

TACKLING POVERTY 2012:

A REPORT ON CHURCH URBAN FUND'S ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Church Urban Fund's annual Tackling Poverty conference - held at the St George's Centre in Leeds -brought together nearly 300 church leaders and Christian workers from England's most deprived communities as part of a growing movement of Christians tackling poverty in this country. The Rt Revd Dr John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, was joined by other keynote speakers including John Bell from the Iona Community; Helen Gatenby, Director of the M13 Project in Manchester; Jude Smith, a Pioneer Minister in Leeds; and Anna Hembury from Hull Youth for Christ. Together, they highlighted the prophetic role of the Church and explored the distinctive and challenging nature of urban ministry. This note summarises some of the core themes that emerged during the day.

VISION FOR TACKLING POVERTY

Tim Bissett, CEO of Church Urban Fund, introduced the conference by sharing his vision for transforming the lives of the poorest and most marginalised people in this country: "Our vision is to see a time when every church in every community is part of tackling poverty together in England. When every church leader can say, *"We know what our role is, we're giving our time, we are giving our money, we are active in our community, and we are faithfully praying for those around us."*

This year, its 25th anniversary, marks a significant change for Church Urban Fund, as it moves from providing start-up funding to long-term support, working in partnership with dioceses to build sustainable networks of church leaders, volunteers and community and youth workers in some of England's most deprived areas: *"This is why Church Urban Fund is fundraising and asking people to sponsor people like you, who are working and living sacrificially in our poorest communities."*

TACKLING POVERTY AT EVERY LEVEL

"The Church, when acting prophetically, is not a vested interest amongst other interest groups, but a body which can stand back and be a voice for the powerless, the weak and the dispossessed."

The Archbishop of York, the **Rt Revd Dr John Sentamu**, said that one of the tasks of the Church of England is to work for the well-being of the whole nation - not just the people inside its congregations. One of the challenges which the Church makes to society is to see people as God sees them, as people with worth and dignity that are able to contribute to and be involved in public life: *"We are here to re-frame national debate as it strives to meet the moral aspirations of the country."*

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At a national level, the Church needs to witness clearly that our government must promote social justice. This means asking whether government policies genuinely contribute to the common good and reflect the reality that no one is expendable. The Archbishop drew particular attention to the impact that the spending cuts are having on essential services, such as the Sure Start programme, projects for older people and initiatives to help those who are unemployed: *"Despite its vision of the Big Society, our coalition government is under enormous pressures today in their spending decisions. These are likely to intensify in the future and will affect whichever government is in power. Decisions made today are likely to have an impact for the next 20 years."*

"We also face the problem of poverty of vision", argued the Archbishop. *"Put simply, we have lost a vision of how we might transform our society to bring about changes that we wish to see."* He reminded us how, in the immediate post-war years, the then government set out on a radical social investment programme, establishing the NHS and expanding social insurance in the midst of an economic crisis: *"They had a clear vision of how things could be different. It is a vision we need to recapture today."*

However, it is at the local level that churches can have the greatest long-term impact on tackling poverty: *"It is because we have a wealth of experience and skill in serving local communities, which has been built up over decades of Christian witness and active support to people in the local community, particularly the lonely and the vulnerable. Often, local churches have been the only organisations to have done this and so have built up a unique insight into the needs of their particular area."*

But, there is a gap in some cases between the rhetoric of tackling poverty and the reality. Referring to recent research by Church Urban Fund, the Archbishop pointed out that 93% of church leaders agree that engaging with the poor and marginalised in the local area is a vital activity for a healthy church, yet only 44% say that tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the strategy of their church: *"Tackling poverty is an absolute key for a healthy and living Church. If the Church does not put its own house in order, then it will be very difficult to persuade others."*

THRIVING, NOT SURVIVING, IN URBAN MINISTRY

"Somehow within all the struggle there has been learning and blessing, and somehow God has enabled me to thrive there and it's been a real joy. I am loved by people who I would never have imagined I would know and meet." (Helen Gatenby)

Helen Gatenby, Anna Hembury and Jude Smith shared their collective experience of living and working in deprived communities, totalling more than 50 years between them. Helen spent a gap year with Careforce on the Brunswick estate in Manchester and has made it her home for the last 23 years, where she runs the M13 youth project.

That commitment to stay, she said, changed the whole way she felt about the place and helped her through the difficult early years. She started with great ideas about how she was going to single-handedly transform the estate, but went through a painful process of letting go in order to make room for what God was doing. This has meant re-evaluating her idea of success: *"I was desperate to see God move and impact people in Brunswick and it wasn't happening. But I learnt over time that God is not looking for success in the way we usually perceive it. He's looking for obedience. So I measure myself by being obedient, not successful."*

"For a long time, it felt like I didn't have a vision. Only recently, have I come to realise that my vision has been about process not product, about the way to be with people and the way to live, about the values I hold, and being incarnational and being led by Jesus, rather than being about this is where I want to get to, this is what I want to do, or this is where I want the project to be."

