



Facing up to Poverty

Experiences of church, social action and poverty in four deprived communities



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Introduction

Church Urban Fund's vision is to see a time when every church in every community is helping to tackle poverty in England – by giving time and money, action and prayer. In order to help achieve this vision, Church Urban Fund wished to have a deeper understanding of what happens to the people involved when churches take action to tackle poverty.

A research team visited four deprived areas in the North East, the North West, the South West and the Midlands where churches were active in tackling poverty. In each area the team listened to a variety of people in order to get different perspectives – employed staff, volunteers, helpers, churchgoers and people experiencing poverty or social exclusion. The aim was to gain insights into how church-led work in these communities influenced behaviour, attitudes, perceptions and faith.

This research will be used in the further development of Church Urban Fund's communications and strategy, in order to encourage and support more churchgoers to take action.

Research objectives

By looking at poverty through the eyes of people in four deprived communities, the research sought to identify the following:

- What it is like to live with, or alongside, poverty
- Perceptions and attitudes to those in poverty
- Perceptions and attitudes to the church/churchgoers
- What barriers may exist between those in poverty and churches
- How these barriers may be overcome
- What motivates people to become involved in community work
- What impact being involved can have on behaviour, attitudes, perceptions and faith



Method

Qualitative interviews were conducted in four deprived areas where churches were active in tackling poverty:

- Newcastle
- Preston
- Camborne
- Birmingham

In each area interviews were conducted with a variety of people in order to get different perspectives.

Interviewees included:

- Employed staff
- Volunteers and helpers
- Churchgoers
- People experiencing poverty

More than 40 qualitative interviews were conducted. All these interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. At each location, as well as the more formal interviews, many conversations were had with people who provided input and insights into the research although these were not formally recorded.

Fieldwork was conducted between 31 May and 18 July 2012.

On the following pages is a brief description of each of the projects visited, the communities they were in and the interviews conducted.

LOCAL PROJECTS AND COMMUNITIES

Communities visited: Newcastle

Community

- An area of primarily social housing that deteriorated to the 90s, but has been the subject of regeneration since then. This regeneration has led to a reduction in crime (burglaries, car crime etc), better housing, more facilities and less pessimistic local residents. However, the area still has a poor reputation.
- Local people are defensive and proud of the area. They feel its reputation is currently undeserved. They can be reluctant to accept handouts/charity.
- There is a mix of long-term residents (with extended families) and a recent influx of migrants.
- Local issues include: low self-worth and aspiration, unemployment, benefit dependency, vandalism, low community cohesion, family breakdown, absent fathers, anti-social behaviour, racism.

Project

- Interviews were conducted at Pendower Good Neighbour project, which has been based at the Sunnybank Centre since 2003.
- The centre comprises of two semi-detached council houses, provided by the council and knocked into one. The ground floor functions as the community centre and the first floor houses a resident worker. There is a kitchen and a partitionable function room that provides a place for groups to meet, including the residents association, Nitt and Natter, homework clubs, youth groups, parent and toddler groups and a football club.
- The centre also organises community events like the celebrations for the jubilee. They have a monthly magazine with estate news and events.
- Interviews also included references to the Cornerstone project (which has been running nearby for 25 years) and a local project for disadvantaged young people.

Interviews

- 10 interviews were conducted, with 6 community workers and 4 project users.

Communities visited: Preston

Community

- Local issues include: unemployment, social isolation, crime, gangs, uncertainty, drugs, alcohol, abuse, anti-social behaviour, lack of confidence and depression.
- High levels of unemployment have been caused by the closure of the dock and other industries in the area since the 1970s.

Project

- A meal drop-in service that offers a choice of free food, as well as emotional support and advice. It is attended by people who are homeless, on low incomes, isolated, or addicted to drugs or alcohol.
- The drop-in is open Sundays and Mondays 6pm-9pm, and in an average evening is attended by up to 30 people. It is part of a Preston-wide collaboration to try and provide food and shelter every night of the week.
- It is based in the Methodist church, but has a large team of volunteers from other churches and none.

Interviews

- 14 interviews were conducted, with 7 community workers and 7 project users.

Communities visited: Camborne

Community

- Communities in Cornwall can be very fragmented. Many houses are sold as holiday homes or bought by retiring couples, leading to empty houses and lonely people. This also pushes the house and rental prices up, increasing the financial pressure on local people.
- Cornwall attracts people who want a new start, some escaping from problems elsewhere in the UK. As one of the warmest parts of the country during the winter, it is also appealing to the homeless. Cornwall has more than 80 people sleeping rough at any one time, making it the local authority with the second highest number of homeless people in England, after Westminster.
- Local issues include: unemployment, low wage economy but higher cost of living, homelessness, drug/alcohol addiction, lack of affordable housing, social isolation, anti-social behaviour, poor infrastructure, migration from rest of EU and UK, stretched services and marked inequality.
- There is a movement by some in the local community to stop homelessness projects as they are thought to attract 'undesirables' from elsewhere.

Project

- DISC (Drop In and Share Centre) is based in the church hall of Camborne Parish Church.
- DISC primarily supports vulnerable adults. Present membership includes people who are homeless, people with addictions, people on probation, people with physical/mental health issues, people with learning disabilities, migrant workers, older people, people in debt and the lonely.
- DISC also provides support and mentoring to ex-offenders, and support for the families of those in prison.
- Facilities include a food bank, clothing bank, bedding bank, shower and washing facilities, phone and internet access, cheap food and drink, as well as games.
- Although the research focussed on DISC, there were also interviewees from All Saints Church/Community Centre in Camborne.

Interviews

- 10 interviews were conducted, 3 with churchgoers, 5 with community workers and 2 with project users.

Communities visited: Birmingham

Community

- Local issues: loneliness, unemployment, little for young people to do, lack of respect for others, drug use, alcohol.
- Garrets Green is in the bottom 10% of the deprivation index. There is high unemployment and benefit dependency compared to the rest of Birmingham and the housing conditions are some of the worst in the UK.
- The local population was primarily white, but is becoming more ethnically diverse.

Project

- St Thomas employs one full-time youth and community regeneration worker and two part-time youth workers to run a community project.
- The community project runs services in response to expressed needs from the local community including; lunch clubs, youth clubs, parent and toddler groups. It also supports community groups and neighbourhood forums.

