



spark

news from Church Action on Poverty
autumn 2020

Using the arts to
loosen poverty's grip
page 10

Being church on the
margins during a
pandemic
page 14



“People have been saying it’s a lifeline”

How the growing Pantry network is anchoring people and
communities during the pandemic – feature article, page 8

LIFE CHANGING STORIES

scripture from the margins

Bible studies on the Acts of the Apostles from Church Action on Poverty



**Five studies by Nick Jowett, Sue Richardson, Chris Howson,
Ruth Wilde and Raj Patta**

**Explore how the gospel message empowered people on the
margins to go out and change the world**

Great for individual reflection or as a church Lent programme

**Available 8 October
– download free at
[www.church-
poverty.org.uk/
bible](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/bible)**

Welcome back!



Our Director **Niall Cooper** hopes that this first printed edition of *SPARK* since the start of the pandemic gives you a flavour of the work we've been involved in over those months.

What a few months it has been. In March, just as lockdown cut us off from friends, family, church and wider community, some 14 million people lost some or all of their income as the economy also went into lockdown. As we now start to emerge into the deepest recession in our lifetimes, it is clear that we're not all in the same boat. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated social and economic inequalities that were already present in society: huge numbers of people now face increased debts and uncertainty over their future, jobs, businesses, homes and livelihoods up and down the country.

It's also clear that we can only challenge poverty if we work together, and if we see people struggling to make ends meet not as hapless victims, but as active participants in the struggle against poverty that we are now all engaged in. A global pandemic brings home the fact that we all belong to one another.

We've been impressed by how churches, communities and 'mutual aid' groups have stepped up to the plate over the past few months. We've been delighted to work with the Joint Public Issues Team and United Reformed Church, to highlight some of what's been happening, and to offer resources for local churches to explore questions of community engagement and social justice in the new reality which we all face (pages 6–7).

One of our roles at Church Action on Poverty is to offer connection, innovation, inspiration and hope. I hope you are inspired by some of what you read here: maybe the amazing way in which our Local Pantries have ensured members can access good food even during lockdown (page 8); or the online gatherings, the Church on the Margins reflection community, and creative workshops that we've held since the start of April (pages 5 and 10); or through our new 'podcast to end poverty' (page 12).

Stay safe – and stay connected.

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give

Start planning a service for Church Action on Poverty Sunday, 21 February 2021
See page 16

act

Listen to the experiences of people on the margins during the pandemic
See page 6

pray

Plan a Lent programme using our new Bible studies
See page 2

news



Self-Reliant brews, jam and poems

The network of Self-Reliant Groups (SRGs) which we support across Greater Manchester has been finding creative ways to cope with lockdown and the pandemic.

Unable to meet in person, they have gathered on Zoom every week for a 'Self-Reliant Brew', and found new ways to inspire one another and work together. They've produced videos about their work, made jam, written poems, and shared inspirational blogs on our website.

We're delighted that SRGs continue to give people dignity, agency and power to change their situations.

Find out about the programme at www.church-poverty.org.uk/srg

We love to catch up, craft and gossip over a brew

Laughing and boosting one another where due!

Hayley, Footloose Self-Reliant Group

Funding to tackle the crisis

The pandemic and economic shock has had a severe impact on many charities. But we're pleased to be able to report that Church Action on Poverty has actually secured funding to expand our work to meet the growing need caused by Covid-19.

A range of funding bodies have supported us to grow the Pantry network (see page 8), explore creative responses (page 10), and support churches to be alongside people on the margins (page 14). We are very grateful to the funders who support this vital work – and to the many individuals who have continued to make regular donations throughout the crisis.

events

Challenge Poverty Week England, 12–18 October 2020

Challenge Poverty Week has been a highly successful event in Scotland for the past seven years, and was mirrored by London Challenge Poverty Week last year. This year, we will support projects across England to take part in the Week for the first time.

The week will run from October 12 to 18. It is an opportunity for people to speak up against poverty, raise their voices, and celebrate what is being done to tackle poverty in communities.

Find out more at
www.church-poverty.org.uk/cpw

Sheffield Pilgrimage, 10 October 2020

Our local group in Sheffield will be holding their annual Pilgrimage event virtually this year. This could be a great chance for people outside Sheffield to experience this inspiring event for the first time!

