where being at once in work and in poverty are increasingly common.

And Methodists believe that Christians are called to challenge structural injustices. In 2011 we became the first UK denomination to mandate the payment of the Living Wage to church employees. Working with Church partners through the Joint Public Issues Team, the Methodist Church has campaigned against the unjust benefit sanctions regime, spoken out about the truth and lies about poverty, and helped churches to reflect on the challenges presented by the growing number of people using food banks.

In the UK there are 13.7 million people living in poverty and it is estimated that each year over 1 million people experience the most degrading and extreme form of poverty – destitution. Yet very few of these people will attend Methodist churches; fewer will speak in our churches, our synods or our annual Conference.

Today’s challenge is to be a church of the poor – for if we are not, how can we understand the reality of poverty, how can we be challenged by the reality of poverty, how can we base our action on the experience of poverty, and in short how can we genuinely call ourselves a church for the poor?

In practice: Methodist anti-poverty projects

The Methodist Church, from its very beginning, has placed a concern for the poor at the heart of its mission and ministry. One of the first Methodist societies met in a building in London called the Foundry. It quickly responded to the poverty around it by providing small loans to families to free them from usurious and often violent moneylenders.

For John and Charles Wesley, ‘works’ as well as faith were essential to the whole of Christian living. This meant they took seriously a duty to care for the poor, prisoners, widows and orphans. One of their main aims was to remedy things that were wrong in society, and John Wesley’s last known letter urged the abolition of “that execrable villainy” slavery.

The Methodist Church in Great Britain today has 31 ‘districts’; districts contain a number of ‘circuits’ (usually groups of around 10 churches). Districts and churches decide where Methodist ministers will be stationed and many do prioritise poorer areas; churches in poor areas are also cross-subsidised by other churches in their circuit.

The **Mission Alongside the Poor** (MAP) programme exists to promote the work of the Methodist Church in support of people affected by poverty and disadvantage. MAP provides funding to Methodist churches to run projects where there is evidence of relative poverty, in urban and rural areas, and where there is a commitment to work alongside those in need. The programme is being reviewed by the 2016 Methodist Conference, and will probably be renamed and focused more closely on poverty.

letting go of power



Revd Dr Clare McBeath is Co-Principal of the Northern Baptist College.

A few weeks ago we took a risk. We took a risk in suspending the regular teaching programme at Luther King House (Manchester) for a week. Instead we gathered the whole community to reflect theologically on a theme, a theme we hear almost daily on our radios and TVs, that of migration.

But we didn't want to just reflect on the stories of migrants 'out there', in Calais, Greece or Turkey. We recognised that a large proportion of our students are themselves migrants with stories to share, and from whom we could learn. So we began by giving everyone their travel permit and lining up according to how far we had travelled on holiday or for work. We learned that many of us travel almost without thinking about it and I, for one, take for granted that I can travel anywhere in the world.

We listened to each other's stories – stories from Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Eritrea.... We heard stories of horror, of violence, extreme poverty and rejection and stories of hope, of hospitality, welcome and celebration. Together we learned some of the statistics behind the news headlines and challenged ourselves to unmask the negative language of the media.

Together we learned stories of migration going back to the very origins of humanity in Africa, migrations within Europe, colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, World War II and the economic migration which followed it. In other words, we learned that migration is normal and has often had a religious dimension. We looked too at the Bible, and its diverse voices and stories of migration – which we can see reflected in current debates.

So where did all this leave us theologically? It left us exploring issues of identity and celebrating diversity. It left us questioning boundaries and challenging the media stories we are fed. It left us with a deep sense of needing to confess that many of us have benefited from being citizens of a colonial power and wanting to seek reconciliation. It helped us to see that the church is migrating as well as hosting. That God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit offer hospitality but are also the migrant on the move.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:52–53

In short, it helped us get beyond the 'them and us'. To move to a place where we are all in some sense leaving home to embark on a journey. To offer hospitality, to call for jubilee and mutual interdependence, to embrace change and movement with a child-like playfulness. In short, to recognise that we need a new vision where all are migrants in solidarity with one another.

So why is this a call to action? How does this embody a vision of a church for the poor? Because these distinctions of them and us, rich and poor, host and migrant, the Western world and the global South, are breaking down, and we are called to cross these boundaries. We are called by the God who had nowhere to call home to let go of security and embrace a radical openness to each other. We are called by the crucified God to let go of power and embrace vulnerability. We are called by the resurrected God to let go of fear and live out a radical love, a new community, God's kin-dom here on earth. And it starts with us, each one of us.