Interviews

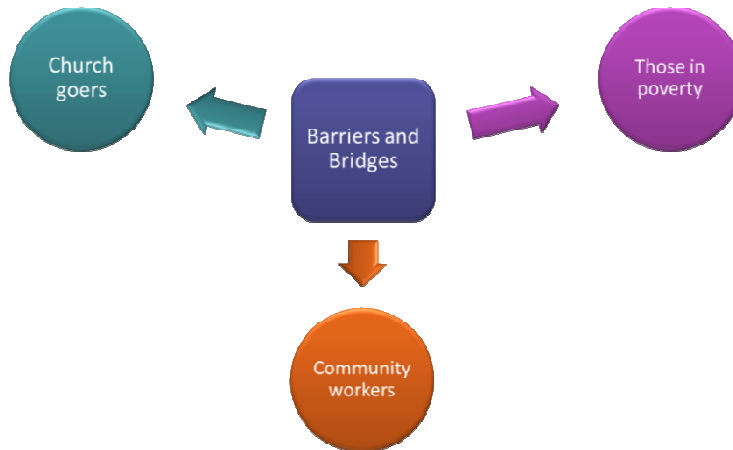
- 10 interviews were conducted, 7 with community workers and 3 with project users.
- Interviewees included a group of children.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Challenging assumptions

The original aim of the research was to identify bridges and barriers between churchgoers and those in poverty. However, it quickly became evident during the research fieldwork that the situation in deprived areas is complex, and that it would be inadequate to report based on a simple hypothesis that there are two separate groups: churchgoers and those in poverty.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that there is a third group: community workers, be they employed or volunteers. The research explored bridges and barriers between these three groups.



Secondly, it is important to understand that there is overlap between these groups. For example, many churchgoers and community workers in deprived areas are in poverty themselves, and those in poverty may become community workers or churchgoers, and many community workers are also churchgoers, but some are not.

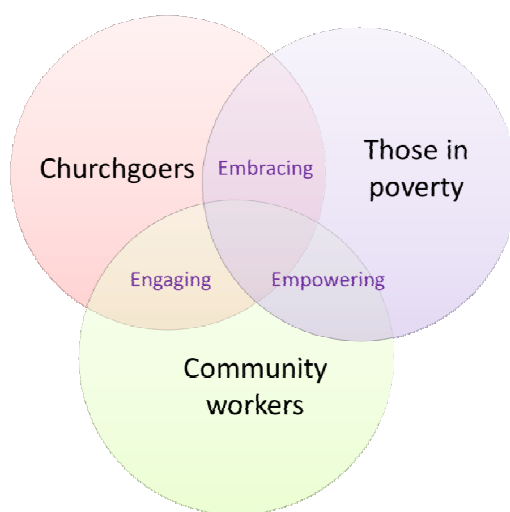


Key Findings

The research found that effective church-led community work helps to break down barriers between these three groups and that this breaking down of barriers occurs through the relationships that develop in the day-to-day work in the community.

In these circumstances, individuals are from the local deprived area, they belong to the church community and are engaged in the church's community work. Some of the most impassioned and effective community workers were those who belonged to all three groups – being part of the church and having first-hand experience of poverty.

The research also highlighted the need to challenge the assumption that churchgoers give to and serve those in poverty, receiving little in return. Indeed, the most impactful relationships between community workers and those in poverty were two-way, recognising that both parties had skills and experience to offer the other. For all involved in community work, there needs to be an openness to give and receive, to serve and be served, to love and be loved.



Where barriers exist between churchgoers, community workers and those in poverty it is important to build the right relationships in order for the community work to be successful:

- Churchgoers need to treat people in poverty as valued individuals with much to offer those around them
- Those in poverty should be empowered to help themselves and help others
- Uninvolved churchgoers need to be encouraged to engage with those doing community work, and those doing community work need to be encouraged to engage with the church

'Serves them right' or 'Serve them right'?

Some people associated with the church have little sympathy with those in poverty, believing that it is largely their own fault that they are experiencing poverty: poor decisions and life choices may have led to drug or alcohol abuse, single parenthood, homelessness, prison, family breakdown, unhealthy lifestyles, debt and so on. Churchgoers who hold these views tend not to get involved with work to alleviate poverty, and if they do it is often with an aim of meeting immediate physical needs, requiring minimal interaction with the people needing help and support.

In contrast, there are some people associated with the church who have real empathy with those in poverty, and are sacrificial in their desire to serve them as people. They work hard to get to know individuals, build relationships and meet their emotional and spiritual needs, which are often at least as great as their physical needs.

Helping themselves or helping others?

Some churchgoers find it very difficult to trust those in poverty. There is a fear that they might not respect what the church is doing for them, and that they might not respect church people or property – when things get damaged or go missing it is often those in poverty who are thought to have been responsible.

Whilst in some cases these views could be justified, it was largely the case that those in poverty who had been shown love and respect were in turn able to show love and respect to others. Some did this within their own communities or families, and others did this through community work associated with the church, sometimes becoming volunteers or even paid workers.

Being Good News or Seeing Good News?

In its work to alleviate poverty, one of the aims of the church is to be Good News to the local community, particularly to those in need. Some churchgoers share their faith overtly and others keep it much more hidden. However, there is a need to not just be Good News, but to see and hear it in those being served. Although they may not be churchgoers, some people in poverty had remarkable stories to tell of their faith journeys – about how God had both sustained and challenged them throughout their lives.

DETAILED FINDINGS

The face of poverty

In the course of the research, many of the faces of poverty presented themselves, including:

- Children with nowhere safe to play
- Women who had been abused as children and adults
- People with ill health or with unhealthy lifestyles
- Those with mental health issues, including depression
- Those who were unemployed or in poorly paid work
- People with no home or in poor housing
- Drug addicts and alcoholics
- People who mistrusted or feared those around them
- Broken families and single parents
- Fragmented, hostile communities
- People with low esteem, lacking self-confidence
- The isolated and lonely

Local needs varied in each of the four communities and the approaches taken by the various churches to help alleviate poverty varied accordingly. However, the most common ‘face of poverty’ seen in the research was the need to be loved, to know that someone cares and to be shown respect. In the worst cases, individuals had little respect for themselves, did not have close relationships with friends or family and had a perception that they were not respected by society in general.

“I feel like I’ve been pushed to the brink. I’ve been shown hell, so I know the difference. I don’t like even saying it, but it’s true. The meningitis, pneumonia, and you know, [it’s] just been totally out of this world. Didn’t know where I was or anything. Nothing good, I know that. Nothing good, no warmth, no love, nothing, no colours, nothing like that - just an awful, horrible feeling. Empty, horrible, desolate feeling. No love, you see. No light, nothing, do you know what I mean? But this place has been really good for me, so that’s my experience of it, and it still is.”

“Absolutely horrible. I used to walk around every day all day, just walk around drinking. Used to sit on the beach, couldn’t get any food from anywhere, never had any money. Sleeping rough was horrible. I’ve got a really bad hip from sleeping on the street. I’ve got rheumatoid arthritis in my hip.”

