

# spark

news from Church Action on Poverty  
summer 2025

Farewell to Niall Cooper  
page 8

Let's End Poverty:  
next steps  
page 9



## Dignity, choice, hope

Read the latest news from the  
Pantry network – and find out  
how you can become a Friend of  
Your Local Pantry

Page 7

# Let **justice** roll like a river, **righteousness** like a never-ending stream

Stef Benstead is a disability rights activist and researcher; a Poverty Truth Commissioner; and a former trustee and expert adviser for Church Action on Poverty. Her new book analyses the principles for a just society given by God in the Bible, and explores how those principles might be reflected in the UK today.

A great resource for anyone who wants their church to reflect the gospel concern for poverty and justice more deeply in its life and worship.

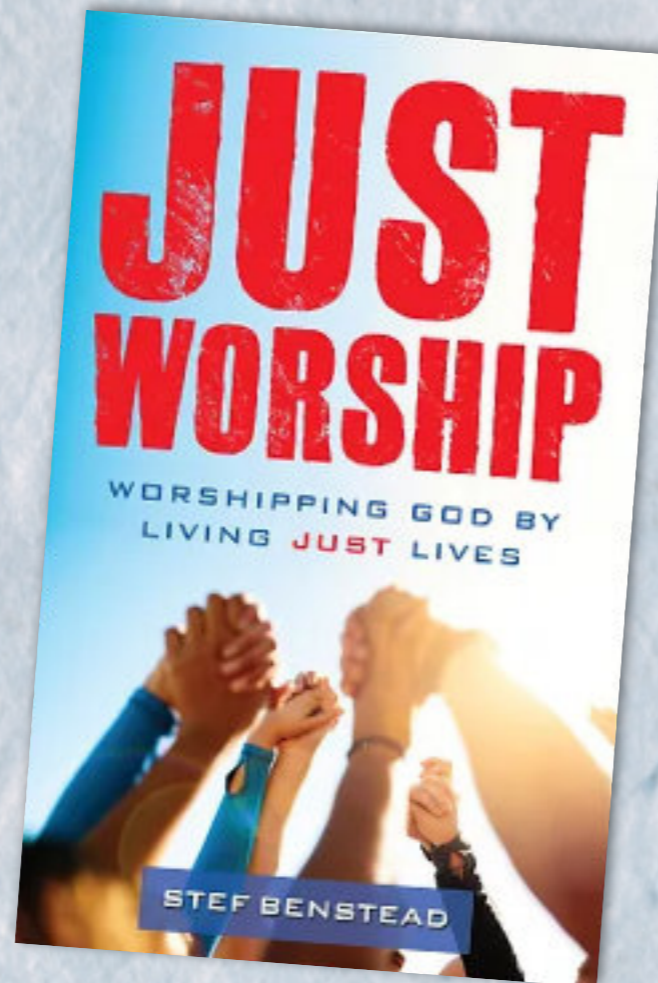
**“A book which brings together the radical teaching of the Bible with the reality of life in unequal Britain today”**

*(Greg Smith, Templeton Foundation)*

**Order your copy now for £15 at  
[www.church-poverty.org.uk/  
justworship](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/justworship)**



Stef Benstead



**I would like to see Christians take**

**seriously the command of God**

**that we all pursue justice**

**for the poor and oppressed**

## Farewell!



Our Chief Exec **Niall Cooper** wonders...  
what do you write in your last editorial  
after 28 years?

**A**s I've been getting ready to leave Church Action on Poverty, I've been reflecting on the incredible journey that it's been since 1997... the many powerful and impactful campaigns and programmes we've run over the years, and many of the inspiring individuals I've met along the way.

It has truly been an honour to work alongside some amazing Church Action on Poverty members, staff and trustees, people and partner organisations, the length and breadth of the UK. It has been – and will continue to be – a privilege to be part of a wider anti-poverty movement that refuses to give up, in spite of all the challenges thrown at people struggling on the frontline of poverty.

The context may have changed, but the challenges are just as great now as in 1997: the cuts to Britain's social security system announced in the

Government's spring statement are deeply harmful to some of the country's poorest people. It is vital that people who are at the sharp end have the opportunity to speak out – as Mary, Sydnie and Stef have done in relation to the cuts to disability benefits that will affect them personally (see page 6). The growth of Your Local Pantry continues to offer dignity, choice and hope to people struggling to make ends meet in more than 120 communities across the UK. See page 7 for how you can become a Friend of Your Local Pantry.

Ultimately, the big task for the churches is still to commit to the long-term goal of building a powerful movement in which people feel they have agency, dignity and power. Your support and your donations are vital to enable Church Action on Poverty to continue to put faith into action.

I wish Church Action on Poverty well in the next stage of the journey!

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The cover image is the winning entry in Your Local Pantry's recent art competition, by Sophie Rainbird of Fratton Together Pantry in Portsmouth.

## Church Action on Poverty

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## give

**Hold a service on Church  
Action on Poverty  
Sunday, 19 October  
See page 11**

## act

**Email your MP about  
immoral, harmful cuts to  
disability benefits  
See page 6**

## pray

**Give thanks for the  
impact we can have  
when we work together  
See page 8**

# news

## A new Archbishop: our wish list

The Church of England held a consultation inviting people and organisations to share their thoughts about the priorities and qualities the new Archbishop of Canterbury should have. Here are some excerpts from Church Action on Poverty's contribution:

"Our hope for the ministry of the next Archbishop is that he or she will prioritise low-income communities, and equip and inspire churches to identify and challenge injustice and loosen its chains; to speak out with people in poverty against unjust systems; and to speak up for a more positive vision of the UK..."