Not seeing failure as a disaster has helped her not to burn out. Helen emphasised the importance of being part of wider networks: being able to pray with people, to discuss mistakes with them, but also to celebrate milestones together and to recognise other people's achievements.

Anna Hembury, who works with Hull Youth For Christ, challenged the over-professionalisation of services, which she likened to a cancer: *"Professionalism is a cancer that has reached epidemic proportion, presenting symptoms which include prohibitive tumours such as health and safety, equal opportunities, and child protection which started off as healthy cells but have grown to unmanageable proportions. Unchecked, it proves fatal, stopping the heart's capacity to love, to trust and to put others' interests first."*

The standards by which we should measure being professional should first and foremost be our interpretation of Jesus' practice in our own context. One of the hallmarks of 'incarnational ministry' is vulnerability – *"the first time people saw me burst into tears was a huge leveller"*. Being vulnerable is about allowing people to minister to you, giving them the opportunity to give and to serve, and letting them make their own decisions. By contrast, being professional in the world's terms tends to be about limiting our vulnerability as much as possible, keeping us safe from harm, from litigation, and from our ability to think for ourselves, lest we make a mistake.

Jude Smith, a pioneer minister in Leeds, issued a passionate call for more Christians to move into deprived areas, for three compelling reasons:

- **Economic:** to bring much-needed resources to these communities
- **Prophetic:** *"We live in a society which is increasingly fractured, where people only hang out with people like them. As the Church, we need to say something to the broader society that it doesn't have to be like this."*
- **Practical:** the barriers are too great if you live in an area that is too unlike the area where you are ministering – and you can't invite people into your home if you live miles away.

JESUS AND THE MARGINALISED

"Faith is acknowledging, as did Jesus, that within people even in desperate situations there is potential which has been planted which enables them to survive and, if given the right encouragement, to change their circumstances."

John Bell, of the Iona Community, drew on the gospel stories and his own experiences to reflect on how, as Christians, we should engage with people who are marginalised. Looking at the encounters Jesus had with people on the margins of society, a number of common themes emerge:

- Jesus met people where they were: he often went to them, rather than waiting for them to come to him
- He didn't assume he knew what people needed, but asked and listened
- He didn't cast any judgement on the people who were marginalised and never spent much time focusing on the negatives or the past
- He rebuked the critics in public in order to openly challenge people's understanding of those they had marginalised, and to give the oppressed arguments they could use against those who were oppressing them

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- He publicly affirmed and 're-named' people who had been rejected by society. Jesus knew that marginalised people live under a cloud of suspicion and so he helped to change the rumour about them, declaring the potential he saw in them that they (and others) had maybe not yet seen: the haemorrhaging woman becomes the faithful believer, for example, and the poor widow becomes the generous giver
- He frequently ate with the 'tax collectors and sinners', because there is something about sharing food which helps to break down barriers between people. John Bell gave the example of a church in Philadelphia where homeless people sit down each week with other church members for a three course meal with proper plates and cutlery; this has had a transformative effect on the church, as homeless people began to understand what it's like to be accepted, and as other church members lost their fear of those who are different.

John Bell also explored the theme of chaos in relation to those who live in poverty: *"It always amazes me that people are able to survive in places of squalor - and yet they do. For us to presume that we have all the answers to their problems is to forget that they have the ability to stick through chaos in a way we would run from very quickly."* Jesus did not run away from chaos, but nor did he impose order on other people's chaos: *"In the same way, we need to enable people to believe that things can be better, and to give them some tools which they can hold in their own hands to begin to make their own kind of order."*

He continued: *"But, I also believe deeply that there comes a time when Christians have to make chaos out of order, because that's what Jesus did and that's why he was crucified. Jesus goes into the temple and he turns over the tables of the moneychangers and the tidy finance of the temple is suddenly upset. He engages at tables with people who others have written off as being immoral or beyond the pale. And so he disregards the tight orderliness which society has created for the benefit of those who have power and influence and money."*

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about the Tackling Poverty conference, including short videos of the plenary talks, go to: www.cuf.org.uk/tackling-poverty-2012

To download this and other research reports, go to www.cuf.org.uk/research

Church Urban Fund supports a network of churches and Christian workers who are tackling poverty in England's most deprived communities, by reaching out to homeless people, providing training and support for unemployed people, helping young people to get their lives on track and much more. If you would like to find out more about the work of Church Urban Fund and how you can support one of our community heroes, please go to: www.cuf.org.uk/communityheroes