In practice: Baptist anti-poverty work

Baptists see that the call of the gospel is to work for freedom, peace and justice, and that this is part of what it means to be a missionary people today. Working in collaboration with ecumenical agencies and partners, they look to be actively involved in creating a movement for change in the world. Their Faith and Society team facilitates campaigning against poverty and the structures that keep people oppressed.

Much of the Baptists' work on social issues is carried out through the Joint Public Issues Team (see page 16), in collaboration with colleagues in the Methodist Conference, the United Reformed Church, and the Church of Scotland.

embodying a church of the poor



Martin Johnstone is secretary of the Church of Scotland's Church & Society Council.

A couple of years ago, in October 2014, I had the incredible privilege of spending four days attending a conference hosted by the Vatican during which Pope Francis spoke powerfully about what it meant to move from being a Church that cared about the poor to being one in which the poorest in our world are the heartbeat of the Church's life.

This remarkable gathering didn't just talk about the possibility of a Church of the Poor. It sought to embody it with participants, primarily from the global South, who were themselves urban slum dwellers, rural farmers and waste pickers. One of the images which will remain with me for the rest of my life is of a huge rubbish bin being pushed through St Peter's Basilica and then placed on the alter next to the most famous communion table in the world from which the Eucharist was celebrated. It felt truly a sign that the poor are at the heart of the Church.

Part of what I understand to be happening at this time is a movement of the Spirit of God which involves a movement of the Church's centre of gravity from Europe (and North America) to what was, in the past, called the Third (or developing) world. This is also, naturally, a movement from the rich to the poor. Many of us in the rich world find such a shift hard to comprehend, surrounded as we are by the decline of institutional religion and the apparent rise of secular fundamentalism where we are frequently more focused on survival than encountering Christ at the margins.

There are, however, glimpses of that reality in our midst. For 15 years, I had the incredible privilege of supporting the Church of Scotland's work in its 60 poorest neighbourhoods. The Church of Scotland has been very unusual – some might say unique – in deliberately bending its mainstream resources towards the very poorest people and places over much of the last 20 years. In 2001 its General Assembly noted: "priority for the poorest is the gospel imperative facing the whole Church, not just the Church in our poorest communities." In subsequent years it has sought not just to talk about this priority but to embody it.

This has not meant that there has been great numerical growth, but that the Church is still there when so many others have walked away is, in itself, a sign of God's abiding presence. On a daily basis many incredible things happen. Food is shared. Prayers rise to heaven. Children laugh. People work for justice. Gospel stories are lived out. Lives are transformed. It also enables the Church in this part of the world to connect with the Church in the global South, to play our small part in the movement to become (or to return to being) a Church of the Poor.

God,
I have a simple prayer
for the Church.
I pray that one day soon
I will be part of a church that
when we pray for the poor,
We will pray for 'us' and not
'them'.
I pray for a Church that
will not only have the
courage
to work for the poor,
to struggle with the poor.
but will also be of the poor.
And I pray that one day
there will be no poor people
in the Church of Scotland
because there will be no
poverty.
And I pray to you,
the God of miracles,
the God of the rich,
the God of the poor.
Amen

For churches, Jesus initiated the act of making visible those who are overlooked. It sometimes requires standing out against a society which stigmatises poverty in order that the violence which is daily perpetrated against poor people may be concealed and covered up.

Kathy Galloway, former leader of the Iona Community and Director of Christian Aid Scotland (from *Taking Care of What We Value*, Church Action on Poverty, 2002)



overview: the Church of Scotland and poverty

The Church of Scotland has a Priority Areas Programme which is responsible for the support, development and coordination of the Church's work within its poorest 65 communities.

"Our Mandate: 'priority for the poorest and the most marginalised is the gospel imperative facing the whole Church, not just the Church in the poorest places.'"

(General Assembly 2001)

The Church of Scotland's 'Priority Areas' programme envisions a "reinvigorated and sustainable worshipping people and community life in all priority area parishes". Its core principles are:

- Priority must mean priority
- Accountability to the local
- Partnership is the only way
- Priority areas are good places to be

In practice: Faith in Community (Tackling Poverty Through Faith)

"Faith in Community Scotland walks together with people of faith in support of our economically poorest communities. We are committed to working hand in hand with all who share the desire to challenge and overcome poverty and exclusion."



