

The Fourth ACTA National Conference, 'To Change the World' took place on 31 October 2015 in Leeds. Delegates from the ACTA network explored Catholic social teaching and the common good with two invited keynote speakers:

*In 'Catholic Social Teaching – What is Justice?', **Dr Jon Cruddas MP** focused on a notion of justice based on ethics and the common good, contrasting it with the limitations of distributive and libertarian approaches. Jon is MP for Dagenham and Rainham.*

*In 'Practising the Common Good – Building Community', **Jenny Sinclair** explored the role of the laity and how they can help to strengthen civil society through the application of Catholic social teaching. Jenny is Founder and Director of the Together for the Common Good network.*

ACTA (A Call to Action) is a growing network of Catholic laity established in 2013 currently standing at over 2,000 members across England and Wales. With some priests among the movement too, they are inspired by the Second Vatican Council and want to encourage a greater role for the laity in the life of the church and promote a culture of openness and dialogue. <http://www.acalltoaction.org.uk/>

Practising the Common Good - building community

Jenny Sinclair

Almost 5 years ago today I was immersed with my mother in her last days of struggle against cancer in the Wirral Hospice. Going through that with her was transformational for me, it was a great gift.

At the same time, plans for my father's memorial stone in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral were being finalised. We were running out of time as the text to be inscribed hadn't yet been decided and my mother's approval was needed. Just two days before she died we found the right passage in Jeremiah:

'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'

These simple words express what David Sheppard's ministry was about as Bishop of Liverpool, and they also tell us about his partnership with the Catholic Archbishop Derek Worlock, their Free Church colleagues, and the clergy and laity of that period. Theirs was a collaborative ministry for the common good and for the renewal of the church. They built

up an outward-facing church drawing on the Spirit with human flourishing of people and community at the heart. And their method was reconciliation.

Having a very private faith, little did I imagine that years later I would begin the groundwork that led to the *Together for the Common Good* project.

Like those in Liverpool before us, we find ourselves now in a society divided, and also increasingly fragmented. In Britain, we have enjoyed greater prosperity and at the same time we are seeing unprecedented inequality. In the world, we are witnessing the rise of ideological extremism and the biggest movement of people since World War II.

It's almost too much. It is hard to know how to respond.

An emphasis on rights and single interest groups builds mutual suspicion and makes interaction less likely with people different from ourselves. This is exaggerated when digital communication overtakes real conversation. Our common life together is being challenged.

Many of our local traditions and associations have been neglected. And in many places, particularly the most deprived, there's a hollowing out of institutions that embodied a sense of local pride. Such a weakening at the local level bolsters overcentralisation of power.

We need to reclaim responsibility, community and belonging. We can do this by personally cultivating and building bridges across divisions.

The churches have real experience in this space, and are doing great work, often not seen by mainstream society. The Churches listen to communities. We know *what's going on* better than any other institution.

So it really is a great privilege for me to meet with you today. I've been impressed watching your network growing and I commend you for the tenacity and dedication that I know has been required to bring you to this point.

At the same time, the *Together for the Common Good* project has been unfolding. People often ask me how it started.

After my mother died, for the first time since my conversion to the Catholic Church in my mid twenties, I became curious to find out what my father and Archbishop Derek Worlock learned from each other. In particular, how much of each other's social traditions did they adopt?

I found myself drawing a *cross* formed of the words 'ecumenism' and 'social justice' and becoming fascinated at their point of intersection.

I had a strong sense that the Holy Spirit had plans, but felt very out of my depth. However I had a sense of trust and followed a trail. To be honest I just prayed my way along, and asked

for help at every stage – looking for allies. I still do. After a year of conversations, I and some like-minded colleagues formed what is now *Together for the Common Good*.

So it was prayer that turned my life upside down. It's like a great wind has swept through.

Our ecumenical steering group guiding the project is inspired by the Sheppard-Worlock legacy. We draw from the social traditions of the Catholic, Anglican, and Free Churches, and in particular from Catholic social thought. We're non-partisan, and with such small capacity we see our role as a catalyst that nourishes and nudges. Like you, we run on a shoestring. Unlike you we don't have a membership structure. Our vulnerability and openness to learn seem to be attractive – we work with others in partnership. The project is Spirit-led and regularly takes us by surprise.