"It would be a great advantage if the next Archbishop had personal experience of poverty and/or other forms of marginalisation, or at least significant experience of ministry or church leadership in a marginalised and excluded community. Such experience would inevitably strengthen the Church's ability to address these issues sincerely and effectively."

## Dark Holy Ground: finding a voice



"With Church Action on Poverty's Local People National Voice campaign in 1998 I finally found my own voice!"

Church Action on Poverty campaigner Linda Granville tells her story in her book *Dark Holy Ground*. In a guest article on our blog, she said: "I want you to know how much I appreciate Church Action on Poverty for playing its part in the very beginning ... to allow me to analyse my own and other situations and help to provide a pathway to give me dignity and to work toward an absolutely fulfilling life."

Read about the book and order a copy at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/darkholyground](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/darkholyground)



## Your Local Pantry in research trial

Our network of Local Pantries has just launched a partnership with SALIENT, a team of food system researchers. We'll be exploring the impact which Pantry membership has on various outcomes including food security, dietary quality and mental wellbeing. We're excited to be working with independent researchers to demonstrate the value of Pantries.

# events

## Farewell to Niall 5 June 2025

As you can read on page 8, our Chief Executive Officer Niall Cooper is leaving after 28 years. We invite you to join us on the evening of 5 June for a special online event. We'll look back over the high points and achievements of Niall's time with us, celebrate the work to reclaim dignity, agency and power, and wish him the best for the future. Please join us if you can.

Sign up at <https://bit.ly/farewellniall>



## Challenge Poverty Week England and Wales 13–19 October 2025

Challenge Poverty Week is a great opportunity to... celebrate the work being done to challenge poverty in communities; amplify the voices of people with lived experience of poverty; and speak out about the unjust structures that trap people in poverty.

Take part if you can. Use the hashtag #challengepoverty on social media; look out for events taking place in the Week; and visit [www.challengepoverty.co.uk](http://www.challengepoverty.co.uk)

## Church Action on Poverty Sunday, 19 October 2025

Our key annual moment for fundraising with churches is being moved so that it's part of Challenge Poverty Week. Please give, act and pray with us. If you already took part on 2 March, we'd love to help you build on your commitment and celebrate the work your church is doing locally to tackle poverty.

Sign up using the enclosed leaflet or at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/sunday](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/sunday)

# We're listening!

During 2024, we carried out a survey and some in-depth conversations with some of our partners and supporters. Communications Manager **Liam Purcell** shares some of what we learned.

**W**e know that, in order to end poverty in the UK, we need to be part of a really wide and powerful movement. To help us link people and groups together and support that movement, we need to listen and learn as much as we can from all the people we work with. So we've been finding out what we can from all kinds of people – from loyal supporters who've been involved for decades, to churches and donors who have only just got involved. We'd like to thank everyone who shared their thoughts with us.

One of the most important things we wanted to hear about was **values** – what drives people to get involved in tackling poverty and working for a better world? People spoke of:

- **Faith** and Christian values, often with a specific reference to the example of Jesus.
- **Empathy, compassion** and **social justice**.
- Real **anger and frustration** about injustice and inequality.
- A **moral obligation** to take action, often because they were aware of their own privileged position.
- The importance of **solidarity** and **collective action**.

Often, we heard that people got involved because Church Action on Poverty's values align closely with those of their church or project. We know that those shared values are the most powerful motivator to bring us together and challenge injustice.

In our conversations, we explored that idea in more depth – learning about where our work overlaps with other movements seeking peace and justice, and hearing about what makes people feel connected to those wider movements:

- Signing or sharing **petitions**.
- **Meeting** with other people in person.
- Being inspired by **stories** of what other people are doing.
- **Praying** with other people.
- Being part of **online communities**.

We also heard about people's **churches**. We learned that many supporters hold leadership positions in churches, but only a small proportion of churches are actively engaged with Church Action on Poverty – there's a big opportunity to for us to do more in partnership with local churches. We also found that most of our supporters are in 'mainline' traditional churches. Could we find ways to better serve other churches too, for example independent evangelical churches and Black majority churches?

Now we hope we can build on what we've learned and the shared values we've identified, to work even more effectively in partnership with all of our valued supporters and allies.

## A staff story: Liam Purcell

As we continue thinking about values and stories of hope, we're going to be inviting individual staff, volunteers and partners to share stories and reflections in SPARK. Here, Liam shares some of the thoughts sparked by this listening process:



"Listening to some of the passionate, dedicated people who work with Church Action on Poverty was really inspiring. I loved hearing stories from people who are leading action for change in their churches and communities – including some who've been linked with Church Action on Poverty for decades.

"One of the most powerful experiences was hearing what drives people, and finding the values we share. I grew up with a Catholic faith that was inextricably intertwined with a concern for poverty and injustice, and I've tried to live out those values in my career, working with the Student Christian Movement and Church Action on Poverty. I loved hearing about how traditions like liberation theology have also inspired others to be part of radical movements for change."

## What do you think?

Do the values described here resonate with you? What motivates you to work for an end to poverty? How does your faith relate to injustice?

We're still listening. In future issues of SPARK, we'd like to explore topics that connect with the values and priorities of people in our networks. What would you like to read about?

