

Poverty: Whose Side is the Church on?

Jenny Sinclair

This talk was given at the Churches Together England Missionary Disciples Conference on 1st March 2023, as a response to the title "Families at the margins – discipleship in challenging circumstances."

So I chose this session, "*families at the margins - discipleship in challenging circumstances*" for the challenge to engage with you about the way the Church talks about "the poor".

I could also use this time to tell you about our work with young people, or promote my new podcast, or to tell you stories about church leaders who've rebuilt relationships with neighbours. But I feel what might be more useful here is to go deeper. So I'm not here to promote anything and I'm interested to hear what you think.

Just to say what I mean by common good: it is not a utopian idea but something we build together - it is the *shared life of a society as we work together across our differences for mutual flourishing, each of us taking responsibility, according to our calling and ability.*ⁱ

So it echoes what Victoria said so beautifully yesterday from 1 Corinthians 12, we are members of one body - we are incomplete without the other. So we see the common good as a practice, as a way to join in with God's justice, a way that integrates our calling.

Yesterday Lisa quite rightly questioned the term "margins". Can that word be said in front of someone who is poor? I think language must be consistent.

One thing we know is that God loves the poor. Would Jesus regard engaging with poor people as challenging? He says the poor are blessed! So for whom is "discipleship in the margins" challenging? This language betrays a church-centric posture that sees the problem in managerial terms: "engagement is difficult".

So before we even start talking about discipleship programmes, and resources and practices and approaches, we need to ask: *why* has the Church fallen out of relationship with poor people?

Who are "the poor"?

The term "the poor" includes everyone on low incomes, so that means the so-called working poor (across all ethnicities), the destitute, plus those who can't or won't work. So we are talking at least 20% of the population. And inflation is likely to push that higher: 750,000 households are currently at risk of mortgage defaultⁱⁱ - and if property values fall, we will see more pushed into negative equity. That is a lot of people. That doesn't feel "marginal" to me.

The New Era

So what's going on? This "cost of living crisis" is just a symptom. The problem is more profound. It is a matter of "political economy" - that is, the arrangements that shape our lives, that determine wages, the state of our housing, the way capital behaves, the types of jobs generated - which is always shaped by ideas.

The economic system we have generates low wages. It is fundamentally unstable.ⁱⁱⁱ Its problems long pre-date Covid. The pandemic just accelerated earlier trends.

In 2015 Pope Francis said *this is not an era of change but a change of era.*^{iv} The old is dying and the new is yet to be born. This is why we see so many morbid symptoms: breakdowns in trust, social fragmentation, exploitation of the person and of the natural world, extreme inequality, civic degradation, psychological distress, spiritual confusion. It is unravelling.

Forty years

Back in the mid 80s the Church was very focused on poverty. My father's book, *Bias to the Poor*^v in 1983, which led to the *Faith in the City*^{vi} report in 1985, focused on the Church's engagement in "urban priority areas" and on "communities of the left behind." But although some of the questions raised were the right ones, that 80s posture was church-centric.

Today - after forty years - affluent people are much more deeply estranged from poor places. It was bad back then, but now it is quite possible for a middle class person never to meet someone from a poor background. They have become quite separate: they have no reason to go to an outer estate or a post industrial town.

Why is there a culture problem?

I think most people now acknowledge there is a problem with class in the Church. But I don't hear anyone talking about *why* that happened.

It's good that people are finally beginning to realise the importance of relationship. But I'm not sure everybody is really getting it. Relationship is sometimes seen as a sort of new "outreach" technique. That position is still church-centric. I don't believe the Church can repair this broken relationship unless it sees things from God's perspective and understands its own complicity. To reconnect with people in poor communities (of all ethnicities) it's vital to understand the nature of the estrangement.

The cause: neoliberalism

Just bear with me a minute. I want to talk about this ideology which comes from a neoliberal philosophy.^{vii} It does have a root. It is founded on a false idea of freedom built around the conception of the unencumbered self, where God is subordinated, where family is seen as a constraint, where tradition is seen as a constraint, even relationship to place holds back this idea of the fulfilment of the freedom of the individual.

Its roots are in the Enlightenment but it took hold in 1979 in the form of neoclassical economics.^{viii} The constraints were removed from capital and this ushered in four decades of transactional individualism and the system of globalisation across the West. It was the era of *contract*.