Faith in Community (FiC) is an independent charity which works closely with the Priority Areas Committee of the Church of Scotland, as well as a wide range of other churches and faith groups. FiC are responsible for a number of faith-based anti-poverty initiatives. Work is targeted at the poorest 5% of communities (according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2006).

www.faithincommunityscotland.org

Tackling Poverty Together is an example of a Faith in Community programme; it is about local communities working together and responding to the impacts of welfare reform in local neighbourhoods.

Parish churches are at the heart of Scotland's communities. They often still exist in villages or deprived urban areas where shops, banks and other institutions have disappeared. The Church delivers and supports a range of social care programmes in these and other communities through its Social Care Council, **CrossReach**. As one of the country's largest providers of social services, CrossReach Services include care for older people, help with alcoholism, drug and mental health problems and assistance for homeless people and those with special learning needs.

Although CrossReach is part of the Church of Scotland, its services are available to people of all faiths and backgrounds. The Church believes that serving people in local communities is a way of honouring Jesus by caring for others and demonstrating his love for them through positive actions.

In practice: Poverty Truth Commission Scotland

The Poverty Truth Commission in Scotland is a collection of people with diverse skills, life experiences, skills and interests, but who share the same concern and accept a common commission: to explore, expose and confront the consequences of poverty in all its forms and to imagine and promote change. The Poverty Truth Commission brings some of Scotland's best known leaders (in politics, policy, public service and the arts) together with people with lived experience of poverty – working together as equal commissioners; titles, positions and qualifications are left at the door. The Commissioners meet to share their own stories and to listen to those of others. Difficult issues are confronted and this can be painful at times, but the group also supports each other, sharing positive stories and finding inspiration together. The group works together towards overcoming poverty in Scotland; ensuring that those affected by decisions are central to decision-making. The Commission believes poverty will only be truly addressed when those who experience it first-hand are at the heart of the process.

The third round of commissioners (2014–16) have produced a report on their findings (*Names Not Numbers*), and spoken publicly on the issues they have been exploring. They have run working groups on Dignity and the Power of Stories, Food Poverty, and The Cost of School.

"It has energised us and renewed our commitment to work for a more just society in which people living with poverty are central to work to overcome it."

The Scottish Commission has already helped establish a similar process in

Leeds, and discussions are taking place in other cities – including Salford, where Church Action on Poverty is a partner helping to establish the Commission.

<http://povertytruthcommission.blogspot.co.uk>



overview: free and independent churches and poverty



The response of Christians in recent years to growing poverty in the UK has been impressive. Almost every church I know, from Pentecostal to Catholic, has some involvement in a food bank, or a homeless project, a money advice service, a job club or most recently with asylum-seekers and refugees. We are certainly more aware

and more concerned. Yet we are not so good at asking the question “why” or understanding the political and economic causes of destitution in our land. Nor are we very good at listening to and sharing the stories of the poor. And very few churches are cultural settings or communities where people struggling with poverty can really feel comfortable, truly welcome and fully belong. There is still much to do before the church as a whole moves from being *for* the poor to being alongside and *of* the poor. We need to make good use of the relationships formed with people who make use of all our projects, and listen to what they, and through them the Spirit, are saying to the Church today.

Greg Smith (Parish of the Risen Lord Preston, Together Lancashire, Evangelical Alliance and William Temple Foundation)

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because
He appointed me to preach the gospel
to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives, and recovery
of sight to the blind, to set free those
who are downtrodden, to proclaim the
favourable year of the Lord.**

Luke 4:16–21

In practice: the Salvation Army's anti-poverty work



The Salvation Army was started by William Booth in 1865. They say that they “fight against wrong in the world” and their mission is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to meet people's needs without discrimination. Helping people in the community in really practical ways has always been at the heart of what the Salvation Army do as a church. They run community outreach events – from drop-in centres, luncheon clubs and playgroups to more specialised work and support groups.

Ann Fowler House Lifehouse is an example of a Salvation Army project: a specialist female-only residential centre for women experiencing homelessness, which specialises in helping its residents back into independent living. It offers more than a safe, secure home for 38 women by offering practical support through training in such basics as literacy, cooking, computer skills, confidence and self-esteem building, as well as employment skills as part of a wider resettlement programme. Project workers assist residents in working through problems and enhancing their independent living skills, in order for them to move on to more appropriate, permanent accommodation. In association with specialist agencies, Ann Fowler House also facilitates programmes to help women who have been abused or worked in the sex trade.



