

The Relational Church

Our Calling in Dark Times

Jenny Sinclair

Session for Northern Diaconal Formation Partnership

1 December 2023, Hinsley Hall, Leeds

Listen to a recording [here](#)

Introduction

Hello everyone, it's great to be here and lovely to meet you.

So, in the next hour and a half, we're going to explore how the Church is called to fulfil God's mission in the wider context of deep change across the world.

- We're going to look at what it means to be relational, and the meaning of mission.
- And we're going to explore the forms of leadership needed for God's mission at this time in the context of profound change happening in the Church and across the world.
- We going to look at why the Church is called to a more relational culture now, and how Catholic Social Teaching can help us navigate this period of upheaval.
- And then we're going to look at what practical steps we can take to become a more relational church.
- So I'm going to talk for a bit have a break, we will have a couple of short chat breaks, and then a longer discussion at the end.

My story

Just before we go any further, I just want to tell you a little about my own journey to this point.

I grew up in an Anglican clergy household, I was a rebel in my teens, I left the church. Much to my surprise, and to everybody else's, in my mid 20s, I had a conversion experience and was called into the Catholic Church.

I lived a quiet life raising my children, and I worked as a graphic designer. But then in my late 40s, in 2011, I had a nudging of the Spirit in my life, and everything changed. And the first idea for Together for the Common Good came to me then, when I saw that things were going very wrong with our culture. And I saw that the church was struggling to respond.

And so I know what it means to listen and join in God's mission. This work is really my vocation.

So at T4CG we draw on Catholic Social Teaching² and we engage across the Christian traditions to encourage people to play their part in spiritual and civic renewal. We help to make Catholic Social Teaching² more accessible. And we call this "common good thinking."

Common Good Thinking

This is how we define the common good:

"The Common Good is the shared life of a society in which everyone can flourish - as we act together in different ways that all contribute towards that goal, enabled by social conditions that mean every single person can participate.

We create these conditions and pursue that goal by working together across our differences, each of us taking responsibility, according to our calling and ability."

This definition is deliberately written in that way because it's relational, and it's practical, and requires our involvement.

1. MISSION AND RELATIONAL CULTURE

Just to be clear what I am doing this evening - in exploring the relational church in dark times, I'm drawing on a range of resources. From the body of Catholic Social Teaching, from this year's *World Day of the Poor* letter, from the *Instrumentum Laboris* document from the Synodal process, from what I learn from missional experts and grassroots experiences, from my own work in different Christian traditions, especially in poor areas. I want to show that the culture change that the Church is called to, is not some kind of ecclesial management exercise or political argument, but a calling of the Holy Spirit to make the Church fit for purpose to serve the world. I'm going to try and illuminate some of the concepts in ways that I hope will be meaningful for you in your ministry.

First of all, let's explore what we mean by "relational", by "mission" and by "church".

What does it mean to be relational?

At the very heart of the Gospel is the concept of relationship. And this fundamental point requires the whole People of God to be involved. We know the passage from Romans 12: 4-8, the church as one body

"For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ.."

Each person's calling is important and complementary. We are not called to a solitary mission but to a shared journey of discipleship. This brings us closer to the mission of Jesus – closer to the ways of the early church and the way they lived.

This relational culture aims to foster the inclusion and involvement of the whole People of God so that God's mission can flourish. And in St Paul's words we just heard there, describe a beautiful image of the church as a single body, with every member contributing in their own way. And if one part of the body suffers, then the whole body is wounded.

But this call to relationality is not just to improve the church. It goes to the heart of the challenges of our

time: the domination of our culture by ideologies that reduce the human person to the unencumbered self, which is resulting in a battle of all against all.

In God's eyes we are not all meant to be the same, nor are we meant to be equal. We are designed to be different for a very particular reason. We are made to love each other. We were made for relationship. I just love this quote from Catherine of Siena. As she was discerning the mind of God, she says:

"I distribute the virtues quite diversely; I do not give all of them to each person, but some to one, some to others... And so I have given many gifts and graces, both spiritual and temporal, with such diversity that I have not given everything to one single person, so that you may be constrained to practice charity towards one another... I have willed that one should need another and that all should be my ministers in distributing the graces and gifts they have received from me."

St. Catherine of Siena discerning the mind of God (*Dial. I,7*)

So we are not designed as isolated individuals in competition, nor was leadership meant to be isolated. We were designed to help each other, in love, under God.