Big money has a tendency to dehumanise and commodify human beings and the natural world. It exploits the earth and it needs units of labour (that's us, human beings) to be cheap and mobile. So investment and jobs went overseas and cheap labour was imported.

Then the so-called knowledge economy was promoted, which dishonoured manual work.^{ix} The insistence on moving to find work used to be seen as right wing but is now reframed as "freedom" by the left.

Even the Labour Party abandoned its Methodist and Catholic roots^x and embraced this liberal ideology. This transactional "freedom" brought prosperity for some but it broke parts of our country. It caused civic and spiritual degradation. It drew the brightest and the best away from their places of belonging to the big cities. It fractured our life together.

To add insult to injury the people in the abandoned places were branded backward and ignorant, gaslit that they were "*feeling* left behind'. This wasn't a feeling. It was real and they lived it. This was in fact a politics of abandonment. It was a breach of the common good. It was a power grab.

After three decades of no sign of reform of this economic system, the so-called "left behind" had enough of this liberal domination and mismanagement. They literally had nothing to lose. Their reaction was framed by big money interests as "populist" but in previous eras it would have been understood as a peasants' revolt.^{xi}

Whose side is the Church on?

Whose side has the Church been on? This is what my friend David Gannon texted to me last month - he is an army veteran from a working class background. He says:

"The church has alienated working class people by turning into a 'woke' foodbank. It needs to start acting like a church again. The 'Cost of Living Nerds' are barking up the wrong tree. State hand outs are soul destroying. People need dignified work so they can maintain some self-respect as well as a life. He added (excuse my language): "Unfettered capital has fucked the country, our economy needs to be pinned to the towns and cities it serves."

Many people say that the Church should more angry. Maybe. But it needs a solid political theology to know what to be angry about.

The Church talks a lot about advocacy for the poor, as if the poor need the Church to be angry because they can't do it for themselves. Well, poor people did use their voice but were held in contempt for doing so.^{xii} So it's not surprising that they gave up on the Church when the Church failed to defend their interests, as it had done in the past.^{xiii}

Jesus in the political economy of Galilee

Compare this with Jesus who never abandons the poor. His love is covenantal, not contractual. He says "*I will be with you always*". In the political economy of Galilee he was the non-violent resister of empire, not part of the elite.^{xiv} He was a manual worker, part of the peasantry, but He built cross-

class, cross-racial coalitions. As He did then, we now must reweave solidarity to uphold the human space and the natural world against the dominance of the principalities and powers.

The Church wants to be prophetic but it is vital to resist the temptation to say things that may be popular but may in fact be misguided. Things in this world don't always get better.

Authentic prophecy is risky because it requires the surrender of tribal allegiances and the speaking of words that people don't want to hear. It may involve humiliation. Jeremiah found the prophet's journey hard and lonely too.

Repentance

This estrangement was complete when churches in many poorer areas closed and pulled out altogether.^{xv} It was a breaking of the covenant.

If the good, well-intentioned people in the churches can bring themselves to recognise that they have perhaps been inadvertently complicit in that process of abandonment which provoked the reaction, then that would be an important first step.

Repentance would be the second step. And then rebuilding the relationship might be possible.

From service provider to reciprocity

And before that there is another problem. Churches are delighted to be providing services for Local Authorities but the service-client dynamic focused on needs unfortunately "others" poor people.^{xvi} That is not building a common good. *"The poor are not the raw material of your salvation."*^{xvii}

Pope Francis says that Christians must stop outsourcing charity to service providers and live a shared life. We *"must commit to a mutual sharing of life that does not allow proxies"*.^{xviii} This requires congregational culture change, to become "communities of place."

We need to adopt a posture of reciprocity. St Lawrence said the poor are the treasure of the Church. Pope Francis goes further. He says the Church needs to be evangelised *by* the poor.^{xix} The truth is the Church is impoverished when it is estranged from poor communities.

Decline is real. The Church itself has become marginalised. It needs to learn to receive as well as give, to shift from a culture of contract to a culture of covenant.^{xx}

Leadership and discipleship in the new era

We are entering a new era. Could it be that God is humbling the Church to bring it back to be more like the early Church? Hastening the death of some things and at the same time bringing to birth new life?

So what kind of leadership is needed in the new era?

How do we prepare our young people for uncertainty? What models of discipleship are we called to? The old church-centric mindset is always looking for fixes - the next training, the next course. That managerial language - "outreach", "margins", "service delivery", "engagement is difficult" - that's all part of the old era.

