

stories from the edge

building a good society in
Scotland's post-industrial towns



Compiled by
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stories from the edge

Faith-inspired social activism is building a Good Society in Scotland's post-industrial towns.

Faith communities in post-industrial towns across Scotland are delivering social action to tackle the effects of poverty. Many of these projects are dealing with an ever-growing need and are stretched thin. Everyone is aware of the effects of poverty in big cities, but less attention is paid to the towns which were the heartlands of manufacturing industry.

Church Action on Poverty, in partnership with Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) and the Conforti Institute, hosted 'Stories from the Edge' on 12 October 2017, a gathering of faith-inspired social activists from Scotland's post-industrial towns alongside leaders from church and civic society, to explore, reflect and share experiences.

The conference began with reflections from two contrasting projects in post-industrial towns (see the boxes elsewhere on this page for details of both projects). The Reverend David Gifford, Rector of St Mary's Scottish Episcopal Church in Port Glasgow, Inverclyde, told us about the Clydemens, a lunch club for former shipyard workers and allied trades, which has more than 90 men registered. He told us about the disappearance of the old industries, and the changes in the landscape which have erased the physical reminders of the once-mighty Lower Clyde, where at one time 70% of the ships sailing the ocean were built. He spoke of the alienation and isolation of the men who built the ships, with loss of identity and a legacy of alcohol abuse and ill health. The Lunch Club is about the history and the proud industrial heritage of Port Glasgow, but it has a far more important role:

"It may not be the sound of rivets and clanging steel you hear at Clydemens these days, but the men chatting and reminiscing – and believing in themselves again."

David Spink, a retired bank manager, shared the story of the Havilah project in Arbroath. He told us about the drop-in service open to anyone seeking company and non-judgemental listening. Many of the people there have issues with drug and alcohol addiction, others are just lonely. All are welcome. The name 'Havilah' is a place "where there is gold" – David felt that it was appropriate. Many of the people who come to the project are the most marginalised in their communities, and perceived very negatively, but in all of them there is gold.

After being inspired by the stories told, the gathering worked together to address a number of questions...

Stories from the Edge: Havilah, Arbroath

St Andrew's Church set up Havilah to express its belief that "EVERYONE is a child of God and no-one should ever be written off". Havilah is a three-hours-a-day, five-days-a-week drop-in service open to anyone seeking company and non-judgemental listening. They offer simple food and drink – tea, coffee, biscuits, soup lunches. They say that "to be ministering in Havilah is to be doing as Jesus did – in love, getting alongside those looked down on and despised."



Members of the church pray regularly for the work, encourage the members who work and volunteer in the project, and provide a warm welcome to Havilah clients when they take part in worship. They also make soup, sponsor individuals who enter rehab, and send them Christmas cards.

Havilah offers:

- a soup lunch in a friendly, relaxed environment;
- someone to talk to in confidence;
- support to attend appointments;
- budgeting advice;
- help to fill out forms and to make benefit claims;
- prison visits and post-prison support;
- guidance for residential rehabilitation;
- signposting to other agencies.

Stories from the Edge: Clydemens, Port Glasgow

To walk the banks of the Lower Clyde today is to be unaware you are walking on ground that for miles was a hive of industry. The human landscape is as bereft and as barren as the shipyards. As the land had lost its identity so had the people – especially men. They could not even point to the smallest remnant of industrial fabric to tell their grandchildren, "I worked there."

Into this situation St Mary's Episcopal Church started Clydemens: a lunch club for former shipyard workers and those of allied trades. Thinking they may get 20 men coming along, from the outset they outgrew the room set aside. With over 90 men registered, the monthly Lunch Club now has 60–70 regulars.



What are we already doing in our towns to create a Good Society in Scotland?

Faith communities in post-industrial towns across Scotland are delivering services and working together in their communities, from running food banks to growing food, from organising credit unions to providing money and debt advice. They are working with a wide range of people, including prisoners and ex-offenders, those struggling with substance abuse, those who are homeless, refugees and people seeking asylum, parents and children, older people, carers, people affected by mental ill health, and so on. They are responding to the need in their communities through direct practical action.

