

General Synod, July 2025

Poverty and the church: 40 years after faith in the city

Mark Sheard, Chair of the Mission and Public Affairs Council

Thank you so much +Rob for that presentation

I find it hard to believe in some ways that it is forty years since Faith in the City was published.

I remember well the shock of seeing riots in Toxteth and Brixton and the spotlight they shone on the scale of deprivation that our society had allowed to take hold of our urban landscapes in the early 80's

As I watched events unfold and heard stories about what life was really like in some of our cities I felt a sense of burning injustice.

And it wasn't just stories, it was the simple bald truth revealed by statistic after statistic.

Let me give you just one example:-

Lord Scarman said in his enquiry into the Brixton riots of 1981, unemployment figures for black youths under nineteen are at 50% compared to a national average of index 20%.

Could that really be true? And could it possibly be right? How could it be allowed to happen?

As a young man in the early stages of my pilgrimage I was continually finding new treasures in the bible. And at this time I discovered the book of Amos for the first time.

I read words with which I have now become familiar, perhaps too familiar; perhaps we all have, but at that time these words came across to me as a clarion call to arms

*But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!*

I was cut to the quick. Here was the voice of God speaking through the prophet demanding justice and compassion from his people as a response to the iniquities of their society.

So would His people, His church, hear that voice in the 1980's and how would they respond?

As we've been reminded by +Rob today the church did hear and did respond... and I was inspired.

I eagerly bought my copy of FitC – and read it – and as story after story emerged my sense of concern deepened. But so also did my sense of hope – God had not abandoned the poor – indeed he had a bias to them.

And the church as his, hands, his feet, his voice and heard that divine imperative and was not abandoning them either.

It is worth noting the words of the sub-title “a Call for Action by Church and Nation”

And the church acted – not only was it a prophetic voice but also an actor. And I did my bit working with unemployed teenagers in West London.

It is so good to be reminded of the ‘whole church’ nature of the response by +Rob today.

But I can almost hear some of you saying – that’s fine, a nice history lesson, but that was then and this is now!

Indeed it is now – and poverty still blights the face of our nation; injustice still rears its head.

Let me remind you of some of the quite shocking facts that are recorded in the paper supporting this motion today (GSXXXX). The source and definitions lying behind these figures are in the paper so let me just share some headlines.

1. As of last year, 21% of the population (14.2 million people) and 31% of children (4.5 million children) were living in poverty.
2. The effects of poverty aren’t felt equally. If you’re a child in a large family (with three or more children), you’re more likely to be living in poverty. If you’re in a family with a disabled member, you’re more likely to be living in poverty. If you are in a Bangladeshi or Pakistani household, you’re almost more likely than not to be living in poverty.
3. In-work poverty has risen, with around two-thirds of working age adults in poverty living in a household where someone was in work.
4. Overall poverty rates have hovered between 20% and 22.5% for a generation, while the number of people living in very deep poverty – struggling or unable to meet their most basic needs – has increased significantly.

And of course behind every statistic is a real life person, a woman, a child, a family. Each has their story, their own struggles, their own reason to feel hopeless and abandoned by society – and even by God. These are the stories +Rob has shared with us today; these are the stories I hear in the work I am privileged to do with Christians Against Poverty (CAP).

These statistics and stories are a reality check –

Are we seeing clearly what is staring us in the face?

Are we growing less attentive to the call of God?

Are we tiring in our efforts to build a just, fair and peaceful kingdom for all in England?

How does the mission of the Church intersect with and complement wider efforts to address poverty across society? What is ours to do, and where might we call on others – including political, business and thought leaders – to step up with us?

So I bring this motion with its four clauses before you today.

Synod please

- Firstly Recognise and celebrate the impact of the Faith in the City report on the work of the church in parishes up and down our land.
- Secondly – and once again thank you +Rob for making this point so clearly in your presentation - please affirm the value and necessity of listening to and learning from people with lived experience of poverty.
- Thirdly – and this of course links back to much of the legacy of the Faith in the City report - please give thanks for the fantastic work undertaken by Christian communities to witness to the love of God, serve and strengthen their communities.
 - And I hope very much that in speeches from the floor we will hear more about this work. I continually find myself both challenged by the ongoing stories of desperate poverty I come across in my work with CAP, but also inspired both by the resilience and perseverance of those who experience poverty and also by the work of Christians across the country who so generously, faithfully and sacrificially give of themselves.
- And fourthly and finally. please wholeheartedly recommit to ending poverty in all its forms and manifestations with all that entails, as we seek to be ambassadors of our Lord who came ‘to bring Good News to the Poor’

But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

I commend the motion before you standing in my name.