Food banks are about more than food and poverty. They are also about the need for justice and equity, but perhaps most of all, they are about community. Food banks are also not just about giving, but also about the benefits of friendship and human interaction on many levels. The Apostolic Pastoral Congress is committed to encouraging every church to be a part of a local food bank solution, because together, we can make a big difference.

Archbishop Doyé Agama is executive director of the Apostolic Pastoral Congress



In practice: the Joint Public Issues Team and tackling poverty

The Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) combines the expertise of the Baptist Union, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church. In March 2015, the Church of Scotland also joined JPIT for a one year pilot partnership. The Team aims to enable the four Churches to work together in living out the gospel of Christ in the Church and in wider society. The aim is to promote equality and justice by influencing those in power and by energising and supporting local congregations.

The Joint Public Issues Team have produced a number of reports on social issues in the UK, including myths about poverty, benefit sanctions and food banks. See www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/resources for more information.



Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

Luke 6:20–21



The church is in an ideal position to be an agent of change because of its independent nature, because it has access to resources that other organisations do not and because the very nature of its witness demands it to be a fellowship of people who sit with others, hear their stories and support them in their struggles. However, this is a difficult message to get across both to the church which sees itself as respectable and not wanting to taint itself with politics on a local level, and to people in the community who see the churches as a patronising agency, ready to play lady bountiful but not ready to enter into their real situations.

Bethan Galliers (in *Building for Community*, Churches National Housing Coalition, 1997)

raising the sails for when the wind changes



Cait Crosse is New Economy Project Manager for the Society of Friends.

For Quakers, overcoming poverty is a matter of justice, not charity. To many, it's wrong that parts of our society struggle to make ends meet, when there is more than enough wealth to go around. And Quakers challenge themselves to take action against social injustice as an important part of their spiritual life – even when it puts them at odds with the political and economic status quo. In this way, Quakers uphold Gandhi's words that “those who say that religion doesn't have anything to do with politics don't know what religion is”. Recently, Friends have organised Equality Weeks, campaigned for a Living Wage and written to their MPs to raise concerns about inequality, to give just three examples. Additionally, the Church employs members of staff to carry out social justice work on behalf of all Friends, such as campaigning against this government's reforms to welfare.

Over the last five years, Quakers have also been thinking collectively about how to work on a bigger scale to address the root causes of economic injustice and unsustainability. Many see growing inequality, poverty and climate change as a sign that there is something fundamentally wrong with our economic system. In 2011, Quakers made a statement at their Yearly Meeting that the global economy “in its pursuit of growth ... is often unjust, violent and destructive”. They decided that they needed, as a Church, to “learn more about how we are influenced and constrained by the economic system”. Friends asked what an economic system compatible with Quaker values such as equality, sustainability and peace would look like in practice. They

knew they didn't have all the answers, but they felt clear that they needed to find out more.

The New Economy project is part of the response to these questions. This project aims to support Quakers to reflect on our current economic system, and think about how they can change it. To help this discernment, seven booklets exploring different aspects of the economy will be published in the coming year. A guiding statement, entitled ‘Principles for a New Economy’, was produced in 2015, suggesting some key features that might underpin an economic system compatible with Quaker values. These principles focus on sustainability, economic and social equality and meaningful democracy within an economic system aimed at “the enhancement of all life, human and non-human”. These are common ideals, perhaps. But if put into practice, these principles would represent a significant departure from the mainstream economic policies of today.

Why bother with this utopian thinking, when there are pressing problems of poverty and inequality facing us across Britain? Quakers know, from centuries of experience, that change takes time and requires both practical responses to current issues, but also a ‘long view’. The New Economy project is ultimately about supporting Friends to take action, but action that addresses root causes, as well as urgent needs. This thinking is required by the scale of the problem – the reality that the economic inequality, poverty and climate chaos facing the world today may only be solved by radical changes to our system, our communities and our lives. At the annual Quaker Salter Lecture, Ed Mayo, the Secretary General of Co-operatives UK, called the process of imagining a better world and nurturing practical local changes “raising the sails for when the wind changes”. Friends hope that the New Economy project will play an important part in this sail-raising work, to help build a just and equal economy in the future.