This is in effect a relational, distributed form of leadership - which not only liberates people from isolated models of leadership, it liberates followers from passivity or alienation. It allows every person to find agency, purpose and meaning.

If the church can make the shift to becoming relational, then it can act and help to reweave the brokenness that we are seeing in the world, and allow the multifaceted nature of God to find expression in the world.

So what is the meaning of "mission"?

The culture shift required is to bring us back to God's priorities rather than our own. Our society has got very lost, and this is what the world needs now.

Pope Francis talks about the "*discernment of the times*"⁴ in order to fulfil the church's mission - which is God's mission - which as Pope Paul VI said is "*to proclaim and establish among all peoples, the Kingdom of God.*" (*Lumen Gentium*⁵).

At the heart of this mission is God's desire to heal the fragmentation caused by a de-sacralised world. It is about bringing the Kingdom alive on earth as in heaven.

The *missio dei* (the mission of God) is in fact about a total vision for the transformation of the whole of reality - this defines the goal of mission as bringing back the whole universe into reconciled relationship with God. As it's stated in Ephesians

"...to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Eph 1:9-10

This is a bit cosmic, but this is the vision. So the *Missio Dei* reminds us that the church is called to join in with this mission of God.

It is not the church that has a mission but the God of mission who has a church. Too often, we get this the wrong way round.

Mission has been 'inward' rather than outward; the Church has not always fulfilled her calling to give herself away for the sake of the world but has instead sought to shore up her own influence and power.

God wants to transform the world. The *Missio Dei* necessarily involves the whole people of God, requiring the church to engage across all cultural, racial, social, political and economic differences.

So what we mean by mission, is rooted in the radically inclusive trinitarian relational life of the Godhead, and so the *Missio Dei* calls every human person – across all differences – into God’s great creative participation.

And if some are missing, the mission is incomplete.

Changing church

So we need to be honest about the changes in the church. Can the church fulfil this mission that we're talking about? The prospects don't look good. The institutional churches in the West are in decline, while other parts of the body of Christ are growing. Globally God's church on earth is undergoing profound change. But I think it's clear that God is at work, we need to listen to Him and discern how we can join in.

There is a lot of talk about walking more closely with God - the practices of synodality, Lectio, listening and accompaniment - with these practices we will be better able to sense the movements of the Spirit in our neighbourhood.

This listening - both to the Holy Spirit and to each other and to our neighbours, especially those who are poor - is fundamental. Because our culture has become so atomised, we have become estranged from each other, and our culture has fragmented so we mix less with people outside our socio-economic group. Our estrangement from each other makes it harder for us to hear God. So we need to be very attentive.

What's clear is that what is not working is what I'd call the "consumerist" model of church. You know - where you go to church, you get something and you go home again. Where there is a very thin notion of relationship.

Whereas churches seeing growth are doing something different: they are relational, they're providing a sense of family, they're attentive to the Holy Spirit, living in friendship alongside their neighbours, and they make it easy for people to get involved, especially poor people.

Relational culture

There is a powerful sense of God calling forth a new - and yet ancient - culture in the church.

In this post-Christendom period, the church needs to adapt. I will say much more later about how we develop a relational culture, but for the moment I want to focus on responsibility.

When we think about the new culture, the principle of Subsidiarity is fundamental to helping us understand responsibility. Subsidiarity is a core principle in Catholic social doctrine which determines that decisions should be taken as far as possible closest to those they affect and a central authority shouldn't do what can be done at a more local level. Its purpose is very important - it is to uphold the integrity of the human being, prevent domination, and ensure good leadership.

- Church teaching has long advocated for subsidiarity in public life - for example neither governmental power nor the power of capital should be overcentralised and power should be distributed regionally and locally. Equally it is vital in terms of personal conscience and the

autonomy of the family.

- But in terms of the ecclesial architecture of the Church, we could say that the Church has to some degree failed to implement subsidiarity within its own structures.
- Where responsibility is taken is a matter for careful discernment - there are decisions of course which belong in the proper authority of the Magisterium of the Church. I for one am immensely grateful that at times of cultural instability that the Church is the one institution that is holding firm to tradition, holding the tension between truth and love.
- But Subsidiarity is also important in terms of place: it's about lifting up the authentic cultural character of people in each location. Every part of the world has its own unique characteristics, histories, tragedies and gifts. So subsidiarity means people taking responsibility according to their particularity, not being dominated by a higher authority. This means that each diocese, and each parish should discern its own calling - and be grounded in reality.
- It's important that what you're doing in terms of interpreting mission is authentically of where you are. That means doing that interpreting with your neighbours. it's of value to the whole world that we each do mission in a way that's iterated naturally and authentically from our own situation, and then we will learn from each other's particular contexts. God's energy is expressed differently through each of us. So place and particularity are very important.

