

Hosting a regional roundtable event on tackling poverty:

A guide for churches and dioceses



Introduction

Too often in society, we hear from the same voices over and over again. Sometimes, we even turn to the same select few voices ourselves.

But it's in all of our interests to start better, wider, more productive conversations. They can be positive and transformational for us all.

They enable us to share and explore new issues and perspectives.

They enable us all to improve our understanding of challenges, and to overcome our own stumbling blocks.

And they enable us all to work together, making solutions more achievable, and more collectively held.

One way to start positive conversations is to organise a regional roundtable event, bringing together church leaders, people in poverty, and community groups from your region, to commit to tackling poverty together, and in the right way.

Church Action on Poverty has co-hosted two such events in recent years, in Yorkshire and North East England. The events have enabled a mixture of people from those regions to pool their wisdom, ideas and contacts, to achieve more together than anyone could alone.

This guide outlines the benefits of this approach, and gives some practical tips if you want to organise a similar event.

Why is it worth doing?

Church leaders want to see an end to poverty. Community groups want to see an end to poverty. People in poverty want to see an end to poverty. Individually, each can make some progress - but not much. Together, the potential to be heard and to bring about meaningful change is far greater.

Each group can bring different insights and resources - whether that's physical spaces that can be used, relationships and influential community contacts, the

acquired trust of the neighbourhood, or the unique first-hand wisdom of what is causing or sustaining poverty.

Working together creates greater potential. It also ensures an efficient approach - it reduces the risk of work being needlessly duplicated, it means groups can learn from each other, and it means potential mistakes can be corrected before they happen. It reduces the risk of people being left out of the conversation, and it reminds us not to presume what is needed, but to listen - so work is done *with* people on low incomes, rather than *to*.

Here are some of the things that have happened as a result of the first two events:

- New lasting relationships have been formed between churches and communities facing similar challenges
 - Individuals with experience of poverty have become more involved in campaigning work with national charities
 - A dedicated group has been formed to explore poverty in a particular rural area of North East England
 - More churches are looking to develop poverty strategies in partnership with people with lived experience
 - The insights of people in poverty have been amplified in the media
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How to host an event like this

The following advice is based on our own learning, from the two events we've held:

Getting started and organisation

We encourage collaboration from the start. Whether you're a community group, a church, or a group of people with lived experience of poverty, reach out to one of the others to work up a plan together.

Venue

Make sure you have a venue that is easy to get to, and which is accessible. Church halls or community centres are suitable, as they're well known in the community.

Times

Our events lasted two hours, followed by lunch so conversations can continue.

Who to invite

We've found that for a two-hour meeting, the ideal number of speaking participants is about 16 to 20. If you have too many, it will be hard for everyone to participate

meaningfully. At the North East England event, we did also have some observers, who followed the conversation without taking part.

You'll want a mixture of church leaders from different denominations, or different faiths; people with direct experience of poverty; and community groups who are well placed to take work forward afterwards. Ideally, people in poverty will make up at least half the attendees.

Planning the day - give yourself time

You couldn't possibly talk about every aspect of poverty in a two-hour meeting. It's pointless trying. You should aim to identify a few key issues to explore. These may be widespread issues that church leaders can help to speak up about (such as the sanctions system); it might be a localised issue (for instance we heard in Durham about the particular challenges facing ex-mining villages); or it might be issues affecting particular demographics, such as carers, disabled people, or young care-leavers.

Identifying these issues is a role for the people who have direct lived experience of poverty. There's no point choosing a topic that none of the speakers can directly speak to.

Deciding the agenda and running order should be done by, or in partnership with, people with direct experience of poverty. We have also learnt that making time for people with lived experience to meet well in advance, and discuss ideas, is the best approach. The date for our Durham event was set about eight months in advance, and the people with lived experience met twice during that time to agree priority issues and to agree who would speak on what topics.

Agree some broad aims in advance. As an example, the aims for the event in the North East of England were:

- *To influence change - not just to talk about issues but to help change things at their root.*
- *To make this the start of lasting collaboration - this shouldn't be a one-off, but rather a chance to model a participative/collaborative approach, which should lead to something ongoing. This could mean a commitment to regular meetings between church leaders and people/groups with lived experience, or perhaps a chance for community speakers/groups to help shape all denominations' anti-poverty work.*
- *To develop improved communication channels, between different community groups and to/from such groups and church leaders.*
- *To secure a potential quick action/outcome linked to Challenge Poverty Week and the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty*

Chairing

The agenda will be tight, and you need someone who can chair efficiently and keep to time. The Archbishop of York and the Bishop of Durham chaired the first two events. You may want to approach a senior church leader, who will be experienced in efficient meeting management. Include in the agenda good time for open discussion, but ensure speakers are not interrupted in their own allotted time.

Food

Deep discussion is hungry work - do make sure drinks are available on arrival, and arrange lunch for attendees afterwards. This also keeps the conversation going, and allows people to pick up on any key points they want to explore.

Media and reporting afterwards

We invited a journalist to the first event, but at the second we instead took photographs and gathered quotes, and shared these afterwards with media outlets and church newsletters. We preferred the latter approach, but if you have a local journalist you trust, you may want to invite them in a listening role. This decision ought to be made jointly by all organisers. Having a talented photographer at the event was helpful, but check whether people are happy to be photographed.

Certainly, we'd encourage you to write up a short report of your event. At the Yorkshire event, we worked with a researcher on a detailed report, which was sent to all northern Bishops and to all MPs in the York Diocese. At the North East event, we produced a shorter report, [which can be read online here](#). This is much easier to do, and still ensures that the messages can be shared beyond the room. If you'd rather talk about what happened through Church Action on Poverty, contact our communications and storytelling worker on gavin@church-poverty.org.uk

Actions and follow-up

If you've got a broad mix of people to come together, you don't want this to be a one-off event. Consult in advance on what useful outcomes might be, and try to arrange a follow-up meeting for a few months later. This needn't be as big an event and it could be done on Zoom, but it's a chance to remind everyone of what was discussed on the day, to check on progress and to make sure things keep moving forward. You might want some short-term actions, such as a joint statement on a particular issue, or a commitment to work on a particular piece of work together.