We need a new God-centric posture. One that watches and listens for where He is at work, and that recognises this may be outside "church" life.^{xxi} If congregations are able to act humbly and rebuild trust, things could get interesting.

It has been said there are two types of leadership: to manage that which currently exists and to manage that which is yet to exist.^{xxii} This the place we need to be in. This kind of leadership formation is to become open-handed: "Take nothing with you" (Luke 9:3). It needs to be attuned to discernment. That involves reciprocity and mutual respect, trusting people in the neighbourhood, cultivating the leadership of local people, restoring their power.^{xxiii} In terms of church leadership, that requires some "de-centering", and it requires established leaders to have some humility.

It will mean accompanying young people who are so hungry for meaning, supporting them to sense the Spirit moving in their life and to nurture vocation. It will mean contemplative practices. It will mean the people of the Church being willing to accept their own brokenness.

It will mean holding intergenerational spaces for group discipleship where people can be real, known and loved, to experience the Eucharist, encounter Scripture, ask questions and share stories, get to know each other and to speak freely without fear.

Finding God in the neighbourhood

I will end with a story^{xxiv} of a pastor. His church is on a council estate, his congregation was stuck at thirty. He felt a failure. Then he felt the Holy Spirit asking him to approach six non-church goers in the neighbourhood to join him for a meal on a Thursday evening. He he's from a humble background himself, on a council estate, so he knows how to speak, and they trust him. He said to them "it'll be like church but not really", he said "I'm not shopping, cooking for you or washing up. We'll do it together." They decided on a roast dinner and they cooked and ate together. He said to them "if something is on your mind, just write it on a piece of paper and put it in the box. That was their introduction to prayer. He introduced a few lines from the Beatitudes. There was a moving conversation. They washed up together. It became regular a thing. They brought their kids and grandparents. It grew to more than a hundred and fifty in six months. They carried on cooking together and managed it themselves. *Thursday Tea* saw baptisms and the Holy Spirit was moving among them. So it wasn't church as we know it but it's about being open to what's coming.

A question for discussion:

In the last week, what signs of life, unrelated to your church, have you seen in a poor place you know well? [You're not allowed to include things that happen in church]

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<https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/>

NOTES

- ⁱ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/common-good-thinking>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.mortgagestrategy.co.uk/news/over-750000-homes-risk-default-47000-mortgage-prisoners-fca/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Edward Hadas, [My hate-affair with economics](#)
- ^{iv} <https://www.ncronline.org/catholicism-can-and-must-change-francis-forcefully-tells-italian-church-gathering>
- ^v See David Sheppard, [Bias to the Poor](#)
- ^{vi} See Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas [Faith in the City](#)
- ^{vii} See Adrian Pabst, [How Christian is Post-Liberalism?](#)
- ^{viii} See Edward Hadas, [My hate-affair with economics](#)
- ^{ix} See David Goodhart, [The Road to Somewhere](#)
- ^x See Maurice Glasman, [Blue Labour: the Politics of the Common Good](#)
- ^{xi} See Matthew Goodwin and Roger Eatwell, [National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy](#)
- ^{xii} See Jenny Sinclair, [Rebuilding the Broken Body](#)
- ^{xiii} See Jenny Sinclair, [To Live a Decent Life](#)
- ^{xiv} See Douglas E Oakman, [The Radical Jesus, the Bible, and the Great Transformation](#)
- ^{xv} See Church Action on Poverty report, [Church on the Margins, 2023](#)
- ^{xvi} <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/news/churches-more-than-service-providers>
- ^{xvii} See Liam Black, [The Poor are not the Raw Material for your Salvation](#)
- ^{xviii} See Pope Francis, [World Day of the Poor Letter, 2021](#)
- ^{xix} See Pope Francis, [Evangelii Gaudium \(the Joy of the Gospel\), 2013](#)
- ^{xx} See The Friday Group, [The New Era: How are Churches Called to Respond?](#)
- ^{xxi} See Alan J Roxburgh, [Joining God in the Neighbourhood](#)
- ^{xxii} See Martin Robinson, [The Place of the Parish](#)
- ^{xxiii} See Jenny Sinclair, [A New Formation for a New Era](#)
- ^{xxiv} See Nick Graves, [Where the Kingdom Is](#)