Get in touch and let us know your thoughts!

Email [liamp@church-poverty.org.uk](mailto:liamp@church-poverty.org.uk)

# Stop these immoral cuts

The cuts to Britain's social security system announced in the Government's spring statement are deeply harmful to some of the country's poorest people, and are based on misleading spin. Can you stand with disabled people and oppose the cuts?

Read the full statement and email your MP at [bit.ly/immoralcuts](http://bit.ly/immoralcuts)

**D**isabled activists who work with and advise Church Action on Poverty say the further dismantling of crucial welfare support threatens to impoverish them, and flies in the face of Government promises and thorough evidence.

Stef Benstead, Mary Passeri and Sydnie Corley (pictured below, left to right) are all involved in our Speaking Truth to Power programme and other campaigns, and have joined the growing calls all over the country for the threatened cuts to be cancelled.

In December, Stef, Sydnie, Mary and others met the minister for disability, Sir Stephen Timms MP, who had said that disabled people would be at the heart of the Government's actions. Church Action on Poverty is urging Stephen Timms to honour that pledge, and we have asked supporters to ask their MPs to make similar calls. Over 250 people have spoken out in this way so far.

Stef says: "Labour said they would put disabled people at the heart of everything they do, but instead they've shoved us to the very edges. They're using a lot of spin and weasel words, but it is worse than empty rhetoric. It is deliberately misleading the public in order to buy support for immoral, harmful cuts."

"It really is a bogus consultation. The things they aren't consulting on, and the assumptions made behind the things that they are consulting on, make the results a foregone conclusion. The cuts will happen, and they're not interested in anything other than pretending to care about the people affected."

Sydnie highlighted that in recent years, hundreds of thousands of people who were initially refused support were wrongly rejected, and had the refusal overturned at appeal, showing that the Government has a terrible track record at assessing people's health and disability.

She says: "The DWP does not understand people's conditions. Their 'professionals' are not qualified in many disabilities or in who can receive what payment, and what jobs people are capable of. The waiting list for PIP is too long."

"Too many people have to appeal where they were originally awarded hardly any points, then achieve the proper high amount in each category via the appeal. This waiting time is even longer and one that is degrading and not accessible to all, and this whole process is too much of a strain on people's physical and mental health."

Mary said she was terrified that the changes were coming in at the same time as the assisted dying legislation. She said: "The benefits system should be there as a safety net. I totally agree it should not be an alternative way of living. But it needs to be a stronger net, with fewer tears to fall through!"

"Now this is happening and the assisted dying laws are coming in as well. You can foresee a system where they will say they'll give me benefits for another five years, and that's it – and then in the context of assisted dying, see what pressure that puts on people not to live any more!"



"They said they would put disabled people at the heart of everything they do, but instead they've shoved us to the very edges"



## Dignity, choice and hope

We love these stories from around the UK, which show how the Local Pantries supported by Church Action on Poverty are about so much more than just food.

An exciting project to make sure young people are heard in their community has led to the opening of the seventh Your Local Pantry in Scotland.

**Hurlford Helping Hands Pantry**, in Ayrshire, opened as part of a partnership between Co-op and Barnardo's.

Mariia is a local teenager and a member of the Co-op and Barnardo's Youth Advisory Group. She worked with young people from Hurlford and nearby, to work out what type of service would be most useful for the community.

"Young people said they wanted to make food more accessible," said Mariia.

"The idea of a Pantry came up straight away – a place where people of all ages can come without judgement or stigma to get the nutritious food they need to thrive. It's so lovely to see it all come to life."

It proved tricky at first to find a suitable venue for the Pantry. Then, a local church leader mentioned a disused room above St Paul's Catholic Church hall, and the community came together to transform it!



In a recent issue of the **Pantry Post newsletter**, we asked members to send in art reflecting their Pantry. The winning entry was the beautiful picture that appears on the front cover of this issue of **SPARK**, by Sophie Rainbird, a member at Fratton Together Pantry in Portsmouth. Here are a couple of the other brilliant entries we received – these are by Andrea Coles of Quinton Pantry, and Tim Shubotham of London Lighthouse Pantry.

The Bishop of Leeds, Nick Baines, visited **InterAct Pantry in Leeds** to chat to volunteers and members, and to hear what difference the Pantry makes locally.

The Pantry is one of over 60 run by or supported by churches. Bishop Nick encouraged more churches to consider opening Pantries, saying: "What's really impressive is that we recognise that food isn't just for eating – we commune around food. So whether people are collecting food or eating food together, it's a social event. It goes to the heart of the Christian faith as well, this is what we do all the time."



Could you help your own Local Pantry – and others across the UK – to continue offering dignity, choice and hope?

Be a Friend of Your Local Pantry! If you can make a donation – or even better, set up a regular gift – your support could help a Pantry to keep its shelves stocked. It also enables Church Action on Poverty to run the network of Pantries, providing vital services and training to ensure Pantries make a big impact in their communities.

Become a Pantry Friend now at [www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/friends](http://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/friends)

# Farewell to Niall

**Niall Cooper** is stepping down as Chief Exec of Church Action on Poverty after 28 years. He looks back at his time in post, and some remarkable highlights.



From 1997  
to 2025

## How did you first come to be involved in Church Action on Poverty?

"My university degree had been in politics and religion, and I knew that I wanted to do that work – not just study it, but to do it. My passion was how the churches could make a difference.

