

## KEY FINDINGS:

# BIAS TO THE POOR?

## CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TO POVERTY IN THIS COUNTRY

**One of the challenges of tackling poverty in England is to raise awareness of its existence and increase understanding of what it means to be poor in an economically developed country like ours. Christian theology provides a distinctive perspective on poverty, including an in-built 'bias to the poor' and a strong emphasis on a personal and collective responsibility to help those in poverty as an expression of God's love for, and identification with, the 'least of these'. This research looks at how this theology is reflected in the attitudes of clergy and churchgoers and, in particular, whether they think differently to the rest of the population about issues of poverty and inequality. The key findings are:**

- There are sharp differences between the views of clergy members and their congregations concerning poverty. For example, three quarters of clergy said they think poverty is mainly due to social injustice, but only one fifth of regular churchgoers agree.
- There is also an apparent lack of awareness of poverty among the laity; only 37% of regular churchgoers think there is 'quite a lot' of child poverty in Britain, compared with 78% of clergy. This is in stark contrast to the latest UK poverty figures, which show that up to four million children – or nearly one in three – are living in poverty.
- Possibly more surprising is the finding that churchgoers' attitudes to poverty are little different to those of non-churchgoers. Churchgoers are no more aware of poverty and no more likely to attribute it to social injustice than non-churchgoers. In another question, only 36% of regular churchgoers said they think large income differences are 'morally wrong' – the same proportion as for non-churchgoers, and substantially lower than the 74% of clergy who agree with this statement.
- Churchgoers are somewhat more sympathetic to benefit claimants than non-churchgoers, being less likely to believe that most unemployed people could find a job if they tried and also less likely to think that most people on benefits are fiddling the system. However, churchgoers' attitudes have been hardening over the past two decades in line with the views of wider society, which has become much less sympathetic to people living in poverty.
- All in all, attending church appears to do little to change people's underlying attitudes to poverty and inequality. If, as we believe, tackling poverty is at the heart of the gospel message, then there is a clear need for churches to do more to raise awareness and understanding of poverty among their congregations.

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### BACKGROUND

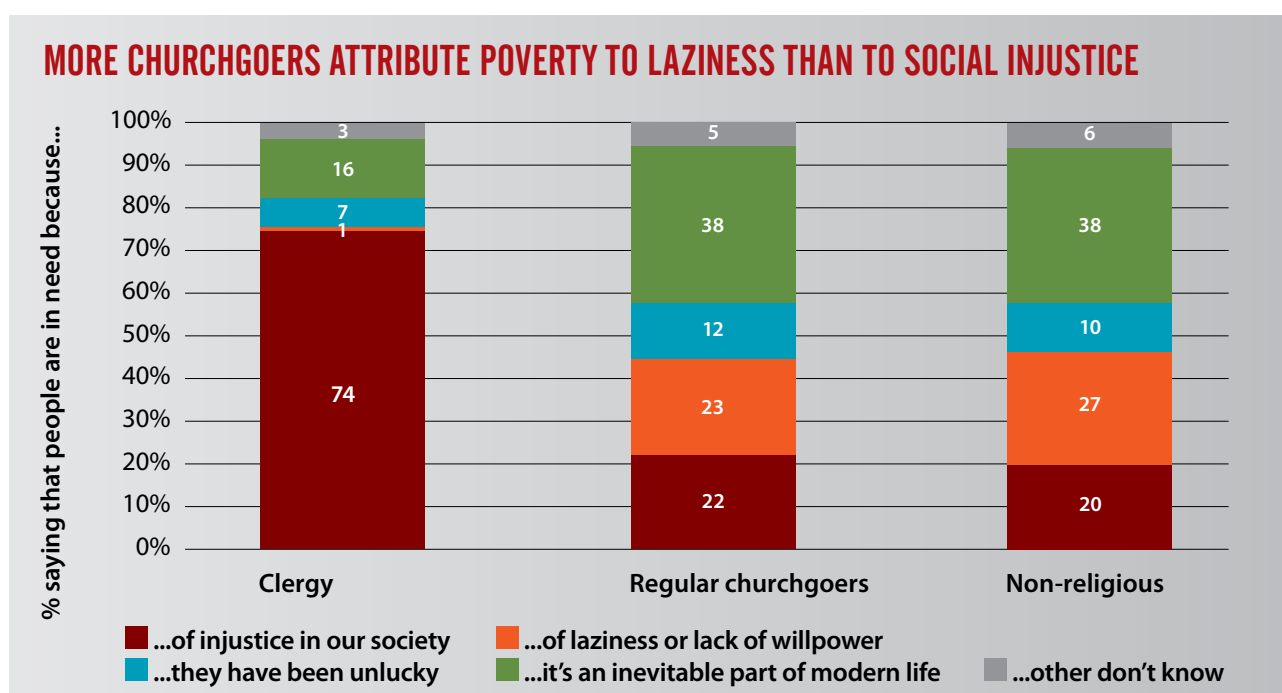
The purpose of this research is to look at whether a 'bias to the poor' is evident in churchgoers' attitudes to poverty in this country. Public attitudes to poverty matter because ultimately they determine the way we treat those in poverty, both individually and through the institutions we are part of.