Some of those we spoke to had experienced poverty as children and had not experienced loving relationships within the family. According to a recent study, 12% of under 11s, 18% of 11-17s and 24% of 18-24s have been exposed to domestic abuse between adults in their homes during childhood (NSPCC 2011). We spoke to one community worker who, as a child, was sexually abused, physically abused and mentally abused. Another community worker had a schizophrenic father in an institution, a mother who had been an alcoholic for 40 years and a sister who had died from a heroin overdose. They described feelings of low self-esteem and hopelessness.

“So I got to that point in my life when I was attacked and raped by my sister’s first husband. But by this time I actually went right off the rails. I must have been about 14 months of just blotto, absolutely mortal drunk, going from one man to another. I’d gone home to tell my parents what had happened, and my dad said, “rubbish”. They didn’t believe me, so I walked back out of that house and took an overdose. Not that I wanted to die, it had nothing to do with dying, it was just a case of needed something more, you know, real. I felt unreal. I felt like I was just this entity.”

In deprived areas, unemployment is usually a major issue and, of course, being without work often increases social isolation. It is estimated that there are around ten million adults who are neither in paid work nor in full-time education and do not participate in any social, political, cultural or community organisations. Being socially isolated in this way decreases confidence and self-esteem, which can make interactions with others very stressful. In one example, a respondent was so stressed about going to the job centre that he became very ill. Even though he is still unemployed he has not claimed benefits for four years in order to avoid interactions with those at the job centre.

“They are so patronising the way they say things. I was frustrated because I wasn’t working, but it was just the humiliation, not the stress of being out of a job but the fact that they were not helpful in any way.”

People living in deprived areas are often wary of others and even fearful. Consequently, they can be reluctant to open up to others and it takes time and effort to build relationships and trust. This wariness of others also extends to those who may be trying to help and support them, particularly if those trying to help have no experience of poverty themselves. Those in poverty can be suspicious of others’ motives and reluctant to open up and trust or build relationships.

One other common factor was that those experiencing poverty often recognised that there were others who were worse off than they were and, in many instances, did what they could to support them. This was particularly the case for those who had been helped and supported themselves and so saw it as a way of giving back to society.

One of the aims of this project is to put a human face on poverty. The following examples are extracts from transcripts of six interviews, telling something of the stories of the individuals concerned.

THE FACE OF POVERTY

My dad died when I was fifteen, he got in after he finished work one night, he was only fifty and I was only fifteen, he just sat there and dropped dead and that has affected me for life.

I played football at school, then in the Youth Training Scheme and then professionally. I was a professional when I turned seventeen, eighteen. I never really got a lot of love there. I had a dog for eight years, sometimes I felt it was just me and my dog against the world. Then I had him stolen from outside a shop. That was the worst thing to happen to me after my Dad.

My mum moved and remarried, and I was left in town on my own because I played football there. So then I just started drinking, and when my team released me I just carried on with the drinking. Before I knew it, I'd lost my flat, I was homeless. So I went from a professional footballer to being homeless in the space of twelve months.

It's amazing how people just think you're subhuman mate, you know, a lot of them. Some people are alright, but some people, they just totally blank you.

I think with my life, I just look at it as a test, He's testing me to see if I still keep my faith. I always think, when my situation gets bad, it's been worse than it is now, I was on the heroin at one time, but I always think it's just a test for me. It's up to us to make things happen.

If I won the lottery, I would give this place money, so they could open every night. To be honest mate, it's amazing how much I look forward to coming to here. I don't know what I'd do without these places.

THE FACE OF POVERTY

I was incredibly abused as a child, because of my mother's gambling habit. If she was in a bad mood, she used to ram us into the coalhouse. I was sexually abused, physically abused and mentally abused, so as you never knew one day to the next if you were going to have something to eat.

So when I turned 14, I decided I'm not living in poverty. I couldn't read or write by this time. So I went to school and I slogged every day, every hour, to learn to read and write. I passed my exams at 16. And then I started to realise in life you can overcome things if you really set your heart on it.

So I got to that point in my life when I was attacked and raped by my sister's first husband. But by this time I actually went right off the rails. I must have been about 14 months of just blotto, absolutely mortal drunk, going from one man to another. I'd gone home to tell my parents what had happened, and my dad said, "rubbish". So I walked back out of that house and took an overdose. It had nothing to do with dying. I needed something more real. I felt like I was just this entity.

The one thing about suffering abuse, you have no self-esteem. Something just happens, it's your fault, and you know, everything's your fault. If you haven't got money for the tea, your fault. Your child falls over and cuts themselves, your fault.

When I met my husband, we swore blind that no child would ever suffer. I would always stand instead for children. I've always put children first. I became an adopted grandmother to twenty-three. A lot of kids in this area call me Auntie. God's given me this knack with children, and I've volunteered since I was twenty-three years old to make sure children got as much as they needed, as much as I could get them. We have to teach these children that there's hope.

THE FACE OF POVERTY

I had to give up my job to look after disabled parents. My dad worked until he was 46 then he had to go onto the pension because he was sick with emphysema, and then cancer.

At the job centre, if I signed on in a Tuesday, Monday night I would have a sleepless night thinking what are they going to say, what are they going to do tomorrow. They make you feel so degraded, so humiliated. If you have an appointment at 10 o'clock, if you happen to be five minutes late you are told off and threatened. I was that stressed I developed pneumonia and a neighbour took me to the doctors. I ended up three days in intensive care. If I wasn't taken to the hospital I wouldn't be here to tell the tale, they said another couple of days and I would have died through basically the jobcentre. I haven't been back since.

I was years and years at the church before I visited or started helping with the project. I never really thought about coming in, I just thought of it, as probably a lot of people do, just think it was for homeless and people with drink and drug problems, not realising that anybody can come in. I came to the church service as normal on Christmas Day and you could smell the cooking in the church and I thought "this is nice". The lady said to me why don't you come in on Boxing Day we are open all day. So I came in on Boxing Day, there was quite a few volunteers and helpers from the church and other churches as well. We were just chatting and I could see the dirty plates getting higher and I said, "I could give you a hand washing the dishes", so it basically started from there.

You don't have to be homeless, you don't have [to have] a drink or a drug problem to have money problems or whatever. I mean some older men come in, they come in every day because they get a nice hot meal, but there is somebody to chat to and there is the paper where they can do the crossword. They will order their lunch and we take it to them, so it's not like a queue up, get in line and it's dished out. It sort of makes them feel like mum or dad could be dishing out the dinner. It may not solve their problems but it shows them there are people that do care.