"I worked on a project called the Churches National Housing Coalition, in 1991. I had helped set it up and Church Action on Poverty then took it on. I was doing community work in Hulme in Manchester at the time, and housing was the main issue.

"Then a few years later in 1997, the then director Paul Goggins was selected to stand as an MP, and I was appointed as director."

## What are some of your stand-out highlights from your time here?

"I think they come into four categories. There have been the big supporter moments; the really big policy wins; the moments of impact in local communities; and witnessing the inspiring activism of people with lived experience of poverty."

### Supporter moments

"The two big supporter moments were the Pilgrimage Against Poverty in 1999, and the Tax Justice bus tour in partnership with Christian Aid in 2013. In 1999, we organised a nine-week pilgrimage from Iona to Westminster. Six people walked the whole way, but thousands of people joined along the route, for a mile or a day or a week. It was a significant thing for people to be part of, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We took a political message and it was amazing – we had a big rally in Trafalgar Square, a service in St Martin-in-the-Fields, and the six people who had walked all the way met with the Chancellor, Gordon Brown.

"Then the Tax Justice Tour was amazing as well – we took a double-decker bus around the country, engaging people in conversations. Both of those things really engaged people behind a message, and created space for conversations."

### Big wins

"For big wins, I'm going to pick out two. The first was financial inclusion work, under the New Labour government. We met with a senior Treasury civil servant and produced a report making the case for investing in affordable credit, as a result of which the Government invested £120 million into credit unions.

"The other big win was the campaign with Thrive Teesside, around irresponsible high-cost lending. That was led by the women of Thrive over the best part of 10 years, with our support. The Government was not initially interested, but we built up a coalition with about 80 backbench MPs, and that persuaded the Financial Conduct Authority to properly regulate high-cost lending, and as a result several million pounds in compensation was paid to customers of three main lenders. And because their business model was then broken, that really saw them off."

Niall leaves the Treasury after meeting with Gordon Brown at the end of the Pilgrimage Against Poverty in 1999



## Community impact

"Along with Oxfam, we introduced Participatory Budgeting to the UK and got the Government to fund us to set up a unit that advised local government. This resulted in over 120 participatory budgeting projects in local communities around the country, each involving hundreds of people – so tens of thousands of people had a direct say in how pots of money were to be spent in their communities. The Scottish Government then enshrined that approach in law in Scotland.

"A second big community impact success has been Your Local Pantry. We took a very local idea and have enabled 120 communities (and counting!) to open Pantries, which are bringing people together through food, and enabling great things to happen. The characteristic of both of those areas of work is that they empower communities to have control and dignity and agency."

## Amplifying lived experience voices

"I draw huge inspiration from activists who have refused to give up – people like Wayne Green, Sarah Whitehead and Ashleigh May. Wayne spoke at the first National Poverty Hearing in 1996, and is still involved now. Sarah started off with one local project and who now runs Community Pride in Salford and advises the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and has trained and supported lots of other people to speak up. Ashleigh was made homeless and moved by her council 200 miles away from her community, but has been determined to speak up and create a space for other people, using her experience as an inspiration for making change. There are many more amazing people I could talk about!"

## What big changes have you seen – and what hasn't changed?

"People's belief in political solutions has shifted, and certainly the harshness of the DWP at the moment is more brutal than ever. People who don't experience poverty do not realise just how punitive and brutal it is. That punitive nature of government systems has got worse.

"As the state has pulled away, we've seen churches, charities and communities stepping up. Covid was the biggest example of that, where people stepped up. That trend has been for good and ill. Compared with 30 years ago, so many more churches are doing so much more, but there is still a pervasive attitude in places that it's about tackling poverty one person at a time, individualising the problem and the solutions.

"One of the things that has endured is the nature of poverty. As Wayne Green said in the 1990s, poverty is a battle of invisibility and being blamed for society's problems. The context has changed, but that is as true now as it was then.

"Another area where we have made strides is in the growing recognition of the importance of prioritising lived experience voices. The Dear Prime Minister letters last year exemplified that – we were able to gather 12 to 15 people, well supported by six or seven organisations around the country, and that would not have happened 10 or even five years ago."

## What would your parting message be to UK churches – and what are your own plans once you step down?

"The big task for churches is helping build a powerful movement in which people do feel they have agency, dignity and power, and in which they have enough allies to push back and say 'enough; we are not going to take this any more'. Churches should invest in that, rather than sticking plaster solutions.

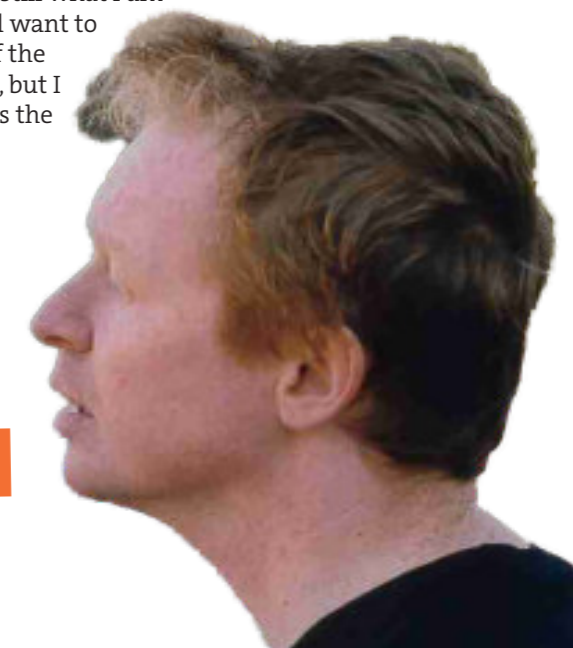
"As for my next steps... Well, in my sixties, I've started fell-running, and have just done the Yorkshire Three Peaks race, and I'll also have some time for seeing family and travelling. I'm going to have a bit of a break and reflect on what I have learnt, but I am not stepping away from the anti-poverty movement. This is still what I am passionate about, and I still want to keep in touch with some of the amazing people I have met, but I also want to find out what's the next challenge I can do."

