

KEY FINDINGS:

POWER, POVERTY AND THE CHURCH:

GALVANISING THE CHURCH TO TACKLE POVERTY IN THIS COUNTRY

How can we build a movement of Christians committed to tackling poverty in this country? And how can we help churches to engage more effectively with those in power? Organised jointly by Church Urban Fund, Church Action on Poverty and St John's Waterloo, this workshop brought together church leaders, activists and anti-poverty charities from across denominations to begin to address these questions. To stimulate debate, we asked three prominent Christian social thinkers to share their views and experiences: Dr Luke Bretherton, Reader of Theology & Politics at King's College London; Canon Paul Hackwood, Chair of Church Urban Fund; and Niall Cooper, National Coordinator of Church Action on Poverty. The event was chaired by The Rev'd Helen Dawes, Deputy Secretary for Public Affairs at Lambeth Palace. Rosie Bairwal (CARJ), Mo Smith (RISE-Regenerate) and The Revd Giles Goddard (St John's, Waterloo) contributed to the panel discussion.

BACKGROUND

"The Church is already doing a lot to tackle poverty, but often in a disjointed way and without the support and recognition of the wider church." Tim Bissett, CEO of Church Urban Fund

Our starting point, as convenors of this workshop, is the firm belief that tackling poverty is a central part of the Church's mission. However, we are also aware that not everyone in the Church shares our passion for tackling poverty. Our challenge is how to raise awareness of poverty in this country and how to resource churches to engage more effectively with people in poverty and bring them together in conversation with those in power, locally and nationally.

This is the first in a series of workshops that seeks to build a movement of Christians committed to tackling poverty through constructive dialogue, and by sharing ideas and practical experience in order to encourage those already engaged in tackling poverty and inspire others to do likewise.

REDEEMING POWER

"In this country, we are fixated on addressing poverty as a question of redistribution of resources. Actually, the real question is the redistribution of power."

Luke Bretherton talked about the need to develop a fresh, redeemed, understanding of power. Many of us are suspicious or nervous about power, either because we are aware that it has been abused in the past, or because it can seem at odds with Christian notions of humility and sacrifice. Yet, as Bretherton pointed out, there is also a theological affirmation of power in the depiction of Christ as the supreme ruler of the universe,

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and a renewed understanding of Jesus, not as meek and mild, but as a political figure who challenges and transforms social and economic relations. When people react against power, it is against *unilateral* forms of power, which attempt to control and dominate others and where power is linked to status. However, *relational* forms of power are transparent and interactive, something that ordinary people can exercise through building relationships and acting together, rather than a special thing reserved for elites.

So, what are the implications for how government and churches should go about tackling poverty? According to Bretherton, we are seeing a shift from 'to' and 'for' to 'with' models of service provision:

- 'To' models involve top-down, paternalistic provision, based on a duty of care to those less fortunate than ourselves and an underlying assumption that experts know better how others should live. The trouble is that this leaves utterly intact the pattern of power relations
- 'For' models seek to avoid paternalism through adopting technocratic, value-free procedures that efficiently match provision to need. The danger is that a provider-client relationship generates dependency among 'service users'
- 'With' models involve all parties with an interest in the common life of the community or institution; no single group is dominant and all are expected to contribute. Examples include community organising, participatory budgeting, and the mutualisation of public services.

There are particular challenges if the Church is going to take this 'with' model seriously and move to more cooperative action or mutual aid. Currently, most church-based social care operates on a 'to' model. But, if we want to see powerful, resilient and faithful communities with the capacity to address their own problems, then people need the power to act for themselves rather than being dependent on services, power to interpret situations for themselves rather than being dependent on interpretations provided by outside 'experts', and power to challenge structures and represent their interests to the powers that be.

This in turn requires leaders, a clear values base and new or strengthened institutions, without which individuals are powerless before the forces of the market and state. Churches are a key institution in which people can learn to exercise relational power, through running small groups, speaking in public, taking part in committees, and becoming familiar with holding power.

WORKING RELATIONALLY

"This is a key moment, because the current economic climate has given us a space to ask some fundamental questions about the state of our society. For some, this is simply a blip in the economic cycle; at the other end of the scale, there are those who want to see an end to capitalism completely. Most of us are somewhere in the middle. We want a fairer society; we want human beings to be considered with dignity; and we want some sense of virtue and morality in the way people relate to each other."

Paul Hackwood shared his own experiences as a parish priest in Bradford, where his church was very active in establishing employment projects, family support projects, an arts project and a refugee project. Looking back, however, he is not sure that it was all that positive, because the people they were helping became outputs and objects of their well-intentioned activities.