THE FACE OF POVERTY

I was a paratrooper for 16 years in the Army and saw action all over the world. I lived in Lincoln with my partner and kids for 16 years. Then I fractured my knee and was told I could not be in the Army any more. I was moved to a desk job, but I couldn't settle there. At this point Lincoln was going downhill, it was getting really bad drug wise. You would see nine year old kids smoking cannabis, 14 year old kids injecting heroin and 15 year old kids snorting cocaine. You wouldn't dare go out on your own after six o'clock at night. People are getting mugged, stabbed, shot. Even the police walked round in fours. We used to holiday in Cornwall three or four times every year so in '96 we decided to move down here.

We had been in Camborne a few years when my partner was murdered. They caught him about ten minutes later and he is now doing 25 years with no parole. I thought "I have got my four children - just get on with it". After a few years the kids left home and I got married again. Then I became homeless overnight when my ex-wife just turned round and said, "right, I want you out" and that was it - I had to go. I stayed with my son for a while, but had to spend a week in a night shelter because it was the only way I could prove I was homeless and get a flat out of the council.

Then I found out my daughter had become addicted to cannabis. She was given less than a month to live so I got her into rehab. I had drug dealers coming to my door, saying "your daughter owes me money". They threatened violence so I told them my family from Manchester will come down with shotguns, and they will use them. I never heard any more from them. If you back down they will pick on you, if you stand up to them they go away.

I've struggled to find any full-time work, I have got angina, I've got COPD, and hypertension behind my eyes. I went for a medical for my benefit and they said "Can you touch your nose? Can you put your hands up? Can you stretch your legs? Can you spread your legs? Can you bend your knees? Then you are fit for work". So I can't walk distances I can't take on heavy weight and I'm a multi-drop delivery driver. They said, "oh well you passed the medical so you are fit for work". I am 58 years old so who in their right mind is going to employ me?

One day my daughter said to me, let's go for breakfasts in the morning and I said "well where are we going for that" and she said we are going to DISC. I had never heard of it. I come here for breakfast and then I find I'm alright until teatime. I got to know the people here and they put me on an over 50s course in Customer Service and Retail and I actually got an NVQ in Level II Maths on that as well. They have bent over backwards trying to help people. It is not what you do it is how you do it, it defines the person you are.

THE FACE OF POVERTY

I grew up in Camborne, then I left to join the Navy. I was diagnosed with depression when I was 18 and that has been a constant battle. I am now 40 so I have battled with mental illness for 22 years and it has been difficult. I got married, moved away, had two children, came back when my marriage split up. I turned to drugs and alcohol. I have got a history of drugs and alcohol right the way through my teens and most of my adulthood. Suicidal tendencies, self-harming, basically I just lost the plot. I lost my way, I lost my faith.

Then a couple of years ago I got to a point where I just had enough and I knew that I had to change and I wanted to change because I couldn't continue living my life that way. I had two options, I either gave up drinking and using drugs or I killed myself. I have got two children and I didn't want them to be without a mother, and at that point I just looked up in the air and I said if there is a God there please help me. And I detoxed at home on my own.

It was one of the worst experiences I have ever been through. I shut myself off from everybody and it was the shame and the guilt.

It is difficult, especially mental illness people aren't aware of it. They look at you and they think that you are okay, but it's the mental illness, the depression, the agoraphobia. People just think because I don't look like I am ill then you don't suffer from it. People need to be aware of how much people suffer and how vulnerable people are.

I have been volunteering for a fortnight. My eyes have certainly been opened to how much this church is doing. I wasn't aware of how much they actually did for people in the community. There are food banks, there are clothing banks, the drop-in centre for vulnerable adults. I think it is absolutely amazing; I get goose bumps when I think about the good things.

Some people are lonely, they just want to sit and have a cup of tea and talk to somebody. They want people to listen to them, they need people there to share their problems with or even just somebody to smile at them and say, have a good day, and not look down on them and be judgemental. You know sometimes it is that simple.

THE FACE OF POVERTY

I've lived here all my life, 24 years. I have moved to like different areas but I've always come back because this is where I've lived since I was little, my mom lives up the road. My mom looked after us because our dad left us when I was 11 and I think my mom did a good job. We're not bad kids, we'd never go and rob cars or anything like that or steal from anyone or fight.

My dad leaving made me go completely. I hated my mom because you blame someone else and I think that's where I went wrong, and obviously going to secondary school you think, I'm bigger now, I can do whatever I want. I was a rebel, honestly I was bad. I used to fight with my mom, I used to go out drinking until silly o'clock in the morning when I was about 13. I think when I got to year nine everything just went downhill. I smoked, I drank, you go to the park, you've got nothing to do and it wasn't cool to come here [to church youth club].

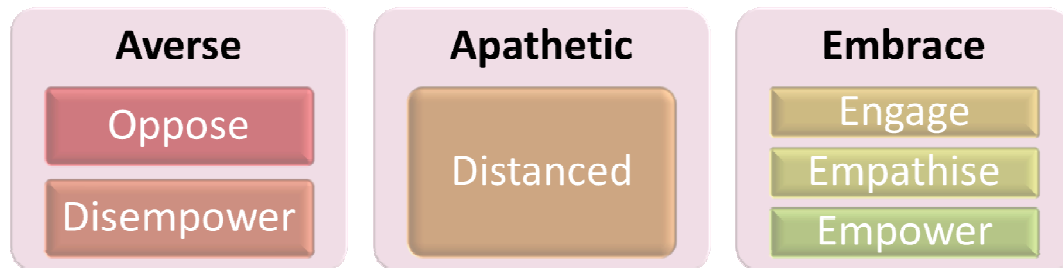
I had a baby at 15 and people go 'oh that's so terrible'. I've had people always do it to me. I was in hospital when I had her and you get treated completely different to the way an older woman would. 'You've had a baby at 15', yeah hang on a minute, I had a baby at 15 but I look after her, I've been to work, and I went to school and I got GCSEs and I'm not actually just thick and having a baby at 15. I might have four kids now but they're always looked after. They're my priority, not going out and getting drunk. Most people seem to think, well you had a baby at 15 so you're a bad mom. So I never judge anybody because I've always been judged. I'd never want my daughter to have a baby at 15, but it doesn't ruin your life, it just puts it on hold for a bit, and I've got four little lives that have come out of it. I think having my kids so young sort of changed my look on everything. I think if I hadn't had my kids when I did I'd be a completely different person now, I would have been horrible.

My boy's dad was a heroin addict. I lived really far away and so I escaped from him and came back here where you do feel safe. Being here I know everybody, it's just the place where I want to be.