Mark Niall's 28 year's of action against poverty with us – join our online farewell event on 5 June, or donate £28 to Church Action on Poverty today: visit [bit.ly/farewellniall](https://bit.ly/farewellniall)

The big task for churches is helping build

a powerful movement in which people

do feel they have agency, dignity and power



# A wider **impact**

We're pleased to share some hopeful highlights from the ongoing impact of projects that we and our partners have been supporting.

## Local voices in York are being given a new role in shaping homeless support.

The Lived Insights group, who we partnered with on the Unheard York storytelling project last summer, have been meeting with city council staff to discuss creating a new feedback system for people who have been through the council's temporary accommodation. The lack of input was highlighted by one of the storytellers as an issue, but the city council has signed up to York Poverty Truth Commission's dignity charter, which includes a commitment to varied and accessible feedback systems, and Lived Insights is now meeting with staff to design a way of ensuring people are heard.



## Two exciting pieces of work are already emerging from a Vision Day held in February at The Dandelion Community church in Wythenshawe, South Manchester.

A wide range of local and national partners took part in the day. Revd Kate Gray, minister at Dandelion, says: "Feedback has been that it was a really positive and creative day, because of the opportunities to connect with all sorts of different organisations that might not have met each other before. It felt very creative and constructive." She highlighted two key strands of emerging work - an attempt to create renewable energy at the church, to reduce bills for many local households, and a women's leadership programme.

## People power looks to have safeguarded the future of a crucial community hub in Liverpool!

The team at Kensington Fields Community Centre has been trying for years to secure the lease on their premises, so they can confidently plan for the future. The issue was a central theme in the *Made In Liverpool* film, which local residents produced in 2022, in partnership with Church Action on Poverty, *The Guardian*, and Feeding Liverpool. The persistence has now paid off... in January, it was announced that the local Albert Gubay Charitable Foundation, in partnership with the city council, would fund a multi-million redevelopment of the building, and the Community Association would be granted a long-term lease. Paul Nicholson, chair of the trustees at the community association, told the *Liverpool Echo* that the news make a massive difference to the community.

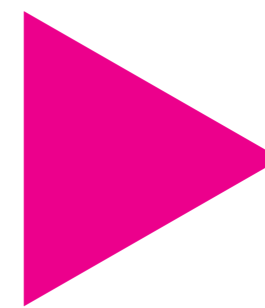


## Our work to improve the way the media reports on poverty is continuing to have a positive effect.

In 2020–21, we worked with people in poverty who had done media interviews before, and with the National Union of Journalists, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and others, to produce a guide to reporting poverty. In early April, the NUJ hosted an event looking at how journalists should ethically approach poverty, and the guide was promoted as a key resource.



# LET'S END POVERTY



## What next?

Church Action on Poverty has been proud to be an active member of Let's End Poverty during 2024. Let's End Poverty Coordinator **Hannah Fremont-Brown** explains what will happen next for the campaign.

**A** collaboration between individuals, churches, charities, trade unions and grassroots groups, Let's End Poverty brought people together with the aim of making ending poverty a primary issue at the 2024 UK General Election. Now that the election has passed, Let's End Poverty will finish at the end of May 2025, but the collaborations and action it has inspired will continue.

Highlights supported by Church Action on Poverty include the Dreams & Realities exhibition – see page 10. And in the lead-up to the election, the Neighbourhood Voices programme amplified the experiences and perspectives of over 40 people in otherwise unheard communities, feeding them into the election debate. In partnership with Church Action on Poverty, more than 20 Local Pantries, individuals and community groups received small grants through the Artists for Change fund, inspiring art projects that expressed community voices and imagined a different future. During Challenge Poverty Week 2024, the Dear Prime Minister Campaign brought the lived experiences of 15 individuals into the Houses of Parliament, and right to the doorstep of the Prime Minister himself!

As the project draws to an end, we have been celebrating everything that Let's End Poverty has achieved and reflecting on the journey so far. At the start of April, Church Action on Poverty hosted a National Poverty Consultation in Manchester. It brought together 35 leaders from across the UK: leaders from grassroots groups, individuals offering their lived and living experiences of poverty into their advocacy, and staff from charities and Churches. This highlights the importance of creating space for everyone to play their part, so 'diagonal connections' between the right people lead to transformative change.

Acknowledging that there is still a mountain to climb when it comes to ending poverty in the UK, participants reflected on how the journey of Let's End Poverty might equip us for the way ahead. Two essential qualities for an effective anti-poverty movement emerged: relationships, and anger.

