

**Bishop Rob Wickham, Group Church Executive, Church Urban Fund**

One of the many wonderful initiatives that Church Urban Fund provides, is Places of Welcome – a network of over 900 asset based community ventures, many of them in churches, that provide their neighbourhoods with places where all people feel safe to connect, belong and get involved. I was visiting one of these projects in Wolverhampton, in an area of significant deprivation. 20 people were there, and 6 people independently told me that this was the only time that week that they were likely to speak to another human being.

Similarly, in Lichfield city centre library a gentleman read out a prayer card that he had been given in a hospice recently where his wife was dying. As he read, tears rolled down his cheeks, concluding that this was the only place he felt safe enough to share this prayer.

Finally, on an outer estate in Leeds, 50 people were enjoying lunch in church. In the corner, the well used clothing bank and foodbank. A young and very distressed mother arrives with her 2 year old. She shared that she needed to get out of the house, and here she can be herself, away from her partner who has mental health (her expression) to enjoy her biggest treat of the week, a Greggs steak slice.

The resurrected Jesus first appears in John's Gospel to Mary of Magdala. She is paralyzed in fear in a graveyard, a place of death, having been left alone by Peter and John, with the potential of capture all around. Jesus meets her in this fear, in her poverty, in her vulnerability, calling her by name. Quite simply, Jesus showed up.

This Gospel of hope in despair comes alive, each and every day. Jesus, through his Spirit, often in his Church - meets with the broken, marginalized - those who are paralyzed or caged by material, relational and identity poverty. Some call this Missio Dei.

Faith in the City, some 40 years ago, gave a language to this revelation. In response to the significantly rising levels of poverty in the 1980's, from 14% of the population to almost a quarter, with some pockets exceeding 50% of the population. We discerned a language, a theological and biblical imperative, a classification, a mechanism to respond. We confidentially raised questions about many contributing factors; politics, education, health, housing, justice, as well as daring to put our own house in order. CUF was a result, as was CMEAC. Urban Priority Areas - our shared language. Priority because these areas had been forgotten, urban because 84% of the nation's population live in the urban.

We found a joint imagination of a decentralized, asset based resource. £60 million was collectively raised by Dioceses, banks, commerce- a mutual effort given the scale of the societal problem. We were determined, angry, hope filled and joyful in equal measure. We threatened the party political at the highest echelons, on account of the truth telling of the reality of poverty. The accusation of the report being Marxist was an attempt to discredit and avoid serious debate of the issues raised.

The money was not invested but spent on grassroots work in Urban Priority Area parishes. Projects were identified, with the support of the Diocesan Bishop, in youth work, community development work and much more. Projects which brought challenge, change and hope. This was in stark contrast to the initial Government response of Development Corporations- top down, done to, and a misguided ideology that trickle down economics works.

Our shared work was prophetic, a wake up call, stressing a need for a collective and collaborative response, different to a political rhetoric at the time that championed that there is “no such things as society”. As Mark will testify, several people in this room said yes to Jesus because of this report - this work is evangelistic.

Today’s debate is a reminder that this task, this priority ministry remains a non-negotiable for the Church. The facts are stark, as you can see from the paper accompanying this debate (to which I am grateful to Will Fremont Brown and Colleagues in Faith and Public Life).

CUF shares the poverty data for every parish through our Look up Tool. A glance will reveal that a man in Blackpool is likely to have 25 years less life expectancy than a man in parts of central London.

In my own ministry, as a Vicar and later as a Bishop I lived in Camden. Somers Town and Hampstead. Life expectancy was 18 years different.

In York Diocese, 56% of children are growing up in poverty in Middlesborough, whilst in Wilberfoss it is less than 1%.

Poverty is a matter of life and death.

Yet, into such poverty, vulnerability and inequality, Jesus shows up and gently brings hope, meeting with His beloved in their deepest needs, making the poorest communities rich in creative learning, not communities to be done to.

Treasures, as Laurence the Deacon describes, that provide rich learning are often ignored in the shaping of mission strategy. All too often our pervading culture lends itself to imposed paternalism.

I pray that this debate will build on this renewed sense of priority, in a cultural, social and politically sensitive way that takes heed to power. Nothing about us, without us, comes the mantra from many projects with whom CUF works. But let's face it, we, as a church, have not always been good at this dynamic. Instead of looking at our communities and asking what we need to fix by reaching into the unknown for Jesus, we begin by looking at what we should cherish and build on, where the Holy Spirit is already at work, where people of faith and goodwill express love for one another through service in action.

There will be some in this chamber who have experienced significant poverty, so we must tread gently, mindful of pastoral principles. I suspect that most have not. I only say this as my experiences in Leeds, Lichfield and Wolverhampton have shown me how little I personally understand poverty. I come to this debate as the pupil, the disciple, but with a heart that is full of anticipation of blessing. As Henri Nouwen reminds us, Jesus said, blessed are the poor, not blessed are those who care for the poor, and today, I am praying that the gift of God's treasures may be recognized, supported, enabled, championed, cherished and beloved by those privileged to be in this room.

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