I wouldn't let my daughter play out, she's eight. I wouldn't even let her walk round to the park with her friends. You don't know who's out there no more. People are a lot less trusting, there's a lot of drug taking around here, people who smoke weed, take heroin. People walk around with spliffs hanging out their mouths. They've had bollards put in so you can't drive the motorbikes around because kids have died from motorbikes and crashing. A lot of people round here do dodgy stuff, you don't know who you're getting involved with unless you've known them forever. It's not a nice place to live to be honest, even though I've lived here forever.

Facing poverty: churchgoers

Almost all churchgoers interviewed were aware of the teachings of Jesus and of the expectation that all Christians should love and serve the poor. However, in practice, perceptions and attitudes towards those in poverty varied both within churches and across churches.



The most positive of churchgoers embraced and empathised with those in poverty, engaging with them through the community work and empowering them to help themselves and others. However, some churchgoers were apathetic, showing little interest or anything other than superficial concern for people in poverty. In some cases they were hardly aware that poverty existed. They were also distanced from the community work that served those in poverty. The research also found that the most negative of churchgoers were averse to those in poverty and would actively oppose and disempower those doing community work.

"They always say Camborne and Redruth are a deprived area and yet looking around it never seems obvious to me that it is particularly deprived in that way... I mean you don't see anybody in rags going around or this sort of thing."

"Well, homeless week, we had a sermon on homelessness, and I was absolutely gobsmacked because one of the questions the vicar asked was "why do you think people are homeless?" And [the] first person who answered, right away, no hesitation whatsoever, and I was absolutely stunned because it was the last person I would have expected, and he just said "they're lazy". I could hardly speak then, that was it, that was me finished, and I just wanted to walk out. I was absolutely disgusted."

A good example of the divergent attitudes amongst churchgoers to those in poverty was noted at a church where youths were vandalising the church. Some members advocated significantly increasing the security system, increasing the physical barriers between the church and the young people, while others

suggested starting a project to engage and empower the local youths. A decision was taken to engage, which led to a very successful youth project.

“There were some problems with vandalism in the church, and we had some elements of the church committee were saying, well, we must deal with this by installing some kind of security fence thing on the roof to discourage this kind of activity. And then there were other people on the committee who were saying, no, that’s not the solution. The solution surely is to engage the young people themselves, and there were just enough people on this other side who said let’s go down the idea of engagement, let’s forget the whole security thing.”

The varying attitudes towards those in poverty were even present with individual churchgoers where they distinguished between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor, feeling that some need to be served, but others take advantage of the church or are not worth helping. The groups perceived as ‘undeserving’ included: drug addicts, alcoholics, ex-offenders, single mothers and the long-term unemployed.

Barriers between churchgoers and those in poverty

Here is a summary of the barriers that hinder churchgoer engagement with efforts to alleviate poverty. Some are ‘passive’ barriers, where churchgoers have not really thought about poverty or made any effort to understand the local issues. Some are ‘active’ barriers, where churchgoers are aware of some of the local poverty issues and have chosen to do nothing, or in the worst cases, to work against those in poverty.

Passive barriers

- Lack of understanding of poverty and its impact on individuals and society
- Lack of awareness and interest in community work to alleviate poverty, including that led by local churches
- Little understanding of the impact that community engagement can have
- Lack of empathy with those in poverty

Active barriers

- Lack of time, finances and other resources
- Negative attitudes to people in poverty, often influenced by others including the media:
 - A failure to be open and accepting of others
 - A belief that people and situations will not change, so any efforts to help are relatively pointless

- Fear:
 - Afraid of being challenged, both physically and socially
 - Concern for personal safety
 - Fear of contamination, for example from those in poverty who might be using church utensils, facilities etc
 - Concern about crime, like theft or vandalism
- Lack of trust and respect

Examples of how churches bridge the gap

The research highlighted a number of ways in which churches were working to bridge the gap between churchgoers and those in poverty.

- Putting a human face on poverty, to deepen empathy and understanding:
 - Encouraging churchgoers to share their own experiences of poverty with each other
 - Welcoming, accommodating and encouraging people who are experiencing poverty
 - Inviting individuals with experience of poverty to talk to churchgoers
- Proactive leadership:
 - Having regular preaching and teaching related to poverty
 - Identifying individual's gifts and encouraging these to be used in community work
 - Recognising and encouraging those who have experience of poverty to use their experiences to help others
 - Making the community work an integral part of the life of a church
- Building relationships:
 - Providing opportunities for regular engagement, rather than isolated interactions

"Once you know the individuals, you're not intimidated by them anymore."

Facing poverty: community workers

In all projects visited, the majority of community workers showed a great deal of love and respect for those they served, as well as for each other. In most instances they made an effort to get to know those they served by name and to build relationships with them. Many community workers interviewed also commented on the fact that they received as well as gave love and support as part of their work.

“They come along because of the people who make them feel wanted and special, and they do, the love is overwhelming. I’m going to use that word all the time, the love is overwhelming. We give them so much of what’s inside of us. They feel it when they walk through the door. I mean the one lady, she comes here every week, she has to catch about two or three buses and she’s in her late 80s, and she’s the first one to arrive. Even through the cold weather and the snow, and the rain she’s there, she’s dripping wet with her little plastic hat on. You know, she’s there, there’s got to be a reason.”

“If you really accept them as equals, they tell you so much, and I often leave here feeling very grateful... and I can share things with these guys and women too.”

In the best examples of community work, the people involved often referred to the community using words relating to ‘family’ and ‘home’.

“It was like the living room of your house.”

“You know, it’s just, it is a very sort of warm, embracing place.”

“I’m like a mother figure... If they need to talk, we’ll talk. Whatever they need, I’m there.”

“I feel they’re like family. I mean they’ll come and give us a hug and we give them a hug. We ask about their family, they ask about us, we tell them what’s going on in our lives, and they really do take an interest in us as much as we take an interest in them. So it’s like a family I think here. I’m not saying in every lunch club it is but I do think it’s like a family here.”

Relationships between community workers and those in poverty are built over time. As stated previously, many people living in deprived areas find it difficult to trust others. Community workers are directly impacted by this and can find themselves challenged regularly by those they are trying to serve, until they have earned their respect.

“People are very distrustful because of the way they’re treated, that they’ve been let down... very often they want someone to talk to and they’ve learned that they can trust me... But that takes time.”

One of the reasons many community workers had such positive attitudes towards those they served was because they had experienced poverty themselves, either directly or through a close family member or friend. This gave them an empathy for those who were struggling. It also motivated and equipped them to help and support others.

“My dad, he’s got schizophrenia, so I’m happy to talk to people with mental health [problems], it doesn’t spook me or freak me out. And my mum was an alcoholic for 40 years, so I’m used to dealing with alcoholism.”

“I have an adopted son who is schizophrenic and I haven’t seen him for nearly five years now... He went off his meds and we tried to get him back on them, and then he just slipped away like a shadow. The last sighting we got was a couple of years ago, in the winter. We hadn’t seen him but word came through that he had been seen in Liverpool city centre, in a shop doorway, with a t-shirt on, trousers, no shoes and socks, no coat, in the freezing winter. So when the vicar mentioned the need for volunteers for the project, and said to me, you were so quick... so I explained why... I’d just like to think somebody somewhere is doing it for him.”

“As a recovering alcoholic – there’s no way I can ever say I’m better than them. That means that we can actually talk on a level of equality. It may be I’m staff, it may be that sometimes I hand them the food, but when we sit down and talk, it’s me as a person talking to them as a person. It’s not me as a volunteer talking to a homeless person. It’s just two people chatting, and I don’t think they get many other opportunities except with the other people who come here, to be treated as equals. And I feel privileged to be treated as an equal by them.”

Although nearly all community workers we met treated others with great respect, the research revealed some community workers with more negative attitudes. Some were perceived by others to be judgemental, failing to treat people in poverty with respect. For example, we were told of one drop-in centre where homeless people were referred to by number, and where staff would not give belts to those who asked for them to keep their trousers up, 'in case they hang themselves'. It was also reported that people would serve food that was well past its best 'because they eat from dustbins anyway' and that people were given plastic knives and forks to eat with in case they stole cutlery.

"There was a feeling very much of them being somehow undeserving and having brought their circumstances on themselves."

Barriers between community workers and those in poverty

In the projects visited there were few barriers to engagement with those in poverty, apart from ones such as lack of time, finance and other resources. The few barriers that were identified during the research included:

- Lack of respect for the people using the services
- Focus on meeting physical needs only, with an unwillingness to build relationships
- An assumption that those in poverty would reject any opportunities to discuss faith (some of those interviewed relied on faith to help them through difficult times)

Examples of how community workers can bridge the gap

- Attitudes:
 - Not treating people as problems to be solved, but as people who have value and a potential contribution to make
 - Recognising the two-way benefits for all those involved, that volunteers are there to receive as well as to give
 - Showing love, kindness, compassion, understanding, humility, commitment, a non-judgemental attitude and respect
 - Treating people as equals and being willing to listen
- Behaviours:
 - Demonstrating a long-term commitment to the community, building trust
 - Not just meeting people's physical or material needs, but also their emotional and spiritual needs

- Providing opportunities for people to have fun and interact socially, with staff and volunteers joining in e.g. Tom’s bingo in Birmingham
- Empowering people to help themselves and involving them in helping others, providing opportunities for people to give as well as to receive
- Empathetic workers:
 - Staff and volunteers with personal experience of poverty: motivates people to get involved and helps to break down barriers with people in poverty
 - Involving local people who are known in the community, who local people can relate to more easily and seek to imitate

Facing the church: those in poverty

Many of the people interviewed who were living in poverty had had little recent engagement with the church. Some were completely un-churched, but many were de-churched, having had childhood experiences of going to church, through Sunday school or a faith-based school. Their current perceptions of the church were also influenced by social and media stereotypes.

“Since I’ve come to church [for her children’s christening], it’s not as bad as everyone makes it out, when you go to church, oh that’s boring isn’t it, actually it was alright, it was fun. We got cake afterwards as well, you get to speak to lots of different people.”

When asked about their attitudes towards the church most expressed ambivalence, although they generally had respect for the church. They were aware that the Christian faith has teachings about serving the poor, but felt that churchgoers struggle to do this largely because they are socially distant from the realities of poverty.

Although most of the project users were not current churchgoers many still considered themselves to be Christian and talked about their faith helping them through difficult times. For example, one homeless Catholic respondent prayed regularly and described his life as a test of faith.

In three of the four areas we conducted research, the community work took place either in or adjacent to the church. Most project users were unaware of any division between the two and therefore attitudes towards the church were very much influenced by the experiences of the community workers serving them. As they were generally ‘loved’ by the community workers, this had a positive impact on attitudes towards the church and churchgoers. This was even the case in those churches where there

was opposition towards the community work from some churchgoers – the divisions were not really visible to those outside the church.

“I never knew what [the church] done until I actually came here, and it opens your eyes. When you think, well, I have lived in Camborne for 14 years, right, and I never knew this went on. So I was flabbergasted and amazed. It did turn my views round like, because I just thought the church is there for people who want to go to church.”

One respondent described church as “a place of peace” and had fond memories of organ playing as it reminded him of the church school he attended as a child. As a result of coming along to the drop-in centre he had attended church a few times, because the workers were “kind and helpful” and he “just wanted to give something back”. When asked if there were any messages he’d like to give to the church, he simply answered “Thank you”.

One of the main barriers to engaging with the church is lack of trust. This is partly due to the lack of trust felt generally to other people – especially to those who are more affluent, those who are perceived not to have any idea of how it feels to be in poverty, and to those in positions of authority. Churches can either work to build relationships or further exacerbate the lack of trust by not demonstrating any love or respect.

Barriers between those in poverty and the church

Here is a summary of the barriers that were seen to exist between those in poverty and the church.

Lack of awareness:

- Lack of awareness of church-led community work – what it is, who delivers it and the impact it can have
- Lack of understanding about the connection between the church-led community work and the church itself

Negative attitudes and preconceptions:

- An assumption that churchgoers and community workers have little experience of poverty
- A failure to reassess church since less positive experiences of church as a child
- Ignorance or negative stereotypes about church and about Christianity, for example, a concern that Christians may try to convert you, that church is irrelevant or boring, that church is only for pious or posh people
- A perception that churchgoers are motivated more by their own ‘need’ to do good, rather than a genuine desire to help others

Behaviour:

- Having to adapt behaviour e.g. by not being able to smoke, swear, drink or come into conflict with others

Lack of trust:

- Finding it difficult to open up and build relationships with others

Examples of how the gap can be bridged

Building awareness and challenging preconceptions:

- Creating and using opportunities to inform the local community about the church and its work
- Giving a human face to the church and its work by, for example, telling stories of the individuals involved
- Making it known that churchgoers are vulnerable people too, by sharing experiences of poverty

Building relationships and earning respect:

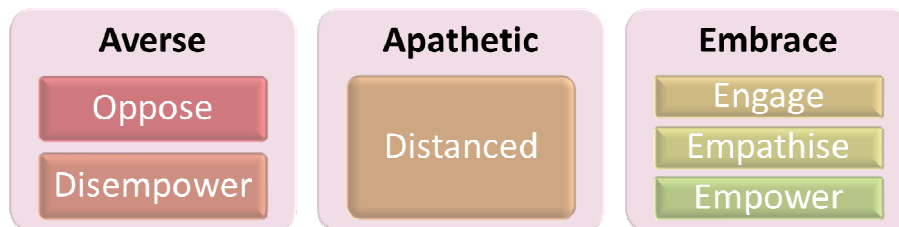
- Being present in the local community, involved with any directly linked work outside the church
- Making an effort to get to know individuals, especially those with influence, whether they are connected to the church or not
- Allowing the community work/project to act as a bridge between the church and those in poverty, especially for those who would not feel comfortable going into church