This analysis combines data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS), a national survey of around 3,500 people (including 500 regular churchgoers who say they attend church at least monthly), with our own survey of 209 Church of England clergy, which we collected at deanery chapter meetings (using a sub-set of questions from the BSAS). Respondents were asked about a range of poverty-related issues, including their perceptions about the extent of child poverty and the reasons people experience poverty. The views of clergy and regular churchgoers were compared with those of people who say they are non-religious (or non-churchgoers). The sub-sample of people of other faiths is too small to report.

### ATTITUDES TO POVERTY

There is an apparent lack of awareness of poverty in this country among the general public, including the majority of practising Christians. According to the latest government statistics, up to four million children – or nearly one in three – are living in poverty in Britain. Yet, when asked about the extent of child poverty, only 37% of regular churchgoers said there was 'quite a lot' of child poverty in Britain, which is around the same as for non-religious people (38%). By contrast, 78% of clergy said there was quite a lot of child poverty.

Three quarters of church leaders believe that poverty is mainly due to 'injustice in society', but only a fifth of regular churchgoers – and the same proportion of non-churchgoers – think this. More people think that laziness or a lack of willpower is the main reason that people experience poverty – cited by around a quarter of regular churchgoers (but only 1% of clergy). The most common response among churchgoers (and non-churchgoers) is that poverty is 'an inevitable part of modern life', suggesting that many Christians have a fatalistic or passive attitude to poverty.



In a series of more detailed questions (not asked of clergy), regular churchgoers recognise that child poverty is due to a wide range of factors. The five most commonly cited reasons are: alcohol or drug addiction (73%), parents who do not want to work (60%), family break-up or bereavement (56%), lack of education (49%) and long-term unemployment (44%). The ranking of responses is the same as for non-churchgoers. All in all, around a half of regular churchgoers mainly attribute child poverty to factors that could be said to be within people’s control, such as addiction or lack of a desire to work. Less than a quarter of churchgoers mainly blame structural causes that are largely outside people’s control, such as low pay, inadequate benefits, or discrimination.

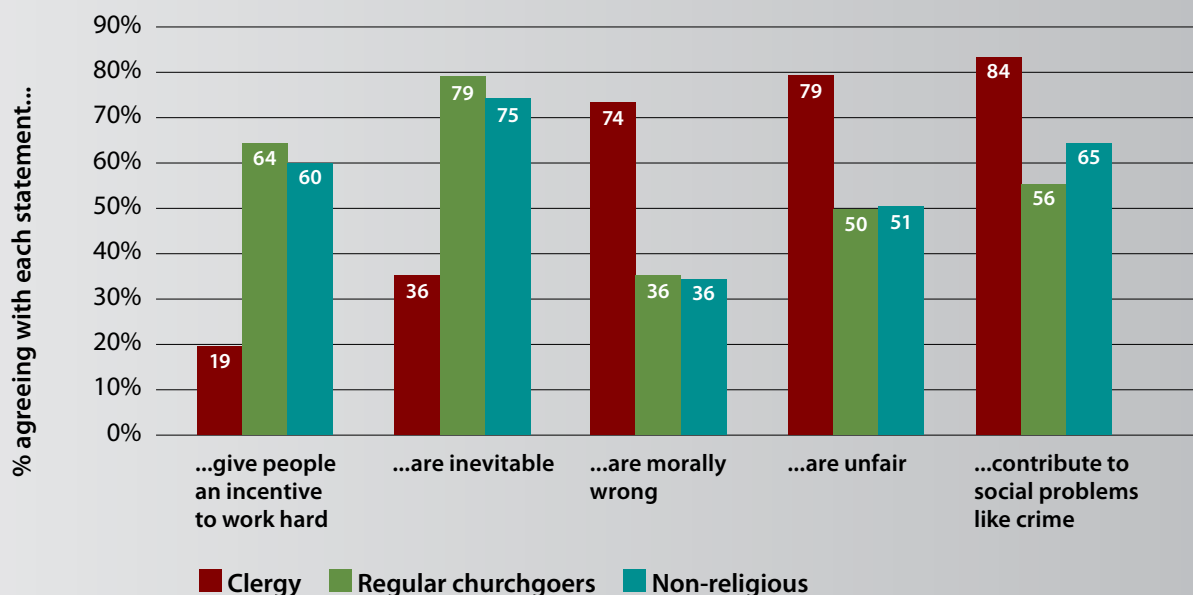
## ATTITUDES TO INEQUALITY

Attitudes to inequality are of interest because there is growing evidence that large differences in income are bad for society as a whole, and because measures to tackle poverty are unlikely to be effective if they do not address the underlying drivers of inequality.

Around 8 in 10 churchgoers and non-churchgoers think that the gap between those with high and low incomes in Britain is too large. Among both groups, around 6 in 10 believe the government has a responsibility to reduce income differences, but fewer than 4 in 10 agree that government should redistribute incomes from the better off to those who are less well off.

Clergy have very different attitudes to their congregations and perhaps more surprisingly, churchgoers’ attitudes are little different to those of non-churchgoers. In one question, 74% of clergy said they think that large income differences are ‘morally wrong’ – but only 36% of regular churchgoers, and the same proportion of non-churchgoers, share their opinion. In another question, around three quarters of churchgoers and non-churchgoers agree that large income differences are inevitable, whereas only a third of clergy believe that nothing can be done to reduce the income gap.

### MOST CHURCHGOERS BELIEVE THAT LARGE INCOME DIFFERENCES ARE INEVITABLE AND ARE NOT MORALLY WRONG – THE OPPOSITE OF MOST CLERGY



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A majority of regular churchgoers (56%) agree that large differences in people's incomes contribute to social problems like crime, which agrees with the main thesis in Wilkinson and Pickett's book, 'The Spirit Level'. However, this view is more widely accepted by non-churchgoers (65% of whom agree with this statement) and even more so by church leaders (84%).

### ATTITUDES TO PEOPLE ON BENEFITS

Churchgoers are somewhat more sympathetic to benefit claimants than non-churchgoers, based on their responses to a series of questions about the benefits system. For example, churchgoers are less likely to agree that most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one (61% versus 68% of non-religious people) and are less likely to think that most people on benefits are fiddling the system (26% versus 36%).

When asked whether the government should spend more on benefits for specific groups, churchgoers make the same distinction between 'deserving' and 'non-deserving' poor as the rest of the population. 86% of churchgoers would like more to be spent on benefits for carers and 73% are in favour of greater benefits for retired people, but only 35% think that more should be spent on single parents and only 14% would support higher spending on unemployed people.

Comparing responses now with those from twenty years ago, churchgoers today are less sympathetic to the poor than when the Church of England's Faith in the City report was published in the 1980s. Most notably, churchgoers are now much more likely to think that benefits are too high and discourage work (rising from 30% in 1987 to 57% in 2009), as opposed to being too low and causing hardship. This hardening of attitudes mirrors changes in public attitudes among the wider population.

### CONCLUSION

Our findings show that clergy understand poverty and inequality very differently to their congregations, and that church attendance has little impact on people's underlying attitudes to these issues (in stark contrast to other moral issues, like euthanasia, censorship, and marriage, where there are very marked differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers). The majority of churchgoers do not recognise the extent of poverty in this country and only a small minority attributes poverty to social injustice. If, as we believe, tackling poverty is at the heart of the gospel message, then there is a clear need for churches to do more to raise awareness and understanding of these issues among their congregations.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

To download this and other research reports, go to [www.cuf.org.uk/research](http://www.cuf.org.uk/research). For more information about this study, please contact Tom Sefton at Church Urban Fund ([tom.sefton@cuf.org.uk](mailto:tom.sefton@cuf.org.uk)).

Church Urban Fund has produced a new Lent course, aimed specifically at churches, which is designed to help congregations to explore and better understand the impact and causes of poverty in this country. Download your free Lent course at: [www.cuf.org.uk/resources-churches/](http://www.cuf.org.uk/resources-churches/) or call 020 7898 1667 to request a hard copy.

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