An occasion for communion

And we are not meant to do this on our own.

The relational posture asks that everyone acknowledges their incompleteness, that mission is only complete when everyone is involved.

Mission in our time requires that everything becomes an occasion for communion.

One very beautiful way of conceptualising how the church is called at this time is rooted in the story of the apostles at Pentecost and the book of Acts, that well known passage that we know:

"³²..They had everything in common. ³³... great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them ... distributed to each as any had need.." Acts 4:32-35

So this sense of having everything in common.

It is a fair enough question to ask whether the church can authentically proclaim the gospel if is not actually living in relationship with its neighbours - in this communal way - whether its efforts for outreach, if its posture, is actually more one of marketing.

"Mission is not the marketing of a religious product, but the construction of a community in which relationships are a manifestation of God's love."^{5a}

The Catholic tradition is quite explicit that the church's relationship with the poor is central. The poor and excluded are supposed to be at the heart of the church. This is very challenging for churches that have become middle class.

"Walking together" - this phrase that we're using now - with poor people, does not mean just serving their needs. Many churches fall into the trap of welfarism - that is, a defeatist politics that sees increasing social security benefits as the primary way to help poor people.

How different is this from the way of communion, where we enter into a relationship of solidarity which then naturally and organically advocates for jobs and investment to enable everyone to reach their aspirations. A relationship with people who are low paid means mutual respect and respecting their agency. There's a reciprocity though, that means hearing each other's stories, spending time together. Not a service client relationship.

We will come back to this later. But first, let's pause for a few minutes - and I'd like to put this question to you. Just turn to your neighbour and give each other a few minutes.

DISCUSSION: Why do you think this behaviour change is called for now?

2. CONTEXT: THE NEW ERA

Catholic Social Teaching helps us stay true to mission

We have thought about what it means to be relational, the meaning of mission but it only really makes complete sense when we understand the context that we are operating in. We have to read the signs of the times.

About eight years ago you might remember Pope Francis said,

*"We are living not through an era of change, but a change of era."*⁶

We've got to take that seriously. He wasn't the only one to spot this. To understand why becoming relational is important, we need to understand this new era.

Our experience must be understood within our political reality - this points to a need for political literacy. Reading the signs of the times is important to Pope Francis as it has been to his predecessors. This means it is necessary to develop a Catholic understanding of political economy, a greater sense of real politik in terms of our own context. In many cases people need to be reconverted or even introduced to our own tradition of Catholic social teaching.

It's often said to be the best kept secret but it's really unforgivable now. It's a worldview. It's a fantastic framework for good judgement.

So Catholic Social Teaching - which has been called the theology of the Holy Spirit in practice - can help us recognise what's going on. It helps us understand these matters of political economy - that means, how our society is structured in terms of how power is arranged, our arrangements in terms of jobs, investments and so on. It helps us to understand and identify the social and cultural systems that are dehumanising. Because it's always concerned about the human person. It gives us an authentically Christian and Catholic

political literacy, It helps us avoid mission drift, which is a massive risk just now and resist the corrosive influences that all kinds of secular ideologies which are becoming so active in this era.

These ideologies are dangerous for Christians. Secular humanism laughs at God. It reduces religion to a lifestyle choice, it aims to relegate the church to a private club out of the public square. And this post-modernist ideology wants us to adopt false ideas about human beings. And some well-intentioned people sadly in the church have been seduced into these worldviews. But we should be confident in our Christian identity. We need to remember we are made in the image of God: and as Christians our identity is in Jesus Christ.

So back in 1891, when Catholic Social Teaching, the modern version of it, started, it was mounting a response⁸ to the industrial revolution - that's why it started - noticing what was happening to human beings. It emerged from a church that was standing in solidarity with the poor at that time. An authentic, reciprocal relationship with poor people helps us to discern the signs of the times.

We're not in relationship with poor people, we tend not to be able to read the signs of the times properly.