Find out more and sign up at
www.church-poverty.org.uk/groups/sheffield

Annual General Meeting, 21 November 2020

We will hold our AGM online this year. Join us to hear inspiring speakers and stories, the latest reports on the movement to end poverty, and for members to elect our Council of Management.

Find out more and sign up at
www.church-poverty.org.uk/agm

Church Action on Poverty Sunday, 21 February 2021

Give, act and pray in your church.

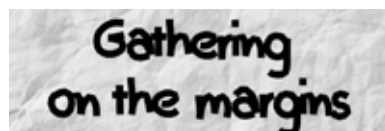
More details on the back cover or at www.church-poverty.org.uk/sunday

Staying **connected** online



Our Events Intern **Felicity Guite** explains how we've been staying connected with the movement to loosen the grip of poverty throughout the pandemic – and how you can still get involved.

Lockdown encouraged us to make more use of digital platforms, and we were actually able to hear from new people across the country and build community. So, even as lockdown begins to lift, we are still gathering online.



Every Tuesday afternoon during lockdown was Gathering on the Margins. These weekly gatherings have been a time for social connection, as well as an opportunity for people in different parts of the country to share their experiences of lockdown. Each session explored a different theme, and the topics we have discussed include: food insecurity, digital exclusion, creative responses to the crisis and building back better, as well as many others. The Gatherings featured speakers and contributors with relevant expertise and lots of opportunity for in-depth discussion in small groups.

Gathering on the Margins has now gone from once a week to once a month as we plan to continue meeting through the autumn. You can join us on Zoom on the third or fourth Tuesday of every month at 2pm. The next gatherings will be on 22 September and 20 October.



A Zoom choir is just one example of the creative ways people are engaging online

Church on the margins

For people interested in more theological reflection, there are also Zoom gatherings at 2pm on the second Thursday of every month. These sessions are an opportunity for reflecting together on what it means to be a Church on the Margins in the time of Coronavirus. The gatherings have discussed issues of power and powerlessness, inhabiting the public realm in the midst of lockdown, and the question of whom our services are serving.

See page 14 to get a taste of some of these reflections, and find out how you can take part in future discussions.

The Collective

In July we launched a magazine style show on Zoom and Facebook Live called *The Collective*. This show is a combination of pre-recorded videos, creative input, live interviews and panel discussions, all telling inspiring stories of collective action to promote dignity, agency and power. In our first episode we explored church responses to the crisis. You can watch July's episode on the Church Action on Poverty Facebook page.

The next episodes of *The Collective* will be at 2pm on Tuesday 15 September and Tuesday 13 October on Zoom and Facebook Live. They will explore community responses to the crisis and the relationship between disability and poverty.

To take part in any of our online gatherings – or see creative content that's already been shared – visit www.church-poverty.org.uk/connected

Gleanings

We're not all in the same boat



During the pandemic, we have been helping churches to listen to people on the margins. Our Director **Niall Cooper** looks at what we heard – and why this is a vital part of the Church's mission.

We are all sharing the experience of the storm

caused by COVID-19 and the lockdown, but it is increasingly clear we are not all in the same boat. Some are being buffeted but remain fundamentally secure, yet it is clear that some groups are at risk of being financially overwhelmed.

With the Joint Public Issues Team (comprising the Methodist, Baptist, Church of Scotland and United Reformed Churches), Church Action on Poverty has been conducting surveys and focus groups as part of an ongoing 'Gleanings' research project, to understand the impacts being seen on the ground during COVID-19, by those trapped in poverty.

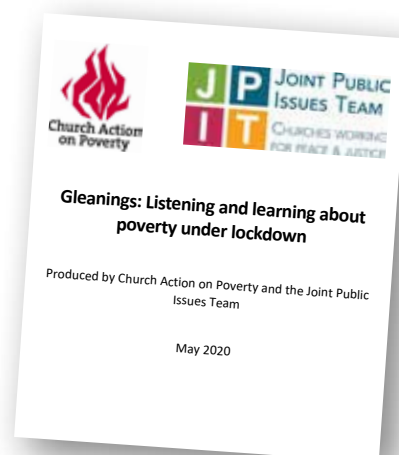
It was apparent from the outset that individuals who were already struggling due to illness, isolation or low income would be amongst those most affected. However, it has also become clear that groups who were managing before the crisis are having difficulties accessing food and other basic essentials.