By contrast, a relational approach of working seeks to provide a supportive framework in which people are able to take control of their own lives and engage with their own issues, rather than being told what to do. Theologically, it is based on two principles: that humans are made in the image of God, which gives all of us value regardless of our status in society; and that we're formed in the shape of the Trinity, which means that our true identity is found in relationship with others.

For this reason, Church Urban Fund is committed to the idea of emergence, that how we respond arises from the conviction, capacity and engagement of local people to change their own situation through their own agency supported by the relationship we have with them: *"People want their lives to change, so what we can do is to get them engaged in addressing the issues they face, provide a supportive framework for that to happen. People have lost control; they need to take it back; and we must do all we can to help people to engage in that process."*

CHALLENGING THE POWER GAP

"The Church has to make its mind up on where it stands on economic justice. Does it avoid taking sides, or does it remain true to the Gospel?"

Niall Cooper argued that underlying all the other inequalities in the UK is a power gap. Global economic forces, corporate power, distant political parties, managerialist bureaucracy, and lack of transparency in decision making processes conspire to drain away any sense of agency. People feel they have little or no say in the decisions that affect them.

True social change is not simply about helping a few individuals to escape poverty, but about transforming power relations between communities and the institutions which shape their lives. As Jim Wallis, the US Christian activist and author, would say, it isn't just about pulling people out of the river, but going upstream and asking who or what is throwing people into the river in the first place. The challenge for the Church is to be a 'wind-changer', shifting the public mood from blaming the poor to championing their cause: *"It is our task to create the conditions in which politicians have to take seriously the challenge of ending poverty in this country in the same way as Make Poverty History has done for international poverty."*

Three examples from CAP's work demonstrate the power of ordinary people to make change happen: Community Pride, which is rooted in the principles of Paulo Friere and the belief that everyone has the power to change within them; Participatory Budgeting, which is based on the principle that communities should have a direct say in how public money is spent locally; and Community Organising, which brings together broad-based coalitions of churches and community organisations to achieve shared goals.

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY ORGANISING

Last year, one of CAP's local partner organisations in Stockton on Tees, Thrive, uncovered huge dissatisfaction among local residents with the high cost lending company, Buy As You View, including high credit charges, poor customer service, and lack of transparency. Instead of encouraging individual customers to get help from the local CAB, Thrive's response was to challenge the way the company operated. With help from a community organiser, local people produced a spoof advert for YouTube highlighting the issue. CAP supporters in churches across the country then emailed and telephoned Buy As You View's Chief Executive, asking him to meet with Thrive. Eventually, he agreed to fly his senior management team from Cardiff to Stockton, where he accepted the concerns of some of his most long-standing customers and acceded to all of Thrive's demands. He also agreed to work with Thrive to bring together a roundtable of other high cost lenders, chaired by the Bishop of Ripon & Leeds, to work towards an industry wide code for responsible lending, which would benefit over a million customers.

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QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

"The most important thing to do initially is to educate our congregations. What we're focusing on here is the way the rich have got richer and the poor have got poorer, because there is a tremendous lack of awareness about that." Giles Goddard

Many issues were raised during the small group and plenary discussions, including:

- The need for church leaders to educate their congregations about the fundamental importance of addressing poverty and injustice as part of Christian discipleship, and to challenge attitudes that poverty is the fault of the poor.
- The need for the Church to put its own house in order, by addressing issues of power within churches, being more outward-looking, and shifting the Church's centre of gravity towards more deprived areas.
- Recognising that resources might be better devoted to seeking to change the power imbalance that perpetuates poverty, even though this takes longer and is riskier and even though it's hard to say no to filling gaps in government provision when there is a pressing need.
- Moving from the tempting space of blaming individuals or institutions to convening conversations across sectors (eg with the banking sector).
- Making the most of the Church's position as the only 'one nation' institution left which has the capacity to broker relationships between different kinds of organisation, whilst being careful not to compromise our ability to be alongside the poor who do not have a place at the table.
- The need to listen more, initiating local conversations with people about what really matters to them and then working out together what we can do to address them.
- Being more willing, as the Church, to speak out about the kind of society we want to live in, less afraid of taking sides or direct action, and not being co-opted by government or funders into ways that are inconsistent with how we work.
- Overcoming a feeling of hopelessness, by strengthening networks and encouraging disparate groups and churches to work together.

FURTHER INFORMATION

To download this and other research reports, go to: www.cuf.org.uk/research. For more information about future 'Power, Poverty and the Church' events, please contact Tom Sefton at Church Urban Fund (tom.sefton@cuf.org.uk). Also, please let us know if you or your church is responding creatively to the challenges discussed in these workshops and would be willing to share your experiences.