It's then continued to guide us all these years with encyclicals, letters and guidance - to uphold true freedom, to uphold the human spirit - to resist what we might call "the principalities and powers".

So Catholic Social Teaching, identifies, in simple terms, three types of power, the two earthly powers of money and state and the one transcendent power of human beings in relationship with each other and with God. Because we're made in the image of God, we are partly transcendent, and that means relational power is a transcendent power.

Correctly understood Catholic Social Teaching transcends left and right. It's non-partisan, it's not anti-capitalist, because it recognises that capital can be creative, but it recognises that it has exploitative, extractive and commodifying tendencies and so it has to be constrained.

But neither is Catholic Social Teaching pro- or anti-state. It recognises that governments can and do promote the good, and it also calls out bureaucratic systems in the administrative state when they become dehumanising, too technocratic, too centralised. It's always concerned about the human person.

So it calls for both state and money power to be de-centralised, distributed wherever possible to local institutions and to the family which it regards as the building block of society.

New Era: the Unravelling

So our Catholic Social Teaching lens - it can help us navigate this change of era. And the reason I'm telling you this is because this is why the relational church is relevant now. It helps us navigate this era and helps us see what is happening to the human being.

I think we can all sense it, can't we, but we find it hard to name. We are caught in a deep spiritual malaise. There are forces have been corroding our civic life for over forty years, with deeper roots going back at least two centuries. The pandemic⁹ accelerated these trends, but they are not new.

These forces were unleashed by a philosophy¹⁰ that views human beings as isolated individuals, rather than the relational beings as God created us.

So it's based on a wrong anthropology.

It has generated what we might call in shorthand "individualism" - and this is the philosophy behind what is happening. This individualism is antithetical to the Catholic understanding of human nature. And like any lie that is treated as true, it has deeply damaged our institutional and social relationships and our sense of belonging and meaning.

So we can see that the family, community and relationship with place have all been undermined. In your parishes, I am sure you will be dealing with the fallout.

The economic application of this transactional individualism has led to the degradation of large parts of our country, to the abandonment of whole communities. This is a breach of the common good.

And successive governments from both left and right have steadily promoted the neoliberal frame underpinning this "me-first" society and not challenged capital. And now it's beginning to unravel.

Right across the West, in all the countries that have adopted the same system, we see breakdowns in trust, political and cultural polarisation, social fragmentation, increasing inequality, rising **pathologies**, symptoms of human distress like loneliness, addiction, self-harm, depression and nihilism and so on. I'm sorry to be frank, but this is what's happening.

The churches too have been vulnerable to this assault, and they haven't known how to resist.

The era of individualism has generated also a careless globalisation: with its off-shoring of jobs, capital flight, human trafficking, zero hours contracts; the medicalisation of sadness, the shaming of manual work by the so-called knowledge economy, the promotion of "social mobility" over belonging to place. All of this is in the interests of big corporations. It's not in the interests of families and communities.

Now geopolitical change and war are adding to the inherent instability of this economic model. And the collusion we're now seeing between capital and the technocratic state, with big tech, big pharma and big media - altogether what some people are calling "the machine"¹¹ - this is challenging the very meaning of human life.

And as governments fail to act, we see this loss of trust, and in the vacuum, extreme ideologies gain traction.

Identity: God vs Self

So this individualism has deep roots. It begins with the Enlightenment, which of course brought many benefits but it also included a turning: a turning away from God and towards the Self.

And over time, it led to a loss of the sense of the transcendent nature of the human person. We need to get things the right way up again.

Everything seems stacked against us, doesn't it, in a world completely dominated by the cult of Self, framed by this aggressive secular humanism. And this new era is just unfolding, we don't know what's coming. We may need to accept a tragic realism that things are not going to get back to normal.

But the truth is that this is God's world. And if we really believe that God is real, then God *is* the primary agent. And so the proper posture for this time of uncertainty is surrender.¹²

We need to be clear about who we are as human beings - our real, God-given identity. My identity is not to

be reduced to a category, like "straight, white woman." No! my identity and yours is as a transcendent human being in God. This is who we are - before we were born, after we die, and all our mortal life.

Now Catholics in particular appreciate the sacramental reality of the two realms, the earthly and the heavenly. Each realm has its own worldview and we have to choose the right one.

As Moses said to the Israelites leaving Egypt, we should choose freedom in God, not the false freedoms of the machine. The machine deceives and unravels. Meanwhile God builds relationships.