Providing opportunities to discuss church and faith:

- Encouraging the visible presence and availability of a minister or priest who people can get to know and talk to, and who can set an example to community workers of how to share their faith appropriately
- Providing opportunities for people who want to ask questions or explore their faith in an unpressured way
- Using Christian symbols e.g. saying grace before meals and celebrating major Christian festivals in an accessible way can help to bring a Christian presence
- Providing opportunities for people to express their need for prayer e.g. prayer request areas
- Building strong relationships between workers and people from the community, making it easier for people to share their faith naturally
- Being aware that people experiencing poverty are often in a vulnerable position and more open to God because of this (though not necessarily more open to church)

Facing each other: churchgoers and community workers

The relationships between churchgoers and community workers varied markedly in the different areas. Some churchgoers fully embraced the work, some were averse to it and some were simply apathetic towards it.



Whilst church leaders engaged, empathised, embraced and empowered community workers this behaviour did not always extend to churchgoers. One worker described the attitude of many churchgoers as 'neutral' – they are happy for the work to happen, but do not want to be personally engaged. Whilst they may broadly support the community work, some churchgoers had little awareness of what it actually involved, they were not aware of its needs and had little empathy with its users. This was confirmed by speaking to churchgoers who had only recently got involved, who claimed they had very little awareness of what took place before they were involved.

"You tend to think well it's going well, let him carry on."

Some churchgoers were too busy with other aspects of church life to take a great interest in the community work or to get involved themselves, but would support with prayer and donations. Others felt that the community work was 'taking over' and detracting from other priorities of the church.

"I must admit I haven't got much involved with them. I have got enough things to do at the church, so many problems up there we are dealing with at the moment with the actual building."

"They probably think, 'good on you', but it wouldn't challenge them enough to get off their backsides and do it as well."

"I think what would hurt [God] more is because the people firmly believe that they are Christians and are doing what he wants them to do, and they're not, basically."

The most positive attitudes were seen in Birmingham where the whole church was fully engaged with the community work and everyone was encouraged to use their gifts to play their part. Nearly all church members were involved and when new people joined the church they were encouraged by the leaders and others to get involved. Those we interviewed felt that the community work was absolutely integral to the life and mission of the church, and indeed, it was hard for the research team to distinguish between the two. The church leaders played an important role in creating this situation - helping to identify and release people's gifts and passions, and creating a culture where people were expected and wanted to help.

"There's always something going on... they're always asking for volunteers."

"People in this church just have a real concern for the community... That's all part of God's plan, he brings people to this church who have a heart for the community."

The most negative views come from projects where there was little engagement from the local church and in some cases active opposition to the community work.

"We did a sleepover to raise awareness and to raise money. A member of the congregation was heard to remark that he hopes that people come and pee on you while you're sleeping out."

"We have people in the congregation who are prejudiced, they don't like us doing this."

Where there was opposition, community workers were under constant pressure to tread carefully to avoid upsetting other churchgoers. Examples included being unable to use crockery and utensils which belonged to 'the church', and having to make sure that any community work did not leave any sign of its activities on church premises.

"It's like attending the feeding of the 5,000 and complaining about the mess left on the grass. It's missing the point."

The research found that divisions could also be exacerbated by community workers who separated their work from the church. In some cases the work would become their 'church', the place where they lived

out and found meaning in their faith. This attitude was seen to further separate the church and community work, both physically and spiritually.

"I'm a Christian, but not a regular churchgoer because I feel I get enough spiritual stuff here."

The community work provides a good opportunity to unify the church and build relationships, not to create divisions.

"The joy of doing this is that it doesn't matter, you're just serving and loving people, who cares whether you're high this or low that or liberal that or conservative? I don't give a rip, you know? And so I think this is a really good opportunity, this kind of stuff, to bring unity to all the echelons of the church."

Summary of barriers between churchgoers and community workers

Here is a summary of the barriers that exist between those who work to alleviate poverty and other churchgoers. Some are 'passive' barriers and others are more 'active' barriers.

Passive barriers

Lack of awareness and engagement:

- Lack of awareness about the community work among those not directly involved, not knowing exactly what the community work is, who is involved, who it helps and the impact it has
- Physical distance: when the community work is a separate entity and located at a distance from the church building
- Community workers on the edge of the church, being relatively unengaged

Higher priorities:

- When churches and church leaders place a higher value on upfront roles like preaching than they do on work with those in poverty (often implicit, rather than explicit)
- Preoccupation with other church priorities e.g. preserving the building

Churchgoers' belief that they have little to contribute:

- Believing they have nothing to offer and lacking confidence to get involved

Active barriers

Attitudes and behaviours:

- Churchgoers who are unsupportive or even hostile to the community work for whatever reason, especially if they have influence within the church
- Fear of the impact community work may have on the church
- Fear of getting involved with those who are socially very different to themselves
- Community workers being negative about other churchgoers who do not share their passion for those in poverty, without seeking to understand why they are not more involved
- Community workers becoming frustrated with the lack of church involvement and cutting themselves off from the rest of church

Examples of how churches can bridge the gap

Awareness and education:

- Sharing news and stories of the church and its community work with both groups
- Providing information and reassurance on the aims and direction of community work
- Making sure that churchgoers are aware of the impact the community work is having
- Teaching regularly on the importance of serving others and on the importance of 'belonging' in a church

Creating and encouraging more opportunities to engage:

- Being open to churchgoers dropping in to see the community work, organising open days
- Having a critical mass of churchgoers involved in the community work, so that it becomes more integral to what the church does
- Creating opportunities for people to get involved in the community work in 'safe' ways e.g. someone who was asked to do the flower arrangements for tables at the drop in centre for homeless people
- Actively identifying people's gifts and encouraging people to use these in community work

Building trust, respect and relationship.

Proactive leadership:

- Having a church leader who is championing the community work within the church
- Acting as a link between community workers and the church, helping workers to make the link with their faith

“Just give it a go and just find out about the project, even if they never end up going again... Just walk in somebody’s steps... Don’t pretend that people don’t exist, because they do and it could be you or your son. Try to look beyond your world.”

Motivation to engage

Many community workers interviewed had experienced poverty, either directly or through a close friend or family member. Their main motivation to engage in poverty alleviation was a desire to help others in similar circumstances. In particular, those that had received help and support themselves spoke of wanting to ‘give back’ by returning that support to others.