What churches have seen

- The families who entered the crisis with very low incomes and receiving benefits have been protected from loss of income. They are, however, experiencing a rise in costs for essentials. This is a particular problem for families with children.
- An enormous rise in demand for food banks. This rise is patchy throughout the country with some areas reporting little or no effect, and others overwhelmed.
- In England the voucher system introduced to replace Free School Meals was poorly designed and has been failing many schools and low-income families.
- Over 1.5 million families have applied for Universal Credit. The application process has been made much easier and the payment has been increased to £94 per week. Churches are however reporting that those with IT difficulties or needing assistance are facing waits of several weeks for assistance from the usual charities who help.
- Debt workers are reporting an increasing number of approaches around managing unsustainable debt.
- Huge income shocks are appearing for middle-income families, some of whom are struggling to cope. There are reports of people needing assistance who would not ever have viewed themselves as benefit claimants or food bank guests.
- The groups we are most concerned about:
 - families with no recourse to public funds. These are non-UK citizens who can no longer earn money due to the crisis but do not qualify for most benefits.
 - low-paid self-employed or gig workers who face an income shock with limited state support.
 - families who need help with Universal Credit – most commonly due to IT or language difficulties.
 - for all of these groups, families struggling with children face additional costs and risks.

Alongside this there is deepening concern about the unavoidable household debts building up, often in the form of unpaid rent or utility bills. In the coming months and years the biblical ideas of Jubilee – of freedom from the chains of debt – may offer some inspiration and challenge to churches, government and wider society.

Read the full *Gleanings* report at www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/gleanings



New reality, same Mission

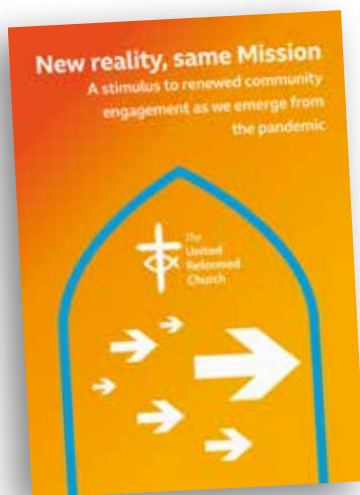
Church Action on Poverty has also collaborated with the United Reformed Church to produce *New Reality: Same Mission* – a study guide and series of videos to enable local churches to explore questions of community engagement and social justice in the new reality which we all face.

While the impulse to get stuck into ‘doing something’ may be hard to resist, it is important to begin by trying to understand the new reality, and reflect on its implications. How have people been affected? What is going on in our communities already? Where is God at work? What have we to offer? And how, therefore, should we join in?

The challenges in our local communities and wider society, exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic, are bigger than anything we can tackle alone. We will need to work in partnership with other agencies and faith groups to make a meaningful difference.

Alongside the study guide are a series of specially commissioned videos providing personal reflections on the challenges faced by Churches in responding to the crisis from, amongst others, Martin Johnstone, Anthony Reddie, Carmel Murphy Elliott and Matt Sowerby.

Download the *New Reality, Same Mission* report and watch the videos at urc.org.uk/same-mission



Dave Herbert is Moderator of URC Northern Synod

“As we move forward into whatever the new normal will be, we need to amplify our prophetic voice and challenge the powers and principalities which would pick off the weakest and most vulnerable, and leave an already accelerating inequality spiralling downwards.”



Pope Francis

“We are not living through an era of change, but a change of era. We are entering a new chapter in the history of the world, and of the church. The scale of the challenge before us demands a careful response.”



How do we stay **close**, while staying **apart**?

Up and down the country, Your Local Pantry projects have been showing the way.

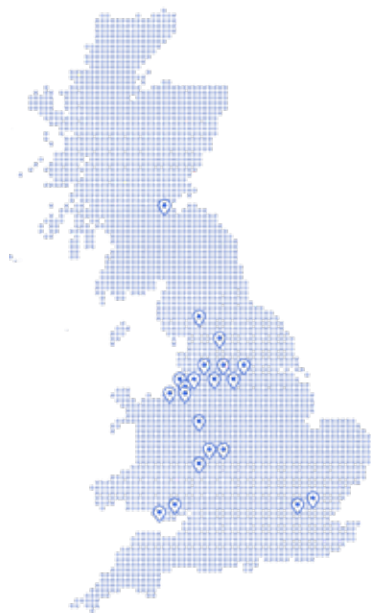


About Your Local Pantry

The Your Local Pantry network now has 20 Pantries, in Edinburgh, Greater Manchester, Liverpool, Lancashire, London, the West Midlands, Staffordshire and South Wales.