We encourage people of good will to work together and learn alongside each other – across belief traditions and political persuasions – so as to be agents of *creative* change for the common good.

We started with a conference, and with a research programme into ecumenical social action. We've hosted conversations with MPs and Peers, coming together across party lines. We held two major debates before the May General Election, bringing the common good into the public space. Our website is a major resource well-used by people of all denominations. Our network is growing, currently with just over 1,600 people and organisations reading our email newsletter. Two books have come out of the project so far.

We are finding that more and more people are drawn to Catholic social thought – that special but previously rather too well-hidden '*gift to all people of goodwill*'.

Not just Catholics, but Christians of all denominations as well as secular allies and friends in other faith traditions, are curious about the Church's social teaching as an effective method to tackle the challenges that face us. This is why we are responding to requests from Anglican and Evangelical clergy and laity to introduce them to Catholic social teaching and the common good.

So we might ask ourselves why is this happening.

Catholic social teaching is often seen as being about the promotion of social justice. Indeed. But the more time you spend with it, the more you realise it's also a recipe for a healthy civil society: how to build a common life together. This is why it is attracting so much interest. It's a living body of thinking, still evolving, that reflects how Jesus wants us to live.

There's sometimes a temptation to *pick and mix* from Catholic social teaching but all the principles - especially the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity - are necessarily harnessed together. There's a creative tension between them that needs to be negotiated.

Solidarity emphasises that all are responsible for all, that we are interconnected by relationships of mutual concern and support. *Subsidiarity* emphasises responsibility at the appropriate level – decisions should always be taken closest to where they will have their effect and no higher than necessary.

Solidarity applied without due attention to subsidiarity can tend towards collectivism and centralisation. Similarly subsidiarity without solidarity can leave people on their own, unsupported.

And most importantly, the central teaching that we put the *poor and vulnerable first* benefits everyone.

We're called to apply these and all the principles throughout our lives.

As Pope Francis does, Catholic social teaching rejects ideology. Liberal or Marxist. It presents a critique of collectivism as well as capitalism.

Above all, it has an affinity with people in the reality of their everyday lives.

The old left-right orthodoxies have not succeeded. People want something different, more human, more rooted.

Catholic social teaching has the potential to transcend those tribal divides. So we see the common good as a practice, to be integrated with our spirituality.

The common good happens when we get together with people with different views to build the conditions in which all will flourish. It is something we create together, side by side with others of goodwill. It is a kind of alchemy. It necessarily requires people who may disagree to encounter each other in *relationship*. bringing complementary skills and insights to solve problems together. Without each other we are impoverished and our solutions will not be sustainable. We cannot create the common good on our own, or by just talking with our mates. We can't impose on others a solution we've devised without them. It won't stick.

Some of the Christian laity may discern a vocation for this challenge - to be bridge builders - between left and right, faith and secular, different faith traditions and confessions, marginalised and powerful, educated and uneducated, urban and rural, old and young, business and unions, management and workers.

When our society is fragmenting into vested interests who know one another less and less, the work of reconciliation is more and more important if we are to build the common good.

Our task is rooted in Jesus saying to us "*that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*" (John 13:34-35)

This calls us to a mission that is profoundly relational.

As it happens, this commandment resonates with the best of all religious traditions, and indeed 'love your neighbour as yourself' has been described as a 'global ethic.'

The challenge for us is for this to be manifested at all levels in our practice of the common good. Without this rule built into our decision-making, our economy, our workplaces, our relationships, our legislation, modern pluralistic societies will not work.

I have learned there are many ways in which the common good is being built, where the principles are being applied. My curiosity has led me into many sectors I didn't know existed.

There is for example a movement of people putting their faith to work in the financial sector. There's the Social Stock Exchange; innovative affordable financial services for disadvantaged areas; investments with social impact; ethical financial products, shareholders working with businesses to make supply chains ethical - and so on.

They say charity is not just what you do with the money, it's how you make the money that will achieve deep system change.

Bad behaviour in banking must be held to account. But as Pope Francis reminds us in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, '*business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world...*'

Imagine what could change if it was the norm for Catholic laity with investments to put their Catholic social teaching into practice in shareholder meetings!