Sometimes in the church we make the wrong choice. We forget who we are. We choose the earthly paradigm. We rely on managerial, technocratic approaches. Just like the builders of the towers of Babel, we think we can sort it all out on our own. Well we can't.

The purpose of the relational church

Why do we need to know all this? Because this is why the church is called to this new, ancient culture of relationship.

Pope Francis is calling for this change - for a culture of encounter, for a fraternal church - at a critical moment in the world, for a very good reason. It's not to save the church for its own sake. It's to make the church fit for purpose to heal the world.

So this listening posture is central. The era that's been so damaging has been this era of individualism. And the antidote to individualism is to build common good. Developing a relational culture in the local church is to build back the connections between human beings that have been lost.

So the world needs the church to be fit for purpose - to resist the dehumanising powers and work for the Kingdom in the places where we live. The local church (that's us) needs to be generating this relational power, as part of God's mission to uphold the human space.

This is what Catholic Social Teaching has consistently taught us - from *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 which highlighted the importance of solidarity with the poor to resist the power of capital, to *Fratelli Tutti*¹³ which emphasises the importance of solidarity, fraternity and civic friendship.

So the Catholic tradition calls us to a countercultural insurgency against individualism.

This is the point of becoming a relational church. So when we read *Fratelli Tutti*, it's not all nice fluffy language. It's actually got a really hard edge to it, because it's urgent.

However the churches have been weakened by this individualism. Too many have capitulated to polarised debates, many have turned inwards. Many have fallen out of relationship with their local communities.

And it has to be said, that few Catholics know the reality of the Holy Spirit in their lives - it's not been part of their formation. But this is something that people can learn. And I'm sure that many of you here will know the difference this can make.

So we're going to pause again for a few minutes, same as before, turn to somebody else. have a little chat for a minute each and let's let's come back looking at what it takes to become a relational church.

DISCUSSION: Where do you see signs of the unravelling where you are?

3. BECOMING A RELATIONAL CHURCH

Power and ministry in a broader vocational context

So we've seen the brokenness and we know this is a dark time. And we know we can't meet all the need - it's too great. And it's likely to get worse. And it can be overwhelming. So I want to say this to you very directly. Because I know a lot of clergy, and I know its reality. Remember that you're not the Saviour. Please remember that. If you set yourself up as the rescuer - as well as it being a form of idolatry, by the way - it's a recipe for burnout.

But we can walk together with people. That's not the same as trying to save people. We may go down together. It's about solidarity. So when we're thinking about this relational church, it does help to set ministry within the broader context of God's mission and the broad range of vocations, ordained and non ordained.

And the complementarity between them, we can see how church models of leadership have also become influenced by individualism, how the plague of managerialism has captured parts of the church.

In many cases, priests and bishops are saying that their training didn't prepare them for this moment. They were trained for an individualistic model of leadership. And what we know now as clericalism, is actually a result of the era of individualism. And that's why it tends to isolate separate and inhibit the range of charisma that the Holy Spirit generates.

So we need a distributed model of leadership, one that is more grounded, and which seeks connection with people.

I'm reminded of something my dear friend, Archbishop Emeritus Patrick Kelly told me. He's a very old man. But in reflecting on his ministry as an archbishop, he had one big regret. And that was using the archbishop's car. He said he realised how much he had missed by not taking the bus. So a sense of humility, and the need to be connected to people, not separate.

As Christians we're called to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world. Mission is not abstract. God loves people, so that means it's located, it's grounded, it's about living a common life among our neighbours, where everything becomes an opportunity for communion.

When it's done, well, this is a source of joy. Some churches and church leaders do it really well. Others have lost it completely.

Posture

So becoming a relational church requires some shifts in posture. And it has two aspects, in my view, a simple way of looking at it - inward facing and outward facing.

- **Inward facing** - in terms of focusing on the formation of your congregation
- **Outward-facing** - in terms of how you and your congregation relate to your neighbourhood

And I think they have to be together, they are two sides of the same coin, if you just focus on the inward facing, formation of congregation, that's not mission. Both require remembering that God is primary agent, not us.