Pantries offer fresh and chilled food, as well as frozen, long-life and tinned goods, sourced from FareShare and local suppliers. Members can routinely choose what they put in their basket, typically getting around £20 of food for a weekly subscription of just £3 or £4 a week.

Church Action on Poverty began setting up Pantries in 2018, following the success of a scheme developed by Stockport Homes in 2013.



During lockdown, Pantries have ensured members can still access good food, with deliveries by van, bike and in other creative ways

Around 6,000 people are now regularly accessing food at reduced prices, through the growing network of Pantries, and since the beginning of lockdown the projects have been even more valuable. Volunteers and members have been doubled up as delivery drivers, delivering food and spreading friendship.

Phoebe, a volunteer in Liverpool, told us recently:

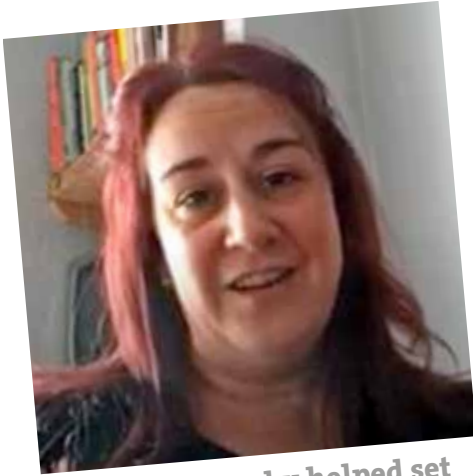
"I can't imagine getting through lockdown without having the Pantry to volunteer with. Seeing the other volunteers was brilliant but also seeing the people we were delivering to... I can't imagine not doing it now; it's food for the soul."

Smethwick Pantry has been particularly busy. The team were in the middle of a session at their base in their local library on 20 March, when they were told it was closing. They relocated to Brasshouse Lane community centre, but it too later closed, and the Pantry is now at Raglan Road Christian Church, with more space and a one-way system. Christina Murray, food hub manager at Smethwick Church Action Network, said:

"The good thing now is the community centre where we were has now reopened and has also opened its own Pantry, as they were so impressed by the idea when they saw it – so we are supporting them now.

"The Pantry is a fantastic system and it's really lovely that there is going to be another one here. We have found a lot of members are coming for conversation as well as food during the outbreak. A lot of people have been stressed and anxious, so we have been talking about stuff and supporting people more than previously. People know we are here to chat and it's so nice that we have been able to continue. Our volunteers have been fantastic as well. They have stuck with us and been wonderful, and it has brought everyone together. There's a great community spirit in the area."





Victoria Ponsonby helped set up Liverpool's first Pantry

The delivery method worked well.

Doorstep communities developed,

which is nice, because

Pantries are always about

more than food

Demand is so high that the Pantry now has a waiting list as well as 181 members.

Other Pantries have also adapted. One in London moved to a larger space so it could continue to run but with safer distancing. In Birmingham, the Yardley Wood and Manna House Pantries launched their own 'video shopping'. Volunteers walked round the room filming the available stock, and members watching online could choose the items for their parcel.

In Cardiff, the South Riverside Community Development Centre brought forward the opening of its Wyndham Street Pantry, having been inspired by the one nearby at Dusty Forge. Sarah Way, from the Centre, said:

"When the lockdown started, the need shot up. A lot of people here are under-employed or on zero-hours contracts, so we sped up our plans and got some more funding, and started."

In Liverpool, more than 800 people are now being supported by the Your Local Pantry network, thanks to two new sites opening and others adapting. Some deliveries were done using electric bikes and bikes donated by British Gas.

Like in Cardiff, organisers accelerated their launches to ensure families could stay afloat as we all navigate these uncharted waters.

The city's first Pantry, which opened at St George's Church in Everton last December, brought in deliveries, and others opened in the spring at Christ Church in Norris Green and St Andrew's in Clubmoor. Victoria Ponsonby, who helped set up the projects, said:

"The delivery method worked well. Doorstep communities developed, which is nice, because Pantries are always about more than food. I've been so pleased to hear how well it has been going; the volunteers have had such a nice welcome and we've had people phoning members as well to check in on them and to tackle isolation. We are working very differently to before."