Many of these projects are not just focused on practical help; they are also focused on tackling stigma and exclusion, building community, enabling participation, reducing loneliness and social isolation, celebrating volunteering and building networks.



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not do a credit check,

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they just helped”

What more needs to be done to make a Good Society in our post-industrial towns?

“Many churches support

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“We are propping up

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government to fail

in their duty

to their citizens”

The discussions identified a number of themes where either more work or a change in culture is needed.

There was a sense that while churches are good at ‘doing charity’ they are often not so good at engaging with the root causes of the issues. There was also recognition that some faith communities can, due to a lack of engagement with the wider community and voluntary sector, inadvertently replicate existing provision rather than collaborating, co-operating, sharing and filling the gaps in provision.

There is a need for impartial and accessible legal and financial professional services: the will is there, what is missing is the resource and organisation.

Many of the answers to this question posed more questions: how do faith-based projects remain rooted, avoiding top-down approaches and encouraging grassroots growth? How can they avoid paternalism and engage with people experiencing poverty and disadvantage as active collaborators rather than perceiving them as passive recipients? Should churches bring God into their social justice service and volunteering?

There was a sense of frustration at the tendency of funding bodies to ignore tried and tested long-term approaches in favour of ‘new and shiny’ short-term projects. It was felt that funders need to go beyond a ‘silo’ mentality to not just fund narrow groups and activities but to enable wider provision. There was also an awareness that the disappearance of European funding would hit hard, and an identified need for representation and advocacy to government to fill the gaps. However, it was strongly felt that the focus should be on meeting need rather than where the funding is coming from.

Overarching this whole conversation were fundamental questions around recognising our own complicity in the issues affecting our communities, and the ethical issues around food banks. If food banks are closed, people will go hungry, but there is anger that they are even necessary in our society. It was felt that food banks are the most visible manifestation of a systemic problem.



What help and support do we need to meet the needs of our places?

There is a need to challenge the media and work with them to change how they report poverty to include the testimony of people with lived experience. It is difficult to persuade people to recognise need and get involved when they are being influenced by negative stereotypes in the media: “we need to get rid of poverty porn.”

There is the need for a shift in culture within funding bodies to recognise the need for better approaches for sustainability and to value long-term impact over short-term thinking.

It was also felt that there is a need for more support and training for faith-based activists to become more involved in campaigning as well as providing services to enable them to be more prophetic and speak truth to power.

The need for a shift in mindset across the board to a more networked approach was identified: not doing anything alone that can be done together; ensuring that churches look beyond themselves.

It was seen to be important to celebrate what has already been achieved, sharing stories of hope and success to build on and encourage us to ‘hang on in there’. To move forward there is a need to invest in training volunteers and to develop effective grassroots leadership in communities.

**“How do areas of
prosperity engage
with the edge
when it is hidden
and they do not
even know it is there?”**



What do we need to 'centre the edge'?

There was a focus on the need to rebuild a sense of connected community, working to bring the level of compassion for immediate neighbours to the same level as the concern for global citizens. Spirituality and faith affect how people operate, with power dynamics replaced by relationships and community. This is not just institutional but individual: church members are often active in many community projects.

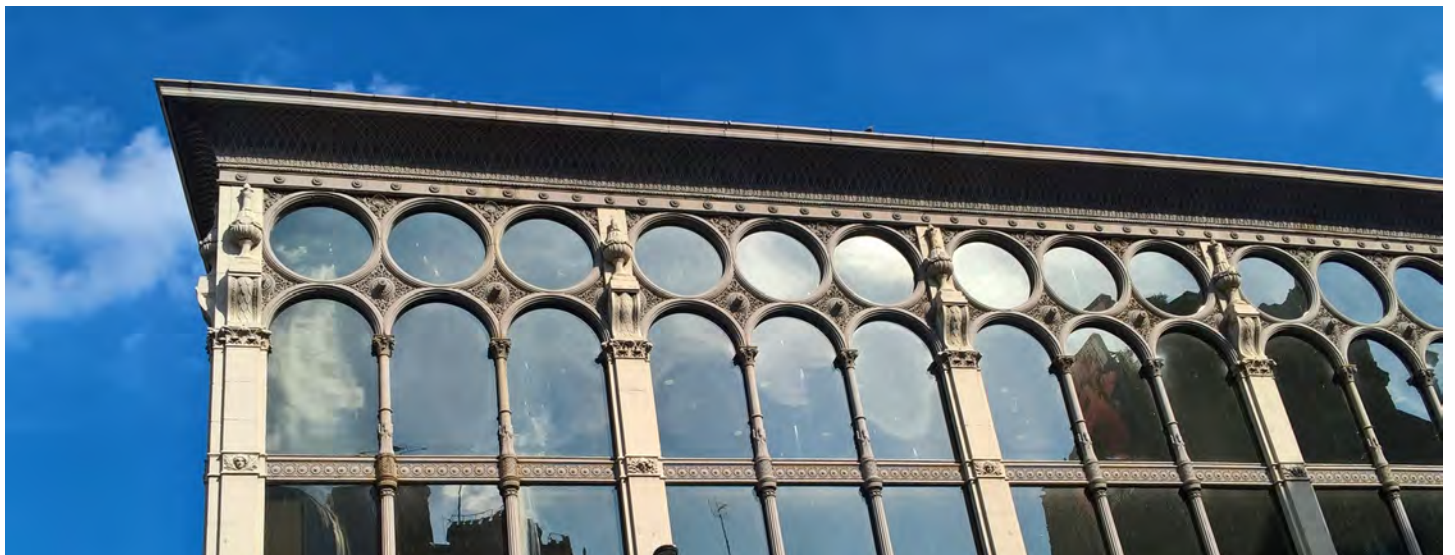
It is uncomfortable to acknowledge our own failings. We live in a society where people are homeless and there is a need for food banks. This is hard to admit and accept, so it is easy for people to blame 'the other'. People are cloaked from their own vulnerability by economic security: faith communities can enable people to go beyond charity to walk alongside others in shared vulnerability. There is an assumption that there is a 'safety-net': faith communities need to tell people that it is rapidly disappearing and bring people together to challenge that erosion.

There is a need for political will and investment not just in buildings but in people.

"Where there is

no vision,

the people perish"



where heaven might touch earth

Can the edge be a creative place?

The gathering closed with a panel reflection and discussion, with Kathy Galloway (author and former head of Christian Aid in Scotland), Fred Vincent (Project Coordinator of Chance to Thrive/Priority Areas of the Church of Scotland), and Alasdair McKinlay (head of the Community Planning and Empowerment Unit in the Scottish Government).

There was recognition from the panel of the difficulties faced by post-industrial towns in Scotland. Fred Vincent said:

“Scotland saw the double impact of the decline of heavy industry and the demise of mining. Whole towns were built around both industries, leading to double decline, double poverty and double isolation.”

Alasdair McKinlay added that

“The loss in smaller towns was more subtle and complex than in bigger towns. Each place has a slightly different experience.”

When asked about ‘centring the edge’, Fred Vincent responded:

“Isolation and alienation are at the heart of poverty – there is a need to create a space to build dignity and respect, to value people, to go on journeys, not at the centre or the edge but in shared life and relationships.”

Alasdair McKinlay responded:

“Who says who is at the edge? It is all about the perspective – it is dynamic and all about power. It is about listening. It is about walking in other people’s shoes. The importance of listening and relationships in government cannot be overstated. Many people in Scotland are having a bad time and we cannot deny that.”

Kathy Galloway added:

“The language we use can inform meaning. The edge can be the margin of alienation. But the edge is also where things are happening, with different ways of thinking about place. Where are we hearing the ‘edgy’, the innovation and the realisation of new possibilities?”

“Whatever the analysis,
in all of these areas there
are people of faith, vision,
heart, generosity
and giving. From the
central belt to the far north
there are people of faith
and churches. There is
a range of denominations
and other faiths working
in ways to find, bring
together and share the
Good Society, to see where
heaven might touch earth”

The Good Samaritan did not do a credit check, hold a meeting or fill in a form, they just helped

Many churches support existing initiatives as well as delivering themselves: they are not just in a holy huddle

We are propping up a system that neglects its people: we are enabling those in government to fail in their duty to their citizens

How do areas of prosperity engage with the edge when it is hidden and they do not even know it is there?

Where there is no vision, the people perish