Some of those involved had a natural compassion for those in poverty, a desire to help others in general or a particular desire to work in their local community. For others, the primary motivation was reacting to local issues, particularly if they were directly affected (for example, the church being targeted by vandals).

Although most community workers were motivated by a genuine, heartfelt desire to love and support those experiencing poverty, there was concern that some were motivated by their Christian duty to ‘do good’ rather than a genuine desire to serve others, or that they may be doing it largely to fulfil their own personal need.

“If we start with one group of people who have a sense of needing to have stuff delivered to them, and then another group of people who have a sense to fulfil themselves of needing to deliver services to people who are less fortunate, you perpetuate the imbalance of power and you sort of maintain the status, the social status quo.”

Influence of faith

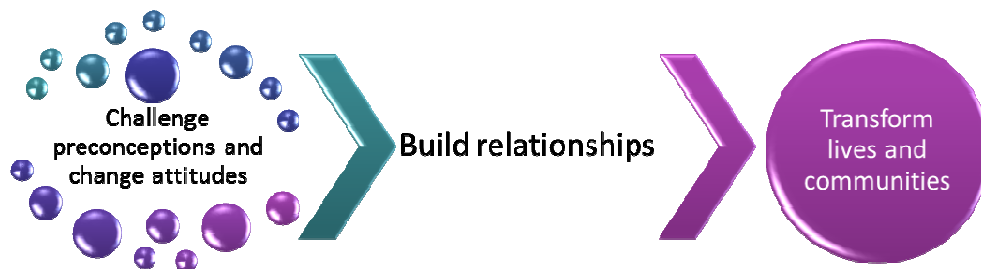
When discussing what prompted people to get involved with the community work, and what motivated them to continue, few spontaneously mentioned their faith. Whilst their Christian faith might have shaped who they were, giving them a strong sense of social equality and justice, the project work did not appear to be driven by a sense of Christian duty or a desire to evangelise. Rather, the primary motivation appeared to be compassion for others.

The main exception to this was in Birmingham, where the community work was an integral part of church life and almost every member of the church was involved in some way. In this situation, faith was expressed as a primary motivation by community workers. A minority expressed the feeling that God had called them to do such work.

“I think when you’re spreading the good news it’s not just about preaching and getting people into church, it’s about giving people an impression of what church is about and what being a Christian is about. I think that’s so important. With our lunch club is, we do have a monthly service if people want to go. But for the rest of the time they see us and Christians at work and how we help people and support people. And I think that is a very good way of spreading the good news, not just about getting people into church. If we only spread it to the people in church we wouldn’t be doing a very good job really would we?”

Recommendations: Building Bridges

One of the main objectives of this research project was to identify barriers and explore how these might be overcome. Between those in poverty, churchgoers and community workers, there is a need to:



Build awareness, understanding and empathy

- Keep people informed about activities, events and news relating to both church and community work
- Share news of the impact of community work
- Share stories of people within the church, those doing community work and those in poverty
- Invite individuals with experience of poverty to talk to churchgoers
- Have 'open days' for both church and community work
- Keep communication regular between churchgoers, project workers and those in poverty

Encourage engagement

- Have church leaders who champion the community work within the church, and the church within the community work
- Identify individual's gifts, whether they be from church or the community, and encourage these to be used
- Recognise and encourage those who have experience of poverty to use those experiences to help others

Build relationships, develop trust and respect

- Encourage churchgoers to be active in the community
- Welcome into the church, accommodate and encourage those experiencing poverty
- Value those in poverty and recognise their potential to contribute, rather than treating them as problems to be solved

- Encourage churchgoers to share experiences of poverty with each other
- Recognise the two-way benefits for all those involved, that community workers are there to receive as well as to give
- Provide opportunities for regular engagement, rather than isolated interactions
- Demonstrate love, kindness, compassion, understanding, humility, commitment and respect
- Make an effort to discover and meet emotional and spiritual needs, not just physical needs

Integrate faith with community work

- Have regular preaching and teaching on poverty
- Provide opportunities for people in poverty to ask questions or explore their faith in an unpressured way
- Provide opportunities for people to express their need for prayer
- Make use of Christian symbols, festivals and other simple activities as stimulus
- Build relationships to make it easier for people to share their faith
- Be prepared to see and hear the Good News as well as to be and share it
- Be aware that people experiencing poverty are often in a vulnerable position and more open to God because of this (though not necessarily more open to church)

Recommendations: Church Urban Fund

Challenge perceptions of who is involved in church-led community work

- Many people hold preconceptions that it is out-of-touch, middle class churchgoers that are involved in church-led community work. There is a need to communicate that many of those doing community work in deprived areas have experienced poverty themselves and are using those experiences to help others.
- Tell stories of those involved in church-led community work, in order to build awareness and understanding, to help build bridges and encourage others to help.

Challenge churches to encourage churchgoers with experience of poverty to help others

- Encourage churches to explore their members' knowledge and experience of poverty.
- Suggest ways in which these experiences could be used to build bridges with others in need.

Encourage integration of faith, community work and church

- Encourage churches to explore whether divisions exist between churchgoers and community workers.
- Give practical advice and ideas to churches where there is a divide between churchgoers and community workers, to help them bridge any gaps.
- Produce materials to help both churchgoers and those doing community work to reflect on the relationship between faith and poverty alleviation.

Help to put the human face on poverty

- Continue to tell the stories of those in poverty, so that they are increasingly seen as people with needs rather than problems to be solved.
- Tell the stories of people who were living reasonable lives, but are now living in poverty due to a change in circumstances.
- Tell stories that communicate how easy it is to fall into poverty, and help eradicate the perception that people 'bring it on themselves'.

Emphasise that meeting physical needs is not enough

- Encourage churches to build relationships with those experiencing poverty.
- Use case histories to demonstrate the transformative impact of those relationships.

Change perceptions from 'giving' to 'giving and receiving'

- Remind churches that relationships are two-way, poverty alleviation is not simply about the church 'giving' to others.
- Raise expectations that those in poverty have a lot to teach the church, and encourage those involved to have open hearts and minds, and to listen to those they are serving.
- Use case histories to demonstrate what the church can learn from those in poverty.

Challenge any reluctance to bring faith into community work

- Use case histories to demonstrate the depth of faith some of those in poverty have.
- Encourage churches not to be afraid to help people spiritually as part of poverty alleviation.
- Give ideas for simple and non-threatening ways in which faith can be explored as part of the community work e.g. prayer books/stations, being available for people to talk to.
- Use case histories to demonstrate how faith has been successfully integrated into community work.