"We've had a lot of feedback and stories, people saying how much they love it when the volunteers deliver the food. Sometimes that's the only socially distanced conversation people have each week and they look forward to seeing what meals they can do and how the parcel complements their own shopping. People have been saying it's a lifeline."

She said they hoped to have 13 Pantries in Liverpool by the end of the year, which would ultimately enable several thousand people in the city to access Pantries in their neighbourhood.



Our new Friends of Your Local Pantry programme means people who don't use the network can still support it.

Pantries receive donated surplus food, but now and again the teams need to buy top-ups of fresh, frozen or seasonal food. Financial donations through the Friends scheme ensure these needs can be met quickly, allowing the Pantries to continue preventing poverty in their neighbourhoods.

If you'd like to sign up, please visit www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/friend

creativity and community



The arts can help us all deal with the pressures of lockdown and the pandemic, as well as helping us explore solutions to poverty and making people's voices heard. Our Empowerment Programme Officer **Ben Pearson** has organised a series of online creative workshops – here are some of the results.

“I just wanted to say a massive thank you for the workshops. I was astounded by the quality of them and also the people attending, their knowledge and passion. One of the things that stood out for me was how quickly a sense of community arose between the attendees.”

Janine Eden-Riley

Participants share their own work at the workshops



The workshops began with an introduction to making a podcast, facilitated by food journalist Gilly Smith who's been working alongside young people with lived experience of poverty to support them to create audio diaries of life during lockdown. Tia, who we've worked with for the last three years, recorded one at home in Darwen and it was later played on BBC Radio 4's *Food Programme*.

Ellis Howard, an actor and writer from Liverpool, has created a blog *Skinny, Shattered and Skint* during lockdown which explores social and political issues through a comedic lens. He delivered two highly engaging workshops on creating your own work. People were able to explore what issues they were passionate about and how to get their message across in a variety of different ways.

Following on from this, Brody Salmon, a young film-maker from Clitheroe, delivered a workshop on using film to tell a story. The two of them are now working on a short film which will be released in September, inspired by conversations with those living in poverty during lockdown.

Following these we were lucky enough to have award-winning photographer Simon Townsley run a workshop on using photography to tell stories in your community. Simon had recently been to Byker to meet Penny, who has spoken about food poverty through our Food Power programme, and document the impact of COVID-19 on families living on the estate. These featured in the *Daily Telegraph* along with an article looking at how school closures will hit those living in deprived areas the hardest.

Finally, Matt Sowerby has been our Poet in Digital Residence since April now, delivering weekly poetry and spoken word workshops, as well as hosting a monthly open mic session. Matt's creativity, alongside his experience of activism and campaigning, resulted in highly engaging workshops, bringing together people from across Church Action on Poverty programmes but also a good handful of new people. It really felt as though friendships and relationships were formed. People talked about how writing poetry and coming together weekly helped them cope during lockdown, and was a positive distraction. We are now working on a poetry anthology which will be published alongside the film in September. The quality of poems that people submitted – over 40 in total – is outstanding.

“I had no idea what to expect, but Ellis's workshop was really inspiring, energising and very entertaining. It helped me understand better what creativity means for me personally and my work and provided useful practical tools for working out ideas and planning – so important for executing finished work.”

Lisa Howard, Food Plymouth/
Food Equality Project



Picture by Kathryn Cheetham, produced following one of our workshops

Are we all in the same boat?

Are we all in the same boat?

Isolated?

Marginalised?

Cut adrift?

Rudderless?

Anchorless?

Directionless?

Inner compass whirling

As the boat spins

Whirlpool whipped.

Whilst hands seek desperately to cling

To the wood that holds all together.

To the crossbar that keeps the boat afloat.

Jesus slept

When roaring waves reigned.

There is calm in the chaos

It's edgy but it's there.

We need to imitate the helmsman on the wood.

Who sees and reaches out to save.

We are all in the same boat.

But some are thrown in at the deep end...

Jo Drew, 11 May 2020

Get creative yourself

At the time of writing, we are planning a second series of creative workshops to run from mid-September to Christmas.

If you would like to take part and explore your own creativity, visit

www.church-poverty.org.uk/creative

Are we all in the same boat?

That's the theme for our poetry anthology, to be published in September, with 30 pieces from people including professional poets and people with lived experience of poverty.

Find out more or download a copy at

www.church-poverty.org.uk/poetry

Listen Up!

A podcast to end poverty?



