



IN THE THICK OF IT

Stories, experiences and reflections on God's kingdom in the margins



INTRODUCTION

In May 2019, a gathering called *In the Thick of It* brought together an ecumenical group of fifty people, all engaged in some way in ministry or mission in marginalised places in Britain, for twenty-four hours in the beautiful setting of Scargill House in Yorkshire. The event had three aims:

1. To facilitate conversations between people engaged in ministry in different marginal contexts, to enable participants to learn from, encourage, inspire and support each other
2. To reflect on how God is at work in these contexts and explore the implications of Christian engagement with social exclusion
3. To consider how the voices and experiences of marginalised communities can inform and enhance policymaking and practice, at both local and wider levels.

This booklet aims to share some of the reflections and stories shared over the gathering, and additional material from some of the contributors, and offer them to a wider audience. Our hope is that it will prompt the conversations and connections to continue, particularly with others who are also engaged in work ‘on the margins’, however that is defined.

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Organising team for *In the Thick of It*, and staff members at the United Reformed Church

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Most of the included photos were taken at the event. Visual narrative © Elizabeth Gray-King 2019 – www.elizabethgrayking.com

Flourishing and Ambiguity: complex good in the margins

ANNA RUDDICK is a community theologian from Urban Life, and acted as a theological reflector for the ‘In the Thick of It’ gathering.

‘In the thick of it’. In the thick of what? What is ‘it’?

What images spring to your mind? Fast-paced rushing traffic, busyness? Or financial worries that prevent you engaging with the natural beauty around you? Or gloop? Competing priorities for your time and energy? People struggling to stay sane in the face of benefit errors, kids struggling at school, partners, parents needing care. The phrase denotes pressure, the sources of that pressure, from without or within, and often both, are unique to each of us.

A few years ago I did some research into the nature of incarnational urban ministry. I was curious about what was happening in the relationships between Christians relocating into marginalised communities and the people they got to know there. And what kind of results this led to in the lives of both parties.

What I found, among other things, was that ministry at the margins is good but it’s complicated. I describe the results of the relationships I observed as ‘a complex good’.

Why is this? Because it’s about change, both in people in ministerial roles of some kind, and in those who struggle against poverty. We are all reaching together for something a bit more *shalom*-ish, something that bears witness to the here and not fully here kingdom of God.

Change involves the loss of some aspect of our worldview along with the gain of a new piece of the picture. Without the loss the new couldn’t emerge. Without ambiguity the flourishing doesn’t emerge.

So maybe we should expect to experience and to be alongside others experiencing both flourishing and ambiguity in our ministries at the margins.

Flourishing

Paul’s story:

I’m not a Christian now but I spend a lot of me time with the Christians... I do a lot of voluntary work yeah, if I’m not in work this is where I am... I do get a lot of responsibility off ‘em and obviously I appreciate that ‘cos it’s trust and I am a trustworthy guy... it does make you feel good because someone’s trusting you with all their property and stuff like that...

Say if I carried on on the streets... half of us probably be in jail now... but knowing these [Eden team members] and starting getting into all more activities and helping out... I see my change, ...obviously we still went back to do our own stuff while we was with



them but instead of just climb one ladder causing trouble I was climbing two so I was still messing about causing trouble but also climbing the ladder to gain respect you know... 'cos I was being with them and then... things move on like so I was climbing two instead of one and obviously you only want to climb one ladder and I just jumped back on to the good ladder to go the good way.

God in a way does help you [find] your way through everything if you think about it but I wanna see something before I believe in him... God's probably that one rung ahead of me, you know until actually something happens and I meet up with him, and until that day I'm always going to be one behind him...

I could stay away from [the church] for a long time... but obviously if I still got to see the people because they're good friends now... obviously your friends come and go but these people I've had for eight, nine, ten, some of them... twelve years so you build a good friendship with 'em 'cos you know they're always going to be around, so you can trust 'em...

Features of flourishing:

- A stronger love of self,
- A more positive approach to life choices large and small,
- An increased ability to act – a sense of agency,
- An increasing awareness of a good God in our world,
- Mutuality – being part of give and take relationships in which everyone is being changed.

Ambiguity

“...it's not quite as black and white”

Louise:

...you have all the experiences that you have to deal with and you think oh my goodness what do I even see in this situation, when someone dies or gets beat up by their boyfriend and all sorts of mad stuff and you don't know what the answers are... yeah, I think my theology has changed quite a bit since coming [here]. Say, it was a nice little pretty box all wrapped up, it's just been opened and has been a bit messy and yea, you know, not quite as compact and tight. ...it can make you think “Oh right, do I believe this just because I have been told it for years and years and I've never had to question it or it's not affected me in a real way” ...when it really affects you and someone that you know then... it's not quite as black and white.

- The vulnerability of life in a marginal place,
- The vulnerability of sharing yourself with another person,
- The long-term and process nature of personal change,
- The frustration of limitations on life change.

Community member Clare's view of her current situation expresses this tension:

...I don't think I've completely changed to being a Christian, ...to me you can't just be one day something and one day something else, I mean it might have happened to people but personally, it's not happened to me so I'm going through like a bit of a battle so I'm not transformed at the minute...

Question for reflection: Do these descriptions of flourishing and ambiguity resonate with your ministry?

Introducing the visual narrative

ELIZABETH GRAY-KING is an artist-theologian, project manager and ordained URC minister, and acted as artist-in-residence for the 'In the Thick of It' gathering, creating a visual narrative of the event on a long scroll.



I arrived with my own sense of the margins, as I have often described my relationship to the institutional worshipping church as 'on the fringes of the prayer shawl.' I don't easily fit and find myself an out-lier of sorts. So the image began with a woven prayer shawl, but a different pattern than the Orthodox Jewish version. The fringes moved into weeds and thorns at the bottom of the whole scroll, the thicket of life for so many in margins. The strong yellow colour is my code for the presence of God. This goes throughout the scroll.

As Anna gently unfolded her research about marginality, we heard that work in the margins shows both flourishing and ambiguity. In the thicket, people of many colours and sizes mix, with the yellow people being those from churches. There are messy edges and sparks of inspiration. It is complex and yet good. There may be loss with both a sense and the reality of distance from the institutions and places of power, stretched out at the top of this section. The yellow institution suggests that God is not absent from anywhere. The scribbles through it all are akin to midrash, the rabbinic notes alongside Hebrew texts. The Celtic trinity symbols are the presence of God everywhere.

What do we mean by ‘the margins’?

HILARY COLLINSON is a URC minister and prison chaplain.

Being on the ‘margins’ and marginalisation will always depend on personal perspective and how the situation is perceived and therefore can vary from individual to individual and is bound up in other experiences and the various contexts people have been in before. For example, access to foodbanks in larger conurbations is relatively easy compared to some rural areas where an expensive, infrequent bus service has to be undertaken before being able to access a similar parcel. Both groups using the service are marginalised, but there is even inequality in how people are able to get to this basic service.

The context I work in, on a sessional basis, is a Young Offenders Institution as a Prison Chaplain. I was employed in that role in an Open Prison for 7 years before that. It is a very particular environment and can feel at times as being ‘on the margins of the margins’. Prisons and the Criminal Justice system can feel very alien to many people and also engenders a whole mixture of feelings especially from victims of crime which I can understand. As a person of faith in that environment it can also feel as if faith and religion is marginalised by the Institution although some who work in the context would be people of faith too. This is not unique to Prison Chaplaincy. I have had some experience of Hospital, University and Industrial Chaplaincy too, and the presence of people of faith in a formal role can be seen as an asset or a challenge, depending on the situation at any one time.

**“marginalisation
is always from
particular
perspectives”**

However, the kingdom of God is not bound by prison walls or barbed wire. God can penetrate the steel doors and the unseen barriers. One young man in distress was put on the suicide and self-harm watch and spent 45 minutes telling me his life story and the circumstances that had led him to this low point. The conversation ended when we were called in for his review and he agreed to a course of medication to deal with his symptoms. He came off the suicide watch and I did not see him for about 4 months. Then I bumped into him when I was on his wing seeing someone else, and he said he was being transferred to another establishment in preparation for local release. I said I knew one of the Chaplains and he asked if I would let him know he was coming. I did and let him know I had made contact, to which his answer was ‘that’s good – I will know someone there’. A conversation ‘in the line of duty’ was used to make this young man feel he would know someone at his next jail. There are so many small incidents like that that remind me that God is there and keeps me going back into this marginalised place.

Returning to the beginning of this piece. The young offenders at least have a roof over their head and three meals a day – marginalisation is always from particular perspectives! For many of these young men the stability of these basic needs being met is in stark contrast to their lives growing up – certainly the experience of the young man who I have written about above.



Solidarity not charity

SARA BARRON is a Baptist minister in Cornwall and also works for CURBS, which supports those working with children in marginalised communities.

I spent most of the last 16 years living and working on a large outer urban estate of 33,000 people. The most deprived wards in Hampshire sit in this estate which had a significant number in financial poverty. Therefore, there was much input given, often not what was needed, and much came from a place of judgement and power. Marginality came with a postcode, as it was perpetuated by those living round the outside of the estate who looked down on the people in it.

Recently I have moved to a small fishing town in Cornwall, a rural context where wealth and poverty sit together with little interaction. Cornwall is the poorest county in UK with average wages touching £15,000pa, far below the national average. Multiple deprivation indices are high in just one area where those who service the tourist industry live. Here marginalisation comes in the form of isolation with lack of transport, seasonal low paid work and high housing costs.

I work two days a week for CURBS who support, train and resource those working with children in marginalised communities. My husband and I are

“much input came from a place of judgement and power”

Baptist ministers and half our time is focussed in the community where we have been missional listening for the last year looking for where God is at work and joining in where we are invited. It is like living in a goldfish bowl as people watch to see ‘does it work’ – hope comes from seeing that Jesus works whatever is going on in life. You need to be your vulnerable self – people want real.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation figures show that 1 in 8 households in full time work fall below the minimum income standard (MIS) and this is a rising figure. Child poverty has risen by 500,000 in the last 5 years. The biggest single factor which creates marginalisation is the growing feeling of isolation that people feel.

What glimpses of the kingdom of God do you see from the margins?

Though the systems may be failing many and do not look set to change much at present, I do see glimpses of hope.

The first is around collaboration. Now more than ever schools, colleges and community supporting groups are feeling the pinch. When we work together, we are more creative, more effective and more sustainable. Our relationship with the school began by asking what we could do to help. The answer came: become a governor, support us with the growing number of children with a connection to social services by providing a therapeutic listening service, turn up to help out at things, promote activities, speak well of the school or group to others. Which is what we did.

This led to being asked to be a chaplain for the teachers, staff and parents as well as the children, bacon rolls with staff early on a Monday morning, a prayer room set up with prayer stations available for staff and children, visiting staff off sick, attending back to work meetings.

This led to conversations about how we could make a difference in the community – tackling food poverty – gathering all who may get involved and working together to support each other. Food bank, school buy in to surplus food scheme which it shared with the food bank and then used to provide holiday lunch programme,

“The biggest single factor which creates marginalisation is the growing feeling of isolation that people feel”



a community fridge in the school. Lunch programme in the holidays supported by local volunteers grows to add breakfast provision and an evening meal one day a week every week throughout the year. Christmas day lunch held at and supported by the local school and church together.

The story just goes on and on finding more and more opportunities to work with others bringing the kingdom of God to the people of the margins through using all who care for the community. Using the underpinning of solidarity rather than charity.

My second source of hope is how children and young people's voices are being heard on the issue of climate change. Children and young people are often those whose voice is the least heard in society. It is deemed they do not know enough to speak until they are older. But I believe that out of the mouths of babes we often hear the prophetic. At present my 14 year old son along with thousands of other young people across the world are trying to make their voice heard on the prominent and hugely important issue of climate change.

This has sparked a passion in my son which is giving him opportunities to share his love of the world and nature, which comes from his faith in God, with those in and outside the church. In the local church he has preached on the subject with many saying how challenged they were to him after. This passion has seen a number of young people get involved in change with the school, no more plastic, recycling waste separated and a consistent voice to challenge when things don't change. The international strikes have given opportunity to talk to the local council, the chair of the county council, the head of recycling and waste management.

I am excited that the young people are being heard and taken seriously. We need to support their challenge and play our part in making changes to the way we care for our God given planet. Here I see the kingdom of God bringing hope to the next generation and to all humanity.

VISUAL NARRATIVE

We heard of margins from a prison chaplain, a Church related community worker, and from a community worker. They told of being marginalised in a place of marginality itself, with the chaplain marginalised by those in the prison which itself locked its inhabitants in a marginal place. We heard of distance from food and deep poverty, with circles of people identifying in their same anguish, the public safety net fraying. The church itself can be on the margin, losing significance in society. Modern church buildings can be marginalised by their lack of symbolic structure. Yet God is seen as connection are made, food is shared, and conversations are characterised by quality listening. ELIZABETH GRAY-KING



A marginal God

ANNA RUDDICK is a community theologian from Urban Life.

‘Marginal places’ and ‘among marginalised people’ – the very definition is negative. There, we/they are not in the centre, not where the power/resources/kudos is perceived to reside.

But our tradition reminds us that God kind of likes the margins. God isn’t a very ‘centre of power’ type God. God is a ‘create a world and entrust it to humanity, choose a people and follow them through their mistakes, prefer prophets over kings, choose a teenage virgin from Nazareth and become human, hang out with social outcasts and annoy the establishment, refuse to become their Che Guevara and instead wash people’s feet, die on a cross’-type God. God is a ‘send God’s Spirit into the world invisibly drawing out the kingdom’-type God.

So God seems to be a marginal God, and God’s not the only one for whom margin space is generative. Social theorists like Manuel Castells recognise the potential for activism, resistance, radical social change, in the margins, the ‘back alleyways’ of society.

“God’s not the only one for whom margin space is generative”

Practical theologian Terry Veling draws on the Jewish practice of *midrash* as a way to recognise the creative potential of margin space. Midrash is a form of reflective exegesis and commentary on the sacred text, often written around the margins of the page, a scribbling in the margins which illuminates the centre.

This is not to justify or sanctify the injustice and sinfulness of exclusion, poverty and the hoarding of power. But it is to recognise that the clearest perspective on human power structures is often to be found at a critical distance from them; and that humans are resourceful, creative beings a trait given space by shared adversity in ways which, I pray, might multiply shalom in our communities.

My experiences of ministry in marginal (in my case urban) communities have been a revelation of God to me. As a woman from a white British lower-middle class family striving has been the tense, background thrum to my upbringing. Aware and motivated towards education and achievement while usually still needing the assistance of state benefits in order to make those dreams happen.

Finding God in Manchester’s urban neighbourhoods, in good and complicated people, has enabled me to acknowledge God’s presence in the margin space within myself. The space in which I will never ‘match up’ to the ideals I so unconsciously strive for. I am grateful for that gift. And it is a gift to speak back to people who may not have noticed God in their midst, the ways in which they remind me of Jesus.

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Matthew 25:35-36,40

Meeting people where they are

RUTH BOTTOMS has been Chaplain at the West London Mission since 2012.

The West London Mission (WLM) has been working with people affected by homelessness and poverty since 1887. It was founded as one of several ‘missions’ by the national Methodist Connexion and was part of the outworking of an understanding of mission as encompassing a concern for the whole person and so having a dimension of social action. ‘Missions were the bold new way forward, independent of circuits, working in areas that circuits could not adequately deal with... Within such areas, mission centres would be established..., from which would be run social, philanthropic and rescue work.’¹ Nowadays, it is a part of a Methodist circuit, and runs a wide range of housing and community services with the mission statement: ‘WLM empowers people affected by homelessness, poverty and trauma to make positive changes in their lives.’²

Current work comprises: a centre helping street homeless people; the housing and support of ex-military homeless people; an affordable professional counselling service; a registered care home specializing in care for people with alcohol dependency; an ‘Approved Premise’ under the Ministry of Justice offering rehabilitation for those leaving prison to transition successfully and safely back in to the community; and a community hub providing communal accommodation for low-income workers, offices for local start-ups and a wide range of support and education opportunities, particularly around financial resilience, for local residents.³ Thus the context I work in is complex: based across several locations in four London Boroughs; with people with varied and complex needs, of all faiths and none; a Baptist minister, in a Methodist circuit. I am never bored!

A key part of chaplaincy is being out there where the people are, not waiting for them to come ‘in’ to some religious/faith venue or meeting. Thus I have a regular round of visits to the WLM housing and community services, clocking up 183 separate visits in the year 2018/19, with a further 131 visits by my team of chaplaincy volunteers. What I actually do on any visit is shaped by the particular service structure and the requests of residents and users. You may find me eating with residents, playing pool, talking one to one about anything or facilitating a spirituality discussion group. At other times, I will facilitate, in response to discussions at a resident’s meeting, the celebration of the Christian festivals. And there are those times when I lead funerals and memorial services.

However, in Ann Morisy’s language much of the time I operate in the ‘foundational domain’, where ‘the task is to work or engage with people to build their confidence in the intimations they have of an enduring reality

¹ Brooks, A. (2010) *West End Methodism – the Story of Hinde Street*. London: Northway Publications. p.91

² West London Mission, (2018), *West London Mission 1887-2017: 130 years of Transforming Lives our Annual Report 2017*, available at www.wlm.org.uk/who-we-are/latest-annual-report [Accessed 8th November 2018] p. 2

³ For fuller information on WLM please see the website www.wlm.org.uk

and the non-material aspects of life'.⁴ I am not the expert in terms of responding to the needs our users and residents have that have brought them to us in the first place concerning benefits, housing, addiction, work, ill-health etc. We have trained project workers and key workers for that. Thus the practice of 'being with' can feel unproductive, and it can be a challenge for me and my chaplaincy volunteers to stay available when one feels useless and powerless. Chaplaincy itself can feel marginal.

Glimpses of the kingdom of God

As I engage in chaplaincy in WLM, I glimpse the kingdom of God in numerous ways:

- In raw truth – when people dare to name their pain and the hurt done to them and perhaps that they have done to themselves.
- In generosity of spirit – as those who have little materially, share generously with others in a similar situation.
- In honest prayer – as people tell me find solace in the Psalms because all human life, its joys and sorrows are there.
- In the struggle for justice – as people refuse to be stigmatized, labelled and reduced, but stand up for themselves, and others advocate for them.
- In the courage of living – of surviving against the odds, journeys across continents seeking sanctuary, and then surviving mentally when they find themselves on the streets.
- In the prophetic challenge - to society, charity and church structures that dehumanize
- In rich laughter – at some of life's absurdities.
- In patient waiting – for the humble to be exalted, and the job, the home, to be found.

I do not want to romanticize the challenges of surviving and even more of thriving for the people I work amongst. At the margins I also glimpse the face of evil both in systems that dehumanize and coerce but also that is focused only on the next fix at all cost, that responds with violent words and sometimes actions, that manipulates and deceives.

The danger is that people see only the negative things at the margins, but God and God's kingdom are evident just as much at the margins. Discerning quite where and how needs careful listening to the voices at the margins and a faithful 'being amongst'. In the words of R.S.Thomas in his poem 'The Kingdom',

'It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:'



⁴ Morisy, A. (2004) *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission*, New York/London/Harrisburg: Morehouse. P.151-152

Listening to the Margins

Let me tell you something about my week so far. On Monday I visited at the Haven, our residential care home for men who live with chronic alcohol addiction issues. I found a group of them in the garden, enjoying the sunshine. One of them had been given by his twin brother for his birthday, an Alexa machine and they were busy enjoying the novelty of asking it/her to play whatever tune they liked. Amidst a mix of Police, Wham and Queen, a request was made for Simon and Garfunkel's 'Like a bridge over troubled water'. As the song drew to an end, one of those gathered commented, 'those are great words, so true, you really need friends when you are down.' There were nods of agreement round the group. These are folk who literally know what it is to be down and out, on the street, with evening falling so hard. They also know the importance of friendship that sticks by you in difficult times.

Tuesday found me at Katherine Price Hughes Hostel, named after the wife of the WLM founder minister. It is run under a contract with the Ministry of Justice as an Approved Premise (AP). An AP is somewhere where some of those people who have done the more serious crimes and served significant time in prison may be required to come and live for the first three months of their release on licence as they seek to transition safely back into society. I had two new residents to meet as part of their induction. Introducing myself, checking if they had any religious or faith needs for us to be aware of as they move in with us, explaining I was available to them as a listening ear if they ever wanted to make use of me. I had ten minutes with the first new resident, he thanked me for seeing him which, as it is a mandatory meeting as part of their induction, was a refreshing change from those who begin by telling me they have nothing to say to me! I have become adept at diffusing initial hostility! He didn't count himself as particularly religious or having a faith, but talked about importance of his family. The second new resident I met was keen to tell me his experience of God looking out for him. The first time he had come out on licence he had hit the drink and drugs again after issues about reconnecting with his daughter, so he had ended up recalled to prison. 'Best thing that happened,' he said, 'God was looking out for me, only then did I hit rock bottom and ask for help'. He went cold turkey, and he went to Mass and the AA group meetings inside. 'God was there for me' he said. Now out, he had a letter of introduction from the RC Deacon from the chaplaincy team to give to local parish priest, and he had attended AA meetings every day, and he was back in contact with his daughter.

And if I had been working in London today and tomorrow you would find me loitering with the intent of keeping the possibility of the transcendent alive:- at our drop in centre teaching computer skills and money management; at our hostel for ex-military personnel who have ended up homeless, as well as at our centre working with people who currently sleep rough on the streets. Loitering with intent, joining in alongside what is going on, and listening for the moments in the conversation and the silences where people disclose something of their hopes, dreams, values, truths as they have experienced them.

“[I loiter] with the intent of keeping the possibility of the transcendent alive”

This for me is listening to the margins. Spending quality time where people are, and letting them say what they want to in their own words. And then just sometimes, it is about speaking words of hope and affirmation that acknowledges the worth of the unique individual before me as in the image of God, and shares with them on their journey seeking fullness of life.

Wisdom in the margins

LUCY ZWOLINSKA does community development work for the Methodist Church in Gateshead, encouraging Churches to play an active part in building thriving and interdependent communities. She is also part of Gateshead's first Poverty Truth Commission, which seeks to place experts by experience of poverty at the heart of decision making and challenging power in Gateshead.

Jeremy Kyle's ITV show had just been cancelled when we met for *In the Thick of It*. One of the ladies I work with, whose mental health has suffered at the hand of the benefit system for many years, asked me that week: 'if they've cancelled Jeremy Kyle because of one suicide, when are they going to cancel Universal Credit?'

It's wisdom like this that sums up for me the importance of listening at the margins; those who experience oppression at the hand of broken systems are best placed to critique and bring solutions to the brokenness.

I glimpse the kingdom of God when that topsy turvy kingdom hierarchy takes hold and the marginalised are able to speak truth to power.

Our conversation led me to think about how the margins is a really shifting space. The personal story that was shared of experiencing poverty and instability was a reminder that there is no immunity from marginalisation and that it is something we can shift towards and away from.

Perhaps this asks us to constantly reassess where the margins are, so that we can continue to realign our listening, our solidarity and our commitment to those who are most marginalised.

We also spoke about the importance of active listening at the margins and how that often leads to surprising results. Ruth spoke about what this looks like with people who experience poverty and homelessness in West London. In the area I work in this looks like football bringing refugee and local children together and pop-up ice-cream parlours. This was put into practise when a personal story was shared by someone of her own experience of her time at the margins, and it did feel as though this led to a real shift in the discussions we were having. To have had these conversations without voices from