The common good is being built by businesses where relationships between shareholders, owners and employees are healthy, where workers are involved in decision-making, where the living wage is paid and people are as important as profit. We must celebrate not only the John Lewis model but others such as Whitbread, Timpson, the Quaker family businesses; not least the local small firms that provide services to our communities, often at a very small margin.

Fostering the common good at a local and civic level is dependent not least on the health and strength of our 'intermediate institutions' and their ability to work together. Like universities, clubs, societies, residents' associations, professional and cultural associations, unions, schools, parents' groups, churches, synagogues, mosques. *That means us.*

The common good is also about tackling systems that prevent us from seeing each other as human beings. If we are stuck in a managerial mindset that measures success by ticking boxes, it will become harder and harder for people to treat each other with the love and tenderness that give life meaning.

There's a piece of research on Australian nursing homes after a series of neglect scandals. Some said, 'impose tighter regulations'. Others said, 'deregulate'. In the end they replaced a

complex rulebook with a simple set of principles focusing on goals, such as requiring "a homelike setting," respecting the "dignity of the residents." Within a year, those nursing homes were materially better. Staff were empowered to do what they thought was right, using their own judgment and conscience. It nurtured character, encouraged virtue, improved morale. It also made life much, much better for residents. And it built community.

The common good is certainly being practised where faith-based projects are working *with* communities rather than *doing good to* them. The 42 charities under the *Caritas Social Action Network* umbrella are important players. So too are the 14 ecumenical *Churches Together* regional networks and the national *Near Neighbours* interfaith programme, both run through the Anglican-led *Church Urban Fund*. They are all working *with* struggling communities, *with* ex offenders, addicts, troubled families, foodbanks, the homeless, refugees, involving people of all backgrounds and beliefs, enabling people to transform their lives, and together, building community. All depend on large numbers of dedicated lay people as volunteers.

Much of the activity I have mentioned is in line with, if not directly inspired by, Catholic social teaching and the concept of the common good.

So... I'm wondering why so few Catholics know about it, and why does the Church not teach it to its own. My two teenage sons have been at Catholic schools all their lives and they haven't been taught it. Most of my Catholic lay friends haven't been taught it either, or have forgotten it - or think it's optional. So I am wondering what's the resistance.

The Sheppard-Worlock legacy can help us understand why this matters.

Theirs was a partnership for the common good. And their method was reconciliation.

They gained credibility as honest brokers, bridge builders between estranged groups: local and national government; communities and police; business and unions; faith groups and secular groups.

They were branded as traitors by the left. Of being naïve and 'statist' by the right. They walked a fine line and knew both sides wouldn't listen unless they had first built trust.

Famous as allies of the excluded, and for speaking truth to power, they spent most of their time working alongside communities, and encouraging lay leadership.

This happened in the case of the Eldonian community housing association. Lay people from two parishes in a deprived part of Liverpool got together and succeeded in building an award-winning village that to this day houses over 150 families. They asked Archbishop Derek and Bishop David and local clergy to help them. Together they overcame huge obstacles, negotiating with both the hard left Militant city council and the right wing

Thatcher government. This was about community and empowerment of the excluded. And in a perfect example of subsidiarity and solidarity, the bishops only gave as much help as was asked for. This was not paternalistic assistance.

In their book *Better Together* (named after the Eldonian project) David and Derek say that inner cities only survive and prosper if the skilled residents *stay there* and are *involved* in building their own destiny, creating *places* of pride and belonging.

The Liverpool leaders also engaged with Muslim and Jewish groups, laying the groundwork in the early days of interfaith engagement.

It's less well-known that they were very much 'pro-business', convening and co-chairing the Michaelmas Group, a monthly breakfast meeting of major regional employers and civic leaders. So while central government was pursuing a 'managed decline' policy for Liverpool, this group's efforts behind the scenes laid the foundations for attracting investment to support the regeneration of the city. They understood the significance of business in building the common good.

As I learned more, I could see Catholic social teaching running through everything they did. The Catholic Church shared the great gift.