Our Poverty Media Coordinator **Gavin Aitchison** has been working with people who are helping to create a more compassionate society where they live, to share their stories on our new podcast.

We launched The Cast To End Poverty in May, for people to tell or listen to inspiring and important stories.

If you're not familiar with podcasts, they are like talk radio shows: conversations or stories that you can listen to, but on your smartphone, tablet or computer. They open up a world of opportunities to hear from people you otherwise wouldn't, or to learn about new people, projects, places and ideas. Our new podcast focuses on the movement to end poverty in the UK. We work with some wonderful people and projects, who are helping to loosen poverty's grip and who are challenging unjust systems, and the more ways we can share those stories, the better.

One of our first episodes featured conversations between people in the Parson Cross area of north Sheffield, and we heard from women with particular insights into how the lockdown had affected people who are most marginalised.

Charlotte, who works for the Parson Cross Initiative, told how the team had adapted during lockdown. She said:

"The social aspects of what we did have had to be put on hold, so it's had a big impact. We've still been able to offer emergency food but people are missing the social contact, that's the thing we're really picking up on."

Charlotte introduced Carlie, who co-founded a support group, Autism Hope, and lives with her children, Isaac, aged six, and Lillie, aged 12.

Carlie said:

"We're coping; just about. There have been some extremely difficult times. Isaac, who has autism and severe learning difficulties struggles the most, so not being able to access school and having his routines taken away has had a huge impact on him. As the weeks have gone it has got worse."

She emphasised the importance of the support group, and said:

"You're not on your own; other people do understand and are going through the same thing. One of my friends has two children with autism and has lost her own mum but has been sending little gifts to Lillie. I think this has been a glimpse for everyone to see what it is like to feel isolated and not be able to access things that other people can."

Our next episode featured interviews with several people in York, where many organisations have pulled together during the coronavirus outbreak to distribute food, support, and to sustain community.

Nicky Gladstone, who runs a project providing breakfasts, showers and support for people who are homeless, told of the amazing community



Carlie founded a support group called Autism Hope

I think this

has been a

glimpse for

everyone to

see what it is

like to feel isolated and not be

able to access things that

other people can

response. At one point they had many more volunteers than they could use. She said:

“We were overwhelmed by the kindness of people who came forward and offered their help, people who had been furloughed, students who had come back, people who were out of work...”

“I do feel a real sense of positivity. We have all, across York, enjoyed such close collaboration; we’ve all worked together so closely and shared information where appropriate and looked after each other. I really believe that this is a new opportunity to work together, to work closely, to all pull in the same direction and really make some long-term differences. “We saw so clearly what was valuable in this lockdown; we’ve seen so clearly the things that matter, the people who really make a difference and it would be wonderful to think that we could hold on to that, that we could carry on celebrating the people who actually keep up going and keep the wheels of society turning – and it’s perhaps not who everybody thought it was to start with. We have looked after each other, haven’t we, and it would be wonderful to think that that could carry on.”

Mary Passeri and Sydnie Corley from York Food Justice Alliance also shared their perspective. Mary said:

“We’ve had people come from all over, even from areas that people consider affluent, looking for food. There’s a lot of hidden poverty out there in York...”

“The best thing we’ve been able to do is to link up with other little informal groups. This is the beauty of the alliance; it’s made up of lots of different people in different areas of York. So if we get a load of bananas, we’ve been able to swap bananas for rice, for example. We share food out. It’s been amazing how supportive people have been and how quickly people can get help and support... It’s amazing how people have come together; people we thought would never support or even understand that food security was a problem have just come round and are offering to help all the time.”



Mary Passeri is part of York Food Justice Alliance

It’s been amazing how quickly

people can get help and support...

It’s amazing how

people have come together

How to listen

If you have a smartphone or a tablet and would like to listen to our podcasts, search in your podcast app for ‘Cast To End Poverty’. Once there, if you hit the ‘subscribe’ button, you’ll be notified when a new episode is ready.

If you don’t have a smartphone or tablet, you can still listen to all the episodes online, at

www.anchor.fm/casttoendpoverty



What does it mean to be Church on the margins during a pandemic?



Carmel Murphy is working with us to deliver a new 'Church on the Margins' programme in Greater Manchester. She explains how the pandemic has thrown obstacles in our way – and also sparked reflection and creativity.

God is showing us new things from the perspective of the last and the least

What does it mean to be a church on the margins? This was the question we were planning to begin research around in Manchester this spring through a series of Peer Action Learning Sets. However, we'd timed the start of the new project with the onset of lockdown in the UK and, along with everyone else, had to have a rethink!

While reflecting on how to handle this curve ball, we realised this could be an even more pertinent question in the extraordinary times we were embarking upon. How would we seek to be attentive to and inclusive of those on the margins during a global pandemic? What impact would lockdown have on those who were already isolated and marginalised within our communities – and would those margins increase, given the severity of the situation? We decided to create some space for people to muse over these questions together, and hosted a weekly online gathering throughout lockdown. Sessions began with a reflection from a different person on a different theme each week, followed by small group discussions where we shared our thoughts and experience. It was a rich time! What follows is a flavour of the conversations we had and the issues we grappled with.

During the first couple of weeks there was a growing sense of loss. On a personal level, many were overwhelmed and tired, having tried to respond quickly to the new circumstances. Then, amidst the grief and anxiety of the rising death toll and despite growing need, we heard how difficult decisions had to be made regarding vital services such as food banks. People were feeling the pressure but also feeling powerless to respond, which was deeply unsettling. However, alongside this, we also heard stories of the wonderful ways in which local individuals were helping and

supporting one another at the grassroots; reaching out to neighbours, setting up street WhatsApp groups, and coordinating response across several neighbourhoods through Mutual Aid networks. We experienced commonality and conviviality as the street came out to clap the NHS and keyworkers on a Thursday evening. There seemed to be a togetherness that both punctuated the week and enabled participants to feel part of something positive. Perhaps being a 'church on the margins' means we need to acknowledge our 'Saviour Syndrome' (the constant need to set up services and help, regardless of whether we are best placed to do so) and practise pausing, looking around and joining in with what's already going on?

Talking about the amazing work of the NHS and keyworkers also triggered conversations about how the crisis had exposed inequality. Keyworkers who had previously been overlooked and taken for granted were now thrust into the limelight as highly valued recipients of public praise. We noted that many of these workers are on low incomes, some are working zero-hour contracts, and growing evidence is showing that a disproportionate amount of the health and social care workers who have died from coronavirus come from black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. We might all be in the same storm, but we are definitely not in the same boat! We discussed how the Coronavirus crisis is not the leveller that some state it is; in fact,

quite the opposite. It's revealed afresh some of the deep inequality within our society. Someone commented, "God is showing us new things from the perspective of the last and the least." Perhaps being a 'church on the margins' means continuing to find creative ways to draw attention to these inequalities and campaign for justice?

Finally, and perhaps most predictably, there was a lot of conversation around how churches have responded to the crisis. We talked about the closure of buildings for worship and how this, for some, had helped to shift the focus from Sunday and emphasise the fact that the church is the people not the place. We noted that a lot of churches had moved their services online and, in some cases, had welcomed more people to digital worship than they would a physical service. This was an interesting observation to make, particularly as, almost in the next breath, we acknowledged that getting online was not possible for everyone. A lack of equipment or skills means that many are not able to access the internet and have therefore been excluded from a huge range of activities which, in a time of enforced isolation, may have been of help to them. Perhaps being 'a church on the margins' means always asking the question 'who's missing'?

Who is my neighbour?

Power and powerlessness

Inhabiting the public realm

Solidarity and sacrifice

Whom are we serving in our services?

Resilience

Where are the margins?

The prophetic imagination

God snuck home – a poem shared during our reflections

God snuck home.
No longer bound by the
expectations of a 'consecrated' building
She's concentrated her efforts on breaking out.
Now in the comfort of a well worn dining table
she shares some bread,
with some friends.
And she laughs.
And she weeps.
In the sacred space of home.
By Ruth Wells

Read more

You can check out all the video reflections and the weekly summaries of our discussions by visiting www.church-poverty.org.uk/tag/reflecting-together

What do you think?

Perhaps you could prayerfully reflect on your experience of this crisis so far and contemplate what being a 'church on the margins' means to you. If you would like to do that with others, we continue to have a monthly reflection group. Visit www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotmreflection to sign up.

NEW WINE SKINS

It's vital that we

listen to those

on the margins

who saw and

experienced

poverty first

Stef Benstead is a Poverty Truth Commissioner
and campaigner for disabled people's rights

Give, act and pray

to ensure people on the margins
are fully involved in the world we build
as we emerge from the pandemic

Church Action on Poverty Sunday
21 February 2021

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