At its heart, Let's End Poverty has been a collaboration of individuals in **relationship** with one another, listening to each other's stories and drawing on each other's skills and gifts to create change. These relationships have the potential to be deeply transformative by bridging the often wide gap between people in leadership roles (in political and public life, or in organisations, churches or charities) and individuals who bring lived experiences of the struggle against poverty. We must build relationships that enable solidarity, transform shame and stigma, and tell a different story about what it means to live alongside one another well.

It also became clear that the damage poverty is doing to people and communities means that true relationships often lead to **anger**. It cannot be acceptable that poverty is holding more than 1 in 5 people in the UK back from living full lives. Living and truly understanding this reality stirs up a righteous anger that is echoed by the biblical prophets, and prophetic activists from history.

This anger has to be part of a movement if it is to successfully move society from passive acceptance to active resistance. Without anger, solidarity can easily become kindness, and opportunities for transformation are limited to temporary change. In the face of continuing policy changes that are reducing incomes and opportunities for people and communities living on the lowest incomes, an effective movement has to draw on their anger to motivate sustained, impactful change.

We reflected on the image of a dandelion clock. Perhaps being a movement committed to ending poverty means being the wind that scatters the dandelion seeds, giving them energy to land in new places, take root and bring new colour into the world. An effective movement means hundreds of different activities taking root, each bringing their own skills, gifts and impact to the wider environment. As Let's End Poverty finishes, this image and the relationships it has sparked is carrying forward energy to continue to build a strong, effective anti-poverty movement that can and will see an end to poverty in the UK.



# Liudmyla's story

**T**hree years ago, Liudmyla's life was turned upside down. She had a loving family and an enjoyable teaching job. But when Russia invaded Ukraine, she had to flee her home. She arrived in Sheffield as a refugee, and has found hope, compassion and safety.

Today, her son is in a good school and Liudmyla is improving her English as she aspires to find work here.

Liudmyla and her story have been seen around the country. She was one of the 10 Sheffield residents whose portraits featured in the touring Dreams and Realities exhibition over the past 12 months. And in February, dozens of people gathered at Sheffield Cathedral for an exhibition homecoming event, including Church Action on Poverty members, local politicians, and musicians.

Liudmyla says: "I have really enjoyed it and I can't believe it! Two years ago we started doing the portraits, and now a lot of people have looked at them and read about the struggles and hopes. I think we made a good exhibition and I hope something changes from some of it."

"I feel good that so many people have seen it. I have also told my friends and family, so they all know! Just yesterday one of my friends texted saying they had seen my portrait, and I feel like they know it's important. I feel we have made an important step, and I have enjoyed it. Doing this, I found people in the same position as me, and I heard from other people as well."

"What will happen next? Who knows?! But I am doing what I can, I am studying and improving my English. I believe in the future and I'm looking forward."



Celebrating the paintings' homecoming at Sheffield Cathedral in February: (left to right) Church Action on Poverty CEO Niall Cooper, Lord Mayor of Sheffield Councillor Jayne Dunn, artist Stephen Martin, and exhibition organiser Yo Tozer-Loft

# DREAMS & REALITIES



All of the paintings featured people linked to the community choirs at St Mary's Church in Bramall Lane, Sheffield. They were all painted by Stephen Martin, who himself lives in poverty. Each portrait included something representing the person's challenges, and something representing the hopes and dreams they would pursue if freed from poverty. Stephen's painting included a black background, because he had been living without gas or electricity for 15 years, due to unaffordable disrepair... but he has now finally been able to move into a new home, complete with working utilities!

You may have seen the Dreams and Realities paintings in your church on Church Action on Poverty Sunday. If not, you can still find the paintings, and ideas for a workshop to explore them in your congregation, at [www.letsendpoverty.org.uk](http://www.letsendpoverty.org.uk)

# Giving to reclaim dignity, agency and power

Your donations are vital to enable us to put faith into action.

## Church Action on Poverty Sunday: Dreams and Realities in our context

**Church Action on Poverty Sunday is our key fundraising event for churches every year. Revd Amanda Mallen, a trustee of Church Action on Poverty and a vicar in the West Midlands, reflects on the impact Church Action on Poverty Sunday made in her community.**

During the week following Church Action on Poverty Sunday on 2 March 2025, I held three informal worship workshops. The aim was to help people engage with poverty in many of its forms and the impact it has on individuals and communities and the wider impact overall.

I used the Dreams and Realities artwork [see opposite] to open up the subject and share the lived experience of those featured in the pictures. Telling their stories was a special and thought-provoking time for me personally. I also shared some of my own lived experience of growing up and living in poverty and how that impacted the choices I have made. Some of these choices have been big life-changing decisions yet I found that for me the small everyday choices are more impactful and often more hurtful to make.

In two out of three of the sessions, I asked the participants to create their own Dreams and Realities work. Some chose to draw, some chose written words, and I wanted them to be able to think and communicate in a way that was comfortable and accessible to them.

We also had open discussion during the service about what poverty looked like, and I shared some local statistics. I had also done collective worship sessions (assemblies) in three primary schools the week before and was encouraged to hear that the children didn't know that where they lived was such a high area of deprivation.

We ended the service with prayers and I felt like those who participated had a better understanding of what we are trying to achieve. Supporting each other in this way and enabling people to voice their concerns and opinions will hopefully lead into action, and an end to poverty for all.