A key practice is the one-to-one conversation. not instrumentalised for a campaign, just for the honour of hearing a person's story - by doing this you are giving time to re-establish human connection

- introducing this to the parish develops a congregational culture of encounter, where people are recognised and heard, their stories are known. When you are sitting next to someone in the pew, you actually know who they are.
- And then, as members of the congregation develop this habit, get more confident about doing it, they then extend their one to ones to their neighbours, and by doing so discern how the Spirit is at work in the neighbourhood - back to discernment again - and a listening culture is established. People find it enriching, joyful, meaningful, they discover connection.

Inward-facing

So let's look at this inward-facing posture. What would this look like for you, in your church?

So just some suggestions. You'll have your own ideas.

- a) In terms of liturgy, can you think about creative ways to cultivate a more communal spirituality, ways to make it easy for people who aren't used to church to join in - invite them into be part of the discernment as you design that.
- b) Help people learn how to pray. People really want to learn how to pray. Especially, think about the traditions of Catholic prayer that are communal - *Lectio*, accompaniment, pilgrimage¹⁸. Things that require doing this together, not just individual prayer, recognise what we can do together.
- c) Even Adoration for example, could be made into a more communal experience. You could invite a musician to provide some contemplative music and create a refuge from the noise of everyday life, encourage people to come and be in the presence together. It's a very powerful experience, rather than just going on your own and sort of kneeling at an atomized way.
- d) Then, of course, there's the synodal spiritual conversation³, some of you may have come across this. This can be transformational for relationships. Many congregations are adopting this, not only to learn about each other, but also they're using it for business meetings and decision making, as a way of doing things in relationship with the Holy Spirit.
- e) small discipleship groups are foundationally important - groups that journey together, pray together, dwell in Scripture together, build trust and spiritual intimacy, where you can share your

brokenness. It's worth noting that churches with cell groups like these did much through the pandemic than those that didn't have them. It's more like the early church. Discipleship is meant to be a shared as well as an individual experience. We have to do this together. Make it intergenerational wherever possible. Alpha¹⁹ is a great place to start and there are other cell group models, as is preparing a meal together. The whole ministry around food is very rich.

- f) in terms of the charisms that are work among your congregation - it's very important to learn to recognise these among the non-ordained - the vocations that are emerging beyond the ordained ministries. Key to this is accompaniment - your leadership needs to be sensitive to this, so that you can identify quietly alongside people. Someone might say "I just feel like I want to deepen my faith, I don't know what to do.." That's a sign - there will be lots of ways that people express it and not know how to articulate it, but you need to be alongside people to help spot what is going on.

Everyone has a calling, not just priests and religious, deacons and bishops and so on; we all have a vocation.¹⁶ But it can be easily missed if you don't know what to look for. Before I was called to this work, I was a graphic designer, I wasn't doing anything like this. This is how God works. So we need people who can walk alongside us who can spot and identify what is going on.

- g) And a fundamental shift from this individualistic to more distributed forms of leadership is to notice beyond the usual suspects, to people who have previously been overlooked, unexpected places. Remember Jesus built the church on a fisherman. Peter was not well educated, not an obvious leader. The church desperately needs a broader mix of people. So when you're recruiting, make sure you recruit not just according to age, gender and race, but also to class, to educational background to socio-economic background; and crucially, to be countercultural as the church should be in these times, recruit to a diversity of opinion. Becoming relational means refusing to be tribal. We must work together with people we disagree with.

These are just some of the places to start in terms of developing your inward-facing approach to becoming a relational church.

Outward-facing

Let's look at the outward-facing posture now.

In this time of unravelling, we are called to subvert the culture of individualism by building relationships with our neighbours. Remember our Christian anthropology means we are fundamentally transcendent, relational beings. So by doing this we are playing a crucial role in the reweaving that which has been torn apart.

To get the congregation to step into this mindset, we could begin by asking some simple questions, for example:

- a) How can we become more attentive to where God is already at work so we can join in? Not in the church, but in the neighbourhood? Where do we look?
- b) We can ask questions about our identity as a congregation - who are we, as a people, in this place? How is God calling us to do here and now? Who, among our neighbours are we called to be in relationship with? What can we do together? These are the kinds of discernment questions you can

involve your congregation in to start with.

- c) At the heart of Catholic Social Teaching is the preferential option for the poor. Mission is not an exception to this rule: for the church to thrive, poor, low paid people must be at the heart of mission. In relational terms that means working *with* and rather than *for* people who are low paid, not making them beneficiaries but respecting their agency.
- d) And there is something we need to be honest about here - which is the issue of middle-class church. There is a fear that many churches have of poor people. The fear of ordinary families in the neighbourhood. People have admitted this to me - often churches are more comfortable helping refugees or fundraising for CAFOD than they are in helping their next-door neighbours. When people say this, they often go a little bit quiet and say, well, actually, we're afraid of dysfunctional families in our neighbourhood. There may be good reason for this.

But this points to the difficult reality that the church is not forming its own people to be confident about being a good neighbour. And sometimes these things can be with support can be provided training can be provided to give build a lot of confidence.

So this requires discernment and potentially some support. Pope Francis is clear. He said we should stop outsourcing - to the state and to professionalise charity workers - and get personal. He's not saying the state shouldn't exist, not saying charity shouldn't exist, he affirms all of these things, what he's saying is the church has done so much outsourcing that it's lost its ability to be relational. It needs to become a community of place.

The first step is to be honest about it. It's not just Catholic churches that have fallen out of relationship with the poor communities that surround them, many other churches have too. It's because some churches have become much more middle class, and lost that sense of solidarity.

But it has to be said that there are some churches that are actually doing this quite well. Some of the nondenominational and Pentecostal churches for example. Making it easy for people to get involved, to step over that threshold, so that it's not intimidating. We can learn from what they are doing.

Practical steps: where to start

So we've thought a bit about our inward facing and outward facing practices that can help us become a relational church. But before our discussion let's look at some practical steps.

Let me tell you a very brief story. A woman, a single parent with a daughter, told me she had been struggling with terrible debt for two years. She had gone to mass every week, but she hadn't told a soul. That's the opposite of relational.

By contrast, a relational church has a culture where people are known and support each other. Where people are valued despite their brokenness. That woman would have been supported. Now, sadly, I think we all know that that is not an isolated story. There are many churches where people aren't known.

So we could ask ourselves are we the kind of parish that knows enough about our neighbours, for example, to club together to ensure a poor person gets a dignified burial?

Are we that kind of parish? Are we? Are we the kind of parish that would be comfortable to welcome an ex-offender and his family? How prepared are we to do that?

Are we the kind of congregation in which we make our Sunday dinner a real occasion for communion, by sharing our table? This is what Pope Francis is asking for explicitly - that we should share our table. I know an Italian parish priest who does this every Sunday. He welcomes in ten to twenty homeless men off the street - but crucially it's not a soup kitchen. They cook, eat and wash up together. They sit around a table together. So over time, he helps them re-enter society, by treating them like human beings, in a sense of family.

A pastor I know in Croydon invited some neighbours who were not used to church to a shared meal. He said to them, would you join me - I'm not cooking, I'm not washing up. Would you join me to make a meal? It's sort of church but not really. So they came, they cooked together. They had a conversation. He introduced them to prayer very simply. And they said could we do this again next week? They came again, they brought family, they brought friends. Over six months, it grew to over 100 people. They had to move into the church hall. People got baptised. He learned that there are different ways of doing things.

We are called to become these communities of place. You've probably heard of the national movement *Place of Welcome*²⁵ - there are more than 600 across the country now. Any church can start one, all you need is a room and a few friendly, sensitive people who can host, invite people to come talk about things, play music, be together, play board games, make it intergenerational, a place where people can be together.

And think about young people, remember that loneliness is statistically higher among 18-24 year olds than among the old.²² Young people need a space, a physical space to meet, but invite them to co-design and co-host it.

There is great potential for the local church as a convener - by partnering with local businesses, charities, associations, colleges, to do things together that encourage forms of association that privilege poor and low income people. Like Jesus, we are to live an incarnational theology that tangibly weaves itself into all aspects of our daily experience.

We have buildings, we've got people who are connected into the community, we can share these things. There is potential to build bridges between estranged groups, to offer a space, and support to enable deliberation, to stand in the breach, to suffer with.

The church doesn't just belong to the small group inside. Jesus didn't start a private club. So in sharing our buildings, we are helping to build a local economy of gift. If we ask our neighbours for help when we need it, that's a good place to initiate a culture of reciprocity.

Let me just share a little story with you. A church I know²⁴ in Birmingham when it first started out was in a dilapidated building had nobody there was nobody coming and they asked the neighbours what they most wanted. Top of the list was a playground. So that's what the church did. It organised, got everyone involved. Neighbours actually dug the foundations together. That was 25 years ago. That church was a dilapidated building, almost empty then. It's now the hub of that community with 2,500 people going through that building every week, worshiping, participating, people finding their place in terms of taking responsibility.

The poor are supposed to be the treasure of the church. Pope Francis also says that the church needs to be evangelised *by* the poor, so we need to try to move away from a kind of "service-client" dynamic that creates the tension of 'us' and 'them'.

We need to join with people who perhaps would otherwise be seen as beneficiaries, recipients or "service users" and do things together. We should be striving for a sense of family, a hand up not a handout.

There is a mysterious reason why Francis wants us to engage with the poor - it's not just for their benefit. The church is increasingly marginalised, and it needs friends. If a church is struggling, vulnerability can be a strength because it's when you're vulnerable that you ask for help and that is how relationships form. So when we think about church decline, I can't help thinking whether God could be humbling the church so that in its poverty it realises its need for others, especially the poor. The posture needs to shift from host to neighbour.

In a few moments we'll open up for discussion, I'd love to hear you share your stories from your contexts.

But just to finish, I want to say that being a relational church naturally will lead us to live in the way of the early apostles, to have all things in common - and it will lead us to express our solidarity with our neighbours on low incomes. And together then we advocate for decent jobs and place-based investment - to create a place where young people can build a life, be fruitful and multiply.

So different from this situation of abandonment. You know, poor communities have been abandoned by the political class, and by the church.

This is what Pope Francis' vision is getting at, building on John Paul II's concept of a civilization of love. And yes, it does sound idealistic. But it's a vision that can be built up incrementally, by people like you. From the local in small steps. It doesn't need to be big grand schemes.

This is a shift from contract to covenant.

It's a way of loving people. It's a way of loving people in a place. It's like Jesus said, I'll be with you always, He won't abandon people. So this is how we prepare the church to heal the world. This is God's mission. It is deeply embedded in the Old Testament model of justice. And it's profoundly rooted in our DNA as relational beings, and expressed in the Trinity in the life of Christ himself.

This relational church is really about building the Kingdom.

DISCUSSION: Thinking about power, posture and practical steps, how can the church become more relational?

Jenny Sinclair
Founder and Director, Together for the Common Good

Together for the Common Good is dedicated to spiritual and civic renewal. Drawing on Catholic social thought, T4CG helps people across the churches make sense of this time of seismic change and discern their unique vocation for the common good. Learn more at www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk, sign up for our Newsletter, discover resources and listen to our [Leaving Egypt](#) podcast. We are a small charity entirely reliant on donations, so if you find this resource helpful, please consider making a donation, [here](#).

NOTES

- ¹ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/our-founder-director>
- ² <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/catholic-social-thought>
- ³ https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf
- ⁴ Pope Francis for the opening of the Synod, 2021: <https://rb.gy/ekerw>
- ⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 1964: <https://rb.gy/hmtbp>
- ^{5a} *Instrumentum Laboris*
- ⁶ <https://aleteia.org/blogs/aleteia-blog/pope-francis-we-are-not-living-an-era-of-change-but-a-change-of-era/>
- ⁷ <https://svp.org.uk/our-history>
- ⁸ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/to-live-a-decent-life>
- ⁹ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-plague-and-the-parish>
- ¹⁰ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/how-christian-is-postliberalism>
- ¹¹ <https://unherd.com/thepost/paul-kingsnorth-how-to-resist-the-machine/>
- ¹² <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-story-in-which-we-find-ourselves>
- ¹³ *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020: <https://rb.gy/x37dg>
- ¹⁴ <https://wherepeteris.com/big-tent-catholicism/>
- ¹⁵ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/resources/one-to-one-conversations>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.pathsoflove.com/johnpaul-vocation.html#sdfootnote6anc>
- ¹⁷ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/resources/the-common-good-examen>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.pilgrimways.org.uk/>
- ¹⁹ <https://alpha.org.uk/catholic-context>
- ²⁰ <https://www.24-7prayer.com/podcast/introducing-lectio-divina/>
- ²¹ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/the-soil-of-community>
- ²² <https://www.ukonward.com/reports/age-of-alienation-loneliness-young-people/>
- ²³ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-politics-of-grace-and-place>
- ²⁴ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/pavilion-shaping-a-community-of-hope>
- ²⁵ <https://www.placesofwelcome.org.uk/>
- ²⁶ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/from-jenny-sinclair/how-should-the-church-respond-to-poverty-at-this-time>
- ²⁷ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/renewing-the-covenant>