The Church of England has an important contribution to bring to this table too. Anglicans can teach Catholics a crucial lesson about caring for the *whole* of society, *beyond* the Catholic ghetto. This is what David Sheppard taught Derek Worlock.

We can see a maturing of their legacy in the pastoral letter from the Church of England bishops, released before the General Election this year. *Who is My Neighbour?* is the closest the Anglican Church has come to embracing Catholic social thought – it's a profoundly ecumenical document.

It highlights that the two big postwar political strategies – nationalisation and the welfare state, established in 1945, and the 1979 free-market revolution – have both failed to deliver the common good - a society in which everyone flourishes. The letter suggests a new settlement for the common good where the two forces are in balance with civil society. The letter highlights the role of faith in society (especially the Christian churches and the laity): because we emphasise human dignity, love, family, responsibility and relationships.

If we are to realise this vision - a new settlement for the common good - we will all need to put our shoulders to the wheel. I can hear my father saying, 'Who are our allies?' We need to identify who they are and start a dialogue.

When we first started, our steering group was curious about this too. We studied the ways in which churches are working together for the common good to strengthen civil society, through social action, provision of services, community building, campaigning, and prayer.

The unlikely 20-year friendship between Sheppard, Worlock and their Free Church colleagues demonstrated what happens when people of different Christian traditions put their differences aside and work together.

But - we don't underestimate the resistance to collaboration.

Take working with Evangelical Christians for example. Our Catholic sacramental practices are mysterious to them, and so is clerical hierarchy. And some may think they have joined the social justice party rather late. But they are Jesus followers, true Christians. Pope Francis has close Pentecostal friends and endorses the movement. In spite of our different approaches, if we get to know each other, we will see we share more than what divides us.

My curiosity has led me to learn a lot here. Since 2008 some of the Evangelical movements have thrown themselves, with great energy and inventiveness, into devising ways to get churches and lay people to serve communities.

They help with debt and addiction counselling, social care, parenting, work with ex-offenders, counselling in the workplace, befriending. They tend to be entrepreneurial by character so have applied their business ability to devising replicable programmes that the laity can run from their own churches, in their neighbourhoods. These programmes are self-sustaining and popular, seen as a key part of mission, with thousands of volunteers involved. They are certainly 'smelling of the sheep'! It's no accident their congregations are growing faster than any other part of the Christian tradition. Hands-on experience means they are learning fast. They know that proselytising potentially alienates and so it is rarely a feature now. They are moving at varying speeds, in terms of awareness, along what I would call the pathway from charity to justice.

It's astonishing that to many Catholics, this development has been entirely invisible.

The Catholic theologian Anna Rowlands lectures at Durham on Catholic social teaching. Many of her students are from the Evangelical movements. So the theology of the common good is finding its way. I can see huge potential for cross fertilisation, and this is why I am passionate about learning from different traditions and introducing them to one another. It's why each time our steering group meets, we are hosted by a different denomination.

David and Derek were both loyal and true to their respective traditions (so there's no diluting of doctrine going on here) but they placed the needs of people above their points of difference. We need to do this now. We're well-placed to build the common good, but we will do it *better together*.

This extends further into an interfaith context. It's not just about respecting each other's beliefs and praying together. We will make more progress if our *fraternity* is directed towards a joint project. Other faith traditions really appreciate being approached to collaborate for the common good. They like the way it upholds human dignity, family and community and the way it transcends the old tribal left-right divides.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who although from an Evangelical stable himself, is deeply influenced by Catholic social teaching, said in a recent speech to the Muslim Council of Wales that "*the mainstream of each faith needs to generate a counter-narrative*", that would "*acknowledge our differences*" but commit us "*to support one another in defiance of those who wish to divide us*". He goes on: "*The counter-narrative must be so exciting and so beautiful that it defeats the radicalisers*". And it would be done through "*socially transformative projects involving people from grassroots faith backgrounds working together for the common good.*"

Pope Francis has set free a new spirit in the church.

He is really living the change he wants to see. He encourages differences of opinion. He bridges the gulf between the prosperous and the excluded, between faith and secular. He has friendships with Pentecostals, Lutherans, Methodists, Orthodox, Anglicans, Jews and Muslims. He knows the Spirit transcends human prejudice.