**Church Action on Poverty Sunday is now part of Challenge Poverty Week, so the next one will be on 19 October this year. See the enclosed leaflet or visit [www.church-poverty.org.uk](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk) if you'd like to give, act and pray with us!**

## Legacies: invest in a future without poverty

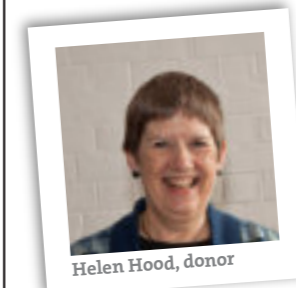
**If you're able to leave a gift to Church Action on Poverty in your will, you can continue putting your faith into action long into the future.**

Ending poverty in the UK is a challenging task that requires long-term commitment. At Church Action on Poverty, we're hugely grateful to the passionate, dedicated donors, activists and church leaders who stand with us. We know that many of you have been standing with us for an end to poverty for years or even decades.

In an increasingly difficult climate for charities and fundraising, our brilliant donors have continued enabling people to reclaim dignity, agency and power. Leaving a legacy is a powerful way of building on that dedication.

In the last couple of years, legacies have made a huge impact in our work. We'd like to thank Sheila Lovibond and her family – she left a hugely generous legacy which is supporting our work in churches and communities this year. Last year, another supporter made a significant donation from a legacy she'd received herself – enabling us to arrange the UK tour of the Dreams and Realities exhibition (see opposite).

**Let your legacy be one of hope and dignity. Visit [www.church-poverty.org.uk/legacies](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/legacies) or call us on 0161 872 9294 to find out more, or to let us know that we're included in your will.**



**By including Church Action on Poverty in my will, I can continue supporting its outstanding work beyond my own lifetime**

# Our churches need more working-class clergy



Our communities are awash with talent – but churches need to offer new routes to ministry. **Father Alex Frost**, vicar of St Matthew Church in Burnley and a member of the Church of England's General Synod, calls for bold thinking from national leaders.

The fact that my academic portfolio was as empty as some of our struggling churches became a huge stumbling block to my pathway to ordination

Church Action on Poverty's 'Church on the Margins' programme calls on churches to involve more people with lived experience of poverty in leadership and making decisions. Find out more on page 7 or at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm)

**I** have never received a standing ovation before and nor did I expect one at my recent trip to London for the Church of England General Synod.

But that is what happened after my February address to the gathering of Archbishops, Bishops, Clergy and Laity on the subject of working-class vocations and people training for ministry.

I'd like to think it wasn't just light relief because I was wedged in between the difficult debate about safeguarding on one side, and the ultra-dry debate about church processes on the other. But maybe that I struck a chord about how and who we recruit for lay and ordained ministry.

The crux of my address and Private Members Motion was to challenge the Church of England and all Churches in the UK that perhaps a 'one size fits all' approach to learning is not always in the interest of the church or the individual selected to train for ministry.

My key argument came from a place of experience and the fact I left school at 15 years old and had no qualifications. Although I went on to have a fabulous career in retail management with Argos, the fact that my academic portfolio was as empty as some of our struggling churches became a huge stumbling block to my pathway to ordination.

And so at Synod I presented my call for a radical change to how churches go about things, and argued that there was a rich harvest of talent and skills from people in our working-class communities that – as yet – had been seriously under-represented.

I asked them to do more to recognise the skills and potential of Christians in an urban setting. After all, these places are awash with entrepreneurs and down-to-earth hard-working people.

But why do our churches need a working-class cleric or pastor? Is this just another attempt to

increase our diversity levels, looking a little more favourable with the secular world?

Well that could be a fair critique, but I do truly believe that more working-class ministers would be a much-needed injection of talent and enthusiasm that offers something different to the academic degree model that exists in many church institutions of all denominations.

And just in case anyone was thinking, "Hang on a minute I'm working-class and I've got a degree, what on earth is Fr Alex going on about?" I'd just like to add that of course many working-class people are academic and they do have degrees, and that is wonderful.

Ultimately I would love to see all churches offer a number of work-streams for ministerial training. Of course keeping the academic pathway for classroom-based learning, but also opening up the opportunities and possibilities of an apprenticeship type model. Offering context-based learning, hands-on endeavour, where the experience from the 'real world' is soaked up and nurtured to create culturally aware people fit for church ministry.

When I stood at the platform I was unsure how this idea would be received, as after all the Church of England isn't particularly regarded as an instrument of change. Anything but, if the truth be known. However, you can imagine my delight when people stood to their feet in approval and passed my motion with 100% support.

The proof now will be in the pudding, and I eagerly look forward to discovering what the ministry division comes up with. But in the meantime I do sincerely hope that if nothing else it has encouraged working-class Christians who doubt their ability to serve their church, to confidently remind them that, YES YOU CAN!!

Father Alex Frost is host of *The God Cast*, and author of *Our Daily Bread: from Argos to the Altar*.

# Change happens when people come together to make it happen

# SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Recently, activists with experience of UK poverty have been doing just that, in conjunction with three universities across the country.

**M**embers of the Speaking Truth To Power panel took part in a national event at London School of Economics with academics and practitioners; and then delivered online workshops at the University of Staffordshire and the University of Salford.