Find out more and read the *Principles for a New Economy* at www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/economic-justice/new-economy



overview: Quakers and poverty

The Society of Friends began in the 17th century. Founder George Fox was a firm believer that belief in God was not compatible with warfare. He developed this belief against the backdrop of the English Civil War, an incredibly bloody and violent conflict. It was a time of unrest and change in England. Quakers were one of several groups who challenged many of the beliefs and ideas of the time. Since 1660, speaking out against violent conflict, and work to tackle its root causes, have been central to Quakerism. Throughout history people have chosen to act out their testimony to peace in different ways such as refusing military service in both world wars, campaigning against nuclear weapons, and engaging in diplomatic work in areas of conflict.

Prominent Quaker Seebohm Rowntree (son of Joseph Rowntree) conducted a famous study on poverty in York, *Poverty: a Study in Town Life* (1901). The study found that almost 28% of the population in York were living in poverty and did not have enough food, fuel and clothing to keep them in good health. The report was significant as it shocked the nation by showing the extent of poverty in a small city like York; the evidence showed that people were not to blame for their own poverty (people could not be expected to save when they did not have enough for the basic essentials). Seebohm's reports helped to bring about the Liberal reforms of 1906–12, including the provision of free school meals, sickness and unemployment insurance, and the first state pensions. Seebohm Rowntree also worked with William Beveridge to pioneer family allowances through a voluntary scheme at Rowntrees. Beveridge was very interested in Seebohm's report on poverty in York and his ideas contributed to Beveridge's thinking on social policy.

Today Quakers in Britain work on a number of social issues including: peace, sustainability, social justice (including housing), economic justice (including economic inequality and social security) and social action training.

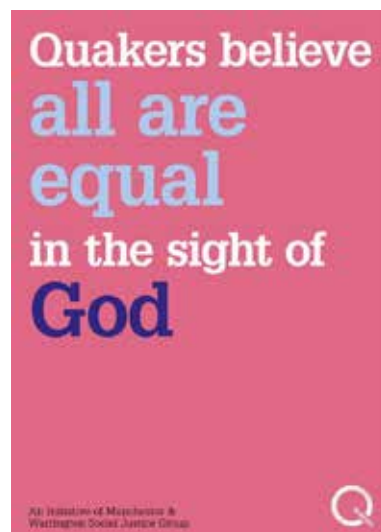
Bear witness to the humanity of all people, including those who break society's conventions or its laws. Try to discern new growing points in social and economic life. Seek to understand the causes of injustice, social unrest and fear. Are you working to bring about a just and compassionate society which allows everyone to develop their capacities and fosters the desire to serve?

Taken from the Society of Friends' Advices and Queries

In practice: Quaker Social Action (QSA)

Since 1867 QSA has taken action against poverty with practical projects in east London and across the UK. They believe that people in poverty are the real poverty experts, so work with them to deliver real change. Quaker values sit at the heart of what they do as an independent charity. QSA currently work on:

- funeral poverty (Down to Earth provides practical help for people struggling with funeral costs and the Fair Funerals campaign)
- finance (coping with living on a low income),
- furniture (providing affordable furniture to people on a low income)
- fulfilment (This Way Up is a project that offers people a course of one-to-one life coaching and group mindfulness practice to help them plan, make clearer decisions and move towards their goals).



a countercultural church of and for the poor



John Cooper is Regional Coordinator (West Midlands) and Local Advocacy Development Officer for Christian Aid.

I'm sat in the corner of a tin tabernacle in the capital city of one of the poorest nations of the world. The church roof may be incomplete but that hasn't stopped people crowding in for their weekly act of worship. As the interpreter whispered into my ears a translation of the testimony being shared, I realised I was getting a glimpse of the church at its most transformational.

The testimony wasn't comfortable to hear. It was the story of a pastor who contracted HIV. Pastor Tharseiss had lost his wife and a child, and was worried that his own church would push him out. Instead they rallied round and supported him, and now he travels round Burundi as part of BUNERELLA +, an ecumenical project supported by Christian Aid, speaking from pulpits to demonstrate that the body of Christ has AIDS and the people of Christ are called to love. His testimony was powerful and there was a sense of movement in the church as the congregation took to its heart the challenging words. People spoke with him afterwards and perspectives were changed.

The Apostle Paul's magnificent vision of 'The Body of Christ' is one that often emerges in writings about how we can create a world free from poverty. The interconnectedness of all elements of our body, and the many hidden links within us that keep us living, remind us that our journey of faith is far more intertwined with communities around the globe than we dare imagine.

That is where movements for justice begin: people inspired to step aside from accepted practice in order to highlight a new truth

By engaging in what John Stott defines as "double listening", listening to both God's Word and God's World, we can begin to understand the world and how we are called to respond. I am heartened by continual glimpses I see of the global church being countercultural and prophetic. I believe that God is at the heart of all movements for justice and

equality, even if they are seen as 'outside' what's socially accepted. Whether in great movements through history, or in the church today. A well known example is Wilberforce first speaking out against the evils of slavery, doing so not as the leader of a wildly popular movement but as a rank outsider. Lesser known ones include when my local church established a food bank. People suggested our postcode wouldn't need one, but once our doors were opened we encountered many of the 'hidden' poor who were just a meal away from absolute poverty.

I am heartened by continual glimpses I see of the global church being countercultural and prophetic

And that is where movements for justice begin: people inspired to step aside from accepted practice in order to highlight a new truth. For many years Christian Aid has been trying to raise the voice of the poorest. That's why hundreds of churches across the UK have recognised their buildings are an act of witness and joined together in the Big Church Switch, moving their energy supplies from climate change causing fossil fuels to renewable power. They act in hope of a fairer, safer future. They dare to dream that God's world includes development of clean energy so all may access electricity. Rather than waiting for this change to come from elsewhere, they are taking it upon themselves to be the instigators of change.

A church of and for the poor recognises and celebrates the presence of the Kingdom of God among us here and now. It risks its 'safe' established place by speaking out for the poorest, the marginalised, the dispossessed; and it seeks to build them up so everyone can find their place as loved and cherished members of God's world. The Kingdom of God can and will exist on God's good earth, and it's the church's place to roll up its sleeves and act as midwife to a beautiful process of renewal and new beginning.

prayers of the people



Chris Howson, Chaplain to Sunderland University, wrote these prayers inspired by words from Luke's Gospel.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

(Luke 1:52–53)

Lord, in a world where the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer, we know that your kingdom is not being fulfilled. Renew us, inspire us, teach us how to live out our calling. We will seek out those laid low by greed and capitalism, and we will lift them before you. We will fill the hungry with good things and help those with money and resources to use them for the good of all.

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.

(Luke 3:11)

Lord, in a world where tax havens are seen as legitimate and where millions go hungry and have restricted healthcare and education, we long to build communities where resources are shared. Help us make sure that food banks and clothes banks, that credit unions and local exchange and change projects, are places that empower and build up resistance to oppression. Help those with money and gifts to share, use them wisely and generously.

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.

(Luke 4:18–19)

Lord – if our church services and our prayers are not about bringing good news to the poor, then let us repent and start over. Jesus begins his ministry with the call to be a people of faith who bring joy and freedom to those who need it most. Let our faith and our churches be led by that same spirit.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”

(Luke 6:20–21)

Lord, those who have gone without know what the kingdom of God should be like. Let those who have suffered guide our worship and our discipleship. Let the destitute refugee teach us about welcome, let the homeless single parent teach us about generosity, let the children teach us about hope and joy. Let the disabled teach us about the use of gifts. Let those who have been imprisoned teach us about

being free. Let us turn this world's expectations upside down.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

(Luke 6:37)

Lord, let us learn not to judge others, but to love them as they are. Let us learn not to condemn others but to embrace them. Let us learn to forgive, and forgive again, so we may be free from the wounds of vengeance and anger.

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

(Luke 14:13)

Lord teach us to open our homes and our churches to the most vulnerable. It may feel like a huge cost to us, but we will discover that we are welcoming Christ back into our lives

So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

(Luke 14:33)

Lord – let all that we have, our homes, our cars, our most beloved possessions – let us offer them to you in service. And if we cannot do this, let us learn to let them go. You are all that we need.

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

(Luke 22:19–20)

Lord, as we gather to worship you, when we share the bread and wine as a community, let us remember you and your teachings. You teach us to share, to love, to reach out to those in need and to be alongside the vulnerable. You teach us to be sacrificial, believing that even if the journey is hard and brings death to old customs – there will always be new life in you.

Amen

prayers and worship

A selection of prayers and worship ideas on the theme of a church of the poor.

Opening prayers

O God, you are the gathering one
who calls us into community
with each other
to love and work,
to support and heal.

You are the gathering one
who calls us into community
with all people;
to bring justice and hope,
freedom and truth.

You are the gathering one
who calls us into community
with the whole creation;
to live in harmony,
to cherish and renew.

Let us worship the God who makes us one.

(Taken from Just Church, www.justchurch.org.uk)

Loving God,
you have led us to this place, not to shield us
from heartache and the pain of human life,
but to heal us and inspire us, to gently
redirect us,
till we see the world as you do and love it
with your love.
Amen

(Taken from the Iona Abbey Worship Book)

Prayers of faith and concern

Give us, O Lord, Churches
that will be more courageous than cautious;
that will not merely 'comfort the afflicted'
but 'afflict the comfortable';
that will not only love the world but will also
judge the world;
that will not only pursue peace but also
demand justice;
that will not remain silent when people are
calling for a voice;
that will not pass by on the other side when
wounded humanity is waiting to be healed;
that will not only call us to worship but also
send us out to witness;
that will follow Christ even when the way
points to a cross.

To this end we offer ourselves in the name of
him who loved us and gave himself for us.

*(Christian Conference of Asia, taken from 'They
Shall Not Rob Us of Hope...'; CAFOD, 1995)*

Poor Ones,
Please take the bread. It is yours.
The house with running water belongs to you.
A plot of land, a dignified job— all yours.
Forgive me for offering it.
Charity is no substitute for justice
but your children are hungry now.

Spirit of Justice,
break open our hearts.
Break them wide open.
Let anger pour through like strong winds,
cleansing us of complacency.
Let courage pour through like spring storms,
flooding out fear.
Let zeal pour through like blazing summer
sun,
filling us with passion.

Force of Justice, grant me
anger at what is,
courage to do what must be done,
passion to break down the walls
of injustice
and build a land flowing with milk and
honey
for God's beloved,
God's special love,
God's Poor Ones.

Spirit of Justice
break open our hearts.
(Sister Mary Lou Kownacki)

An affirmation

It is not true that this world and its inhabitants are doomed to die and be lost;
This is true: For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him shall not die but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction;
This is true: I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred shall have the last word, and that war and destruction have come to stay forever;
This is true: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given in whom authority will rest and whose name will be prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil that seek to rule the world;
This is true: To me is given all authority in Heaven and on Earth, and lo, I am with you always to the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the church, before we can do anything;

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all people, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young people shall see visions, and your old folk shall dream dreams.

It is not true that our dreams for the liberation of humankind, our dreams of justice, of human dignity, of peace, are not meant for this earth and this history;
This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that true worshippers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

(South Africa, taken from the Iona Community Worship Book)

A prayer of confession

O God,
 you have given us the vision
 of working for your kingdom,
 but we fall far short of that hope.
 Forgive us, O God.
 You call us to be the Body of Christ,
 but we fail to see the gifts that are among us
 and often stand divided
 Forgive us, O God
 and give us faith, hope and love.
 Amen

(Taken from Just Church, www.justchurch.org.uk)

A blessing

O God, to those who are hungry give bread,
 And to us, who have bread,
 give hunger for justice.

(Latin America, taken from 'They Shall Not Rob Us of Hope...', CAFOD, 1995)

Suggested hymns

- Sent by the Lord am I
- Jesus Christ is waiting
- Inspired by love and anger
- A touching place (Christ's is the world)
- The Spirit lives to set us free
- O Lord, all the world belongs to you
- Make me a channel of your peace
- Go tell everyone ('God's spirit is in my heart')
- Seek ye first the kingdom of God
- We lay our broken world
- Kum ba ya
- When I needed a neighbour

There is no true commitment to solidarity with the poor if one sees them merely as people passively waiting for help.

...

The gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.

...

The real story of a people is not written by the manipulations and coercions of those in power, ready to sacrifice people to economic theory and national security. It is written by the emerging hope and involvement of the poor.

...

A church for the poor would be challenging, disturbing, in a society that prefers to keep the poor at arm's length, if not out of sight and out of mind.

...

When people see a Church that practises what it preaches, that listens to the cry of the poor, that challenges the values of the world, they sit up and listen.

...

We are called by the crucified God to let go of power and embrace vulnerability. We are called by the resurrected God to let go of fear and live out a radical love, a new community, God's kin-dom here on earth.

...

That is where movements for justice begin: people inspired to step aside from accepted practice in order to highlight a new truth.