

# GRACE, TRUTH & THE COMMON GOOD

## *The Future of Christian Social Action*

Report of the evening on 15th July 2024

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***The Together for the Common Good Prayer***

**Glory be to the father, the son and the Holy Spirit +**

- Come Holy Spirit. We welcome you here in our midst.
- Govern our hearts and minds, govern every aspect of our time together.
- Be in every thought and word; in every intention and motive.
- Lord, we thank you for those who have been an inspiration to us.
- Thank you, for calling us through the Gospel to work together, and for each other.
- We pray for others working for the Common Good and for those who resist it.
- Bind us together across our traditions and move our heart's desire closer to the heart of your desire for us.
- Lord, give us the grace do your will, and make our mission a joy.

**In the love of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen**



# 1. Overview

## Dear Friends

I'm delighted to present this short report about the event on 15th July 2024, *Grace, Truth and the Common Good: the Future of Christian Social Action*. Whether you were there, or wanted to be but couldn't, this is for all who were invited. Thank you for showing an interest.

Seventy invited guests attended altogether, including over sixty social action leaders representing a broad mix of experience, expertise and Christian traditions.

The evening was intended to start an honest conversation. It centered around a lecture by Jon Kuhrt, in which he drew on his experience as a practitioner, and on the wisdom of the Christian traditions, including Catholic social thought and the theology of Lesslie Newbigin.

Jon and I have felt for some time that Christian social action is facing a challenge. I have written about it [here](#) and Jon has written about it [here](#). Although the churches are making a vital contribution, levels of poverty are actually increasing - and inequality, homelessness and destitution are getting worse. In a time of profound instability, and rapid social and political change, we feel we must ask if the churches are on the right road. Are we having the impact we intend? What are the power dynamics? Is our Christian witness authentic? Are we inadvertently propping up an unjust system? We must ask the difficult questions.

The event was held in memory of Frank Field who was known for his courage in asking awkward questions and for telling the truth. We were delighted to be joined by some of Frank's closest family, friends and colleagues on the night. A committed Anglican, Frank was an outstanding parliamentarian and social reformer, dedicated to improving the lives of people trapped in poverty. He thought deeply about putting Christian theology and justice into practice in ways that balanced grace and truth. Frank was a good friend and always encouraged the work of Together for the Common Good.

The event has been very generative. Messages and reflections received so far indicate some deep thinking and an appetite to take this forward in concrete ways.

Even where there is disagreement on the way, we should address the challenges that Jon articulated; there is agreement among a broad range of people that the three issues of *justice, empowerment* and *witness* are the key ones for Christian social action. This means we have a common place from which to continue the dialogue in a spirit of generosity and common language.

Jon and I are working on some next steps, and we will be in touch again in due course.

If, on reading this short report, you have a reflection or a message you'd like to share with us, please send to Louise Lambert at [louise@togetherforthecommongood.co.uk](mailto:louise@togetherforthecommongood.co.uk)

I would like to thank everyone who helped to make this possible, to CCLA for sponsoring, to every guest for coming, and to you for engaging with this now. I'd like to thank Jon especially for so graciously accepting the challenge and for bringing such a generative provocation.

Thank you and God bless

Jenny

**Jenny Sinclair**

Founder and Director, Together for the Common Good

## 2. Brief headlines from lecture and links to full text and recording

- Introduction
  - Reflection on Frank Field
- Putting grace and truth to work:
  - The framework of grace and truth; solidarity and subsidiarity
  - The bishop who disagreed and then became '85% in agreement'
- The challenges of social action - three questions we need to ask:
  - Has enthusiasm for social action led the church to become a handmaid of the state, propping up an unjust system, filling in the gaps caused by its negligence?
  - Have these projects been effective at reducing poverty in sustainable ways?
  - Have they been an effective way of witnessing to the Christian faith or has social action secularised the church?
- The key challenges we face:
  - **The disconnect between charity and justice** - relationship with the state, relational justice; awareness of underlying social and economic systems
  - **Dependency - the disconnection with empowerment** - some social action initiatives inadvertently disempower communities; the problem of the service-client dynamic; welfare reform
  - **Secularising - the disconnection from faith:** influence of funders, the need for confidence; the importance of prayer with guests; full-fat Christianity
- The grace and truth of Jesus
- Practical applications - the grace and truth chart; stories
- Five concluding points for the future (we are not in a benign culture):
  1. Christian social action must be accompanied by a Christian model of justice
  2. Our social action must be empowering and build mutuality
  3. Social action should deepen its Christian distinctiveness
  4. Beware of superficiality and pay attention to messy realities
  5. We need a new movement of Christian social action networks