But. He will not make the Church truly outward facing unless we live it too: as he stressed in his key text *Evangelii Gaudium*, we are *all* missionary disciples now.

You will see from what I have said that the laity have a crucially important part to play as agents of change for the common good.

We might ask ourselves what it is the laity can do.

We must resist the temptation to *avoid* practising the common good at home. Claire Dove, from the black community of inner city Liverpool told me about her first encounter with the Catholic Church. She met lay people who were more concerned about campaigning for overseas social justice or with internal doctrinal debates than with the struggling communities in their own neighbourhood. She was later received into the church after getting to know Fr Austin Smith, the Passionist priest from whom Worlock and Sheppard learned so much. Influenced by Joseph Cardijn's YCW, Young Christian Worker movement, Austin and his parish embodied a church that listened and enabled. Claire Dove went on to become a local civic leader and now chairs the board of Social Enterprise UK.

The renewal of the Church must be rooted where we are, it must demonstrate reconciliation, and include the excluded in our neighbourhoods, parishes, workplaces. If we '*smell of the sheep*' it will change us.

We need to personally *feel* the change that comes with building a common life together.

Each of us has the opportunity, and the responsibility, to practise the common good - to '*seek the welfare of the city*' - wherever our particular vocation takes us.

Sometimes it's a revelation to realise that some things you do and connections you have, that you thought were unconnected with your faith, may be directly relevant assets to building the common good. It's about integrating faith with our actions.

We laity have more agency to effect systems change than we realise.

It would be a mistake to see the challenge as so big that it cannot be tackled.

Over decades, civil society (not least the church and the family) has given up responsibilities that it used to carry to the state and to the market.

We can reclaim some of these responsibilities.

We can help the excluded find ways of contributing and belonging.

Through our professional connections we can help strengthen intermediate, local institutions and build alliances between them.

We can take steps to re-shape the economy. Seeing the market as something *out there* over which we have no control is missing the point: we are *all* market actors.

There are cases where it may not be right to expect the state to provide what we ourselves could do so much better. Legislation and resources are essential to enable, but cultural change will follow from a thousand incremental steps taken by ordinary people.

In an era where the language of rights has a tendency to alienate people from each other by emphasising the individual, our traditions are a resource. We should share our experience about responsibility, human dignity, family, community, relationships, and the transcendent.

We need to know we are custodians of virtues that are capable of strengthening society.

This is what we mean by being an agent of change for the common good.

It doesn't take a lot of people to make a big change: the Quaker movement was small in membership, but hugely influential.

The practice of the common good requires us to recognise the humanity in everyone and the legitimacy of what they have to say. Our approach should be '*relational*'. In other words we must go out of our way to meet people, be prepared to '*stay in the room*', be willing to negotiate, mediate, build relationships, keep dialogue going.

So our churches need to be outward-facing places for the *whole* community, where people know they will be heard, loved and valued.

It's not going to be easy. But we are not alone. God has called us into creative participation with him and the Spirit is here to help us.

We need to feel the language of the heart.

We need to put our principles into practice, and be prepared to work with others whose doctrine, liturgical and cultural practices are strange and different. This depends so much on the laity. We don't have to wait for a lead from the clergy.

Like Teresa of Avila, we know that that our faith is not measured by the splendour of our buildings, the glory of our worship or even by the fervency of our prayers or prophecy.

It is measured by the quality of our love.

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For reference: extract from Gaudium et Spes, paragraph 43

“Secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to lay (persons). Therefore acting as citizens in the world, whether individually or socially, they will keep the laws proper to each discipline, and labor to equip themselves with a genuine expertise in their various fields. They will gladly work with (others) seeking the same goals. Acknowledging the demands of faith and endowed with its force, they will unhesitatingly devise new enterprises, where they are appropriate, and put them into action. Lay (persons) should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city; from priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment. Let the lay (people) not imagine that (their) pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give (them) a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church,(17. Cf. John XXIII, encyclical letter Mater et Magistra, IV: AAS 53 (1961), pp. 456-457; cf. I: AAS loc. cit., pp. 407, 410-411.) let the lay (people) take on (their) own distinctive role.”