Panel member Wayne Green, from Shoreham by Sea in West Sussex, reflects on the two most recent events:

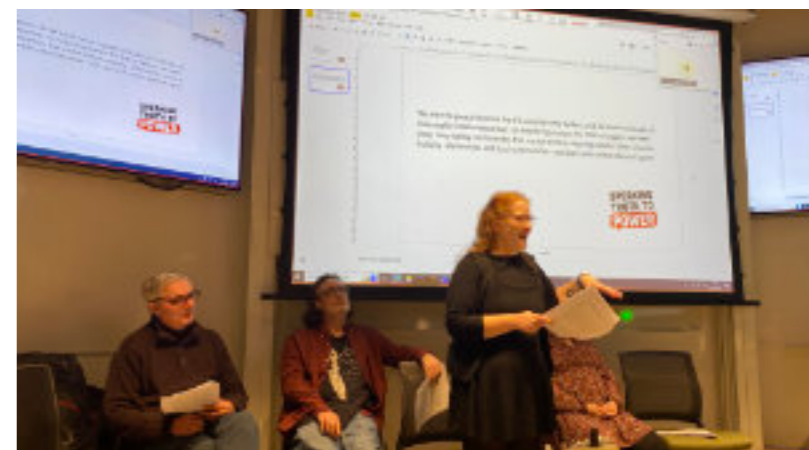
"Why universities? We felt it was important, as activists seeking to end all forms of poverty and exclusion. It is important for students who could be tomorrow's decision makers, policy makers and future leaders, to fully understand how and why we do what we do and how to challenge power structures, with a human-centred experience besides the academic rational perspective.

"The work at times I found was slow, and now and then disagreements got in the way. But I was learning to dump much of my professional experience, relearning to be more empathetic and take more of a back seat, and try not to see it all from my perspective. It was hard for me. But each time we met I could see that I was changing a little more my perspective. Slowly but surely we started to gel really well as a group. And I now understand why the planning took time.

"Finally, we had built two two-hour programmes. We had full control of the design, agenda, subject matter, and timings, and we chose who best to speak on each topic. It was a really fully human-centred collaborative and equally balanced process.

"The workshops were with the Universities of Staffordshire and Salford. We were there by experience to share – for example, to show what the difference is between experience and academic knowledge, also to show the value of real experience of poverty, the pain, how to avoid tokenism, how to navigate power dynamics, types of power flows, and the value of listening by those in power.

"I felt all the lecturers and departments were highly motivated, and positive in working with us, which gave us much confidence.



Speaking Truth to Power panelists at London School of Economics in the autumn (left to right): Wayne Green, Steve Porter, Tracy Porter

"We wanted to highlight to the students that they do have power, and how to be more politically active. Often your experience and knowledge is more than the power-holders' or decision-makers'. We showed real-life examples of how people in poverty can still have a voice and make changes. For example, we told how we had attended events at Parliament, and led on campaigns in our local communities, and spoke about our experiences of campaigns at local and national levels. It was important to show them what is often missed or not shown.

"It is important for students to see and learn from real-life activists in poverty, as this sets the agenda. They too can change the world. I wanted to say, 'You have so much power, it's all around us up for grabs. Look at us, look at what we are doing. Do not be afraid.' As I noted, poverty is a battle of invisibility, it must be won, we must be seen and heard.

"What have I really learned from all of this? I think I have learned to be more humble to the other members. Even though I find it hard to show, I do really care about them all in the years we have grown with each other. At the end of the day who am I, but a poor weak man offering my small bit of experience to such large problems. But I do believe change can happen and the younger generations have so much more to offer than I for that change."

# Act on poverty

**“Our group was really**

**inspired by the Act**

**on Poverty course.**

**Now we’re looking for**

**ways to share the messages**

**with our wider church”**

This two-hour course will help you and your church gain a deeper understanding of poverty and help equip people to do something about it.

Developed jointly with Christian Aid and our other partners, it addresses poverty both globally and in the UK.

**Download the course to use in your church – or take part in one of our online workshops**  
[www.church-poverty.org.uk/actonpoverty](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/actonpoverty)

**Act on Poverty**  
A Short Course for Churches & Groups  
2 hours + a break

**Reflect Speak up Take action**

Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 mins)

God of justice and compassion, you are present with us. Help us to listen to one another with care. Give us open minds and hearts, ready to learn and be challenged. Inspire in us hope for change. Fill us with energy and determination. That we may act for the good of our neighbours. Amen.

**Talking Poverty, Talking Politics (10 mins)**

Poverty and politics aren't easy subjects to discuss. We each bring different views and life experiences to our conversations.

**Listen to Methodist Vice President (2023-24) Deacon Kerry Scarlett talk about her family's experience of poverty.**

Kerry encourages us to be mindful of the assumptions we make about other people. It is important to avoid stereotypes about poverty and those it affects.

Political discussions can be divisive but Christianity has a lot to say about how we should do politics and what our priorities should be. Jesus taught about the issues and everyday choices facing ordinary people and those in power. He wasn't afraid to confront unjust power structures that were harming the very people they were supposed to nurture and protect.

Take a moment to agree some simple ground rules for your group discussion, such as:

- We will listen to each other – no one will interrupt or speak over someone else.
- We will strive to disagree well, showing respect for one another and asking questions without judgement or hostility.
- We will keep confidential any personal information shared in our discussions.

where people feel comfortable to share their personal experience, if they wish to?

**POVERTY TRUTH**

Stef Benstead

Stef is a community activist. Here he discusses the daily struggles with education face as part of broken systems.

because part of the point was that by

**Ashleigh May, Mums on a Mission - Halifax, UK**

“Poverty is something that if we work collectively together, it can be erased.”

Print the double-sided cards below. Use these for the 'Who is my Neighbour' activity.