### Links to the lecture in full

Download FULL TEXT [here](#) | watch the VIDEO [here](#) (includes Q & A)

Listen to AUDIO on a podcast [here](#)



Jon Kuhrt



Frank Field

### 3. Grace and Truth chart

<i>Emphasis on</i> <b>Grace</b>	<i>Emphasis on</i> <b>Truth</b>
Unconditional acceptance	Enforcement of rules
Giving another chance	Maintaining boundaries
Showing compassion	Administering justice
Providing support and care	Challenging and empowering
Advocating for people's rights	Focusing on personal responsibility
Treated as a guest	Treated as a client
Showing flexibility	Being consistent
Saying 'Yes'	Saying 'No'

## 4. Feedback and reflections

*Some of the messages and reflections received so far*

- Such a powerful event last night.
- What a fantastic evening, thank you. It was great to meet a range of different people.
- What an excellent evening. A very strong discussion that could have gone on all night.
- Loved it tonight. So did all the others with whom I had opportunity to meet and chat to.
- A big thank you for yesterday. It was such a fascinating and stimulating evening.
- Loved it! Best wishes and well done for all you are doing! I'm so inspired by the network you have created and the gifts you have of bringing people into a space that cultivates real dialogue and friendship!
- What a super evening last night's event was. Thanks so much to you for dreaming it up.
- I particularly appreciated the time of prayer at the beginning as we all sought to invite the Holy Spirit to govern our hearts minds and speech at the outset
- Thanks so much for an amazing evening yesterday - highly thought-provoking and inspiring content and conversations after.
- I'd love to become involved in whatever way would be helpful.
- The lecture last night was fabulous. Thank you so much for all the work that went into it.
- Excellent, outstanding lecture. Impressed with the five concluding points. A useful text is Pope Benedict's encyclical on the difference between the welfare agencies of the state and the Christian charity. Christian identity is so crucial.
- Great idea to take forward. Something here needs to be worked up.
- Reflecting on the power dynamics, our clients when they first come to us often want us to take control"... we need to focus on the empowerment that follows. Can we think of volunteering as a discipleship pathway? Clients/service users becoming volunteers in the church or service as a "levelling" approach.
- I don't believe we can meaningfully engage by defaulting to managerial terminology. This creates a divide and reveals a middle-class mindset that has infiltrated many church attitudes, approaches, and theology. We must rethink our approach, move beyond these middle-class assumptions, look deeply inwards and genuinely engage with the diverse realities of those we aim to serve. This is not about managerial success but about authentic, inclusive ministry rather than engagement, that truly reflects the love and grace of God.
- Complementary to leaders of NGOs are the parishes: we must recognise the importance of equipping ordinary Christians for local mission. It is interesting to notice how different traditions use different language eg. "missionary disciples", "transforming" congregations, parish model/empowerment etc

- The focus on class is important. We have an increasing number of people who are more culturally working class on our teams and we are appreciating the opportunities and challenges to some of our ways of thinking and acting that that brings.
- Jon's lecture profoundly resonates with the transformative work we are undertaking. I find a significant alignment with our own journey and philosophy, agreeing with about 85% of what he articulated. His critique of food banks and the unhealthy dependency they can foster mirrors our own experiences and the shifts we've made in our approach to social action. His insights into avoiding dependency traps and addressing root causes are essential. However, his perspective occasionally felt somewhat middle-class and highlights the need to reform theology, language and attitudes to truly reflect Christ's message. The challenge is to balance direct action, advocacy, and confident gospel proclamation in a way that genuinely and authentically brings about God's kingdom on earth. I also wonder about the socio-economic makeup of the room. Given we were discussing poverty, it was crucial to have voices of those who have lived experience of poverty. These discussions often end up in the hands of an exclusive group of elite professionals.
- We have lost an understanding of suffering, which plays a really important role in our understanding of social action. Of course, we want to alleviate the suffering, especially the suffering people experience through unjust structures and economies. Part of this hand-out culture is our inability to walk hand in hand with people through suffering.
- As we move forward, there is a need to include the younger generation who understand what social cohesion looks like for their generation and how the gospel of Christ can work afresh amongst them to create new bonds of solidarity, mutuality and love.
- The question now is "where next"? I like the idea of a 21st Century *Faith in the City* - but not if it is as unsuccessful as the first time around. So how do we keep the momentum and tie it more explicitly with practical action and make a visible difference?

A part of the lecture has been published in the Church Times:

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/30-august/comment/opinion/dangers-social-action-projects-must-avoid>



## 5. Notes from our round table conversation

*After the lecture, we held a round table conversation for thirty over a meal. Here is a flavour of the discussion points. Comments are unattributed to honour Chatham House Rule.*

- There are questions about where power lies. The service-client dynamic undermines agency. The tension between the middle class service provider and the working class recipient generates alienation. By contrast, agency is generated by walking alongside in relationship, enabling people to name their own situation and build up local power.
- Need to recall the great traditions of radical agitation, of Christian socialism. The Levellers and the Diggers. After decades of individualism, there has been a loss of memory around agency and people have become atomised. Our forms of association have gone. What will the new forms of association be and what part can the Church play?
- Where is truth told? Poverty Truth Commissions lift up the voices usually unheard.
- Christian identity. The purpose of Christian social action can be understood in terms of the three-fold responsibility of the Church: by proclaiming, through the sacramental, and by the ministry of charity. But that charity must have a distinctively Christian character, not just a welfare activity that could be done by any NGO. A useful text is Part 2 of Pope Benedict's [\*Deus Caritas Est\*](#) on the difference between the welfare agencies of the state and the Christian charity.
- How do we empower ourselves as Christian charities? We undersell, we are deferential. Why do we let the state determine our identity and determine the language we use? This is not an argument for a return to "muscular Christianity", but instead to a generous orthodoxy.
- What is that distinctively Christian character? Jesus not only washes the feet, he dries the feet and he does so personally. The Church needs formation in servant leadership for mission.
- Given where we are now, *Faith in the City* was a failure. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports that levels of poverty since then have not decreased. To what extent are we part of the problem? What will it take for us to move the dial?
- Depending on God. Listening to God is the most important thing. Newbigin emphasises that the Church exists for the mission of God. The Church does not exist for the mission of the state.
- We should think about factors that influence us now. Frank Field would have loved this occasion and the free exchange of ideas. He would also have been provocative. He might have wanted to shift the focus from Christian NGOs to parishes: what about Christians in the streets where they live? Isn't that the way the next generation of Christians will fulfil the mission of the Church? How can they be empowered? Frank would say this is the real question. How will Christians address the dignity of work at a call centre? Perhaps through a set of core values implemented by an employer, then follow a process.

- In terms of how to tackle the causes of poverty, Frank would say it is important to recognise the need to act at different levels.
- It is important for Christians to transcend party political loyalties and ideologies. Frank said it was “important to be critical when necessary, and supportive when necessary, of any party in government”. For example, he said that the best way to transfer wealth from the rich to the poor was not through welfare, but to let people buy their own council houses. He published a piece called [\*“The Poor Get Poorer Under Labour”\*](#)
- Dependency has locked people out of work, and now we have the challenge of migration as well.
- The Grace and Truth critique and the five concluding points are helpful. You can’t have a Christian approach that doesn’t recognise the issue of responsibility. However, although Grace and Truth is a compelling way to run a homelessness service, it needs further development regarding policy and welfare dependency. How would the grace-truth dialectic hold in other charitable examples that aren’t dealing with homelessness, particularly around disability or poor mental health.
- There is a lot of “justice nostalgia” around. For example, people talk about the *Rough Sleeper Unit* from the 1990s. People are struggling to find new ideas. There has been a tendency to refer back to schemes and ideas of the eighties, nineties and noughties, combing over what happened then to extract the wisdom and lessons as we consider this new moment, particularly with a new government. Honest analysis of the past is important but fresh ideas are also required: this is a new time.
- What we do now needs our attention. What would a *Faith in the City* look like now? Profit before people has social consequences.
- Significant elements in the Church lack a theology of political economy. Some Christian funders may be resistant to the critique of the prevailing economic system.
- There is mission drift in terms of the Christian conception of justice. Rather than calling for economic reform that prioritises families and communities, decent work and place-based investment, many church voices tend to support welfarist solutions which meet emergency needs but fail to address the causes of poverty. The economic, social and cultural impact of neoliberalism on our country needs to be understood, and a constructive and distinctively Christian alternative articulated. The theology of Catholic Social Teaching is a deep and coherent body of thinking providing ways to approach this.
- What do people need to hear? They need to hear that they have power.
- Truth telling is not straightforward. When I have had to tell truth to my neighbours, I have become the object of protest. This provokes a hard reaction. And telling truth to funders has consequences too. They don’t want to hear that their outcomes are not being met. Telling truth can render you voiceless.
- The truth some people might need to hear is that they have inherent self-worth: and the challenge might be for them to start believing that and living according to that truth with the help of their community.

- The Grace and Truth analysis derives from specialist experience in homelessness. But it is not always helpful to reduce the situation to something that someone could do better. There is this pervasive belief that if you try hard enough, you will make it, but there are structural realities that sometimes mean this isn't true. Let's not cut ourselves off from what must be done by government. Labour have committed to ending food distribution.
- The question is how - *how* is justice achieved? There are different models of justice. The Christian model is relational justice. Our distinctiveness is critical.
- You need chutzpah to stand up for what you believe. Blair brought faith communities together but told them to stop proselytising. I witnessed a funding decision to support a Catholic charity because it didn't proselytise.
- It is vital that we can be more honest generally. Christian approaches must be distinctive, and this means being different from mainstream NGOs.
- Our institutions, crucially including funders, may not be ready to be part of the reciprocal transformation, self-critique and change that is necessary for the "social transformation" we claim we want to see. This must form part of the task ahead, asking difficult questions of our own state of readiness and strength of character to make these changes.

## **6. Organisations invited**

### ***In attendance on the night***

Bonny Downs Community

Cafod

Cardinal Hume Centre

CARE

Caritas Social Action Network

Caritas Westminster

Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales

CCLA

Christians Against Poverty

Church Urban Fund

ChurchWorks Commission

Connections at St Martin's in the Fields

Daughters of Charity Services

Dominican Friars of Britain

Good Faith Partnership

Hope into Action

Housing Justice

Joint Public Issues Team

Justice and Peace Commission, Archdiocese of Westminster

Kings Arms Project

London Institute of Contemporary Christianity

Methodist Church of Great Britain

National Estates Churches Network

Prison Advice Care Trust

Radio Maria England

Sanctuary Mental Health

Social Market Foundation

St Vincent de Paul Society of England and Wales

The Catholic Union of Great Britain

The Ecological Conversion Group  
The Eden Network/The Message Trust  
The Gratitude Initiative  
The Salvation Army UK  
Theos think tank  
Together for the Common Good  
Trussell Trust  
*And others*

***Those wishing to join, giving apologies***

Alliance for Responsible Citizenship Ltd  
A Rocha UK  
Archbishops' Council of the Church of England  
Archdiocese of Liverpool  
Ascension Trust  
Bible Society  
Caritas Clifton  
Caritas Shrewsbury  
Catholic Chaplaincy, London Universities  
Centre for Social Justice  
Churches Together England  
Cinnamon Network  
Clean for Good  
Common Good Foundation  
Community Money Advice  
Compassionate Communities  
Crisis  
DePaul UK  
FaithAction  
Faith Works  
Feeding Britain  
Gather Movement

Guild of Our Lady of Ransom  
Jubilee Plus  
Lauderdale Trust  
Marriage Care  
Missio  
Oasis  
Peter's House  
Porticus UK  
Proximity  
Redeeming Our Communities  
Share Jesus International  
St John of God Hospitaller Services  
St Mary's University  
Stewardship  
Tearfund  
The Charles Plater Trust  
The Passage  
The Voluntary Solidarity Fund UK  
University of Birmingham  
Youth Endowment Fund  
*And others*

## About Together for the Common Good

Together for the Common Good (T4CG) is a small national charity dedicated to spiritual and civic renewal. Working with leaders, charities, churches and schools, T4CG helps Christians of all traditions navigate this time of profound change, work together and discern their vocation for the common good.

- Website: [www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk](http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk)
- Podcast: [Leaving Egypt](#) - What does it mean to be God's people in a time of unravelling?
- Programme for young people: [Common Good Schools](#)
- Content from our Founder Director [Jenny Sinclair](#)
- Sign up for the T4CG Newsletter and discover previous editions [here](#)



## Acknowledgements

London Jesuit Centre

Ailsa Petterson

Frankie Delamain

Drew Horley

Ben Curran

Sincere thanks to CCLA for supporting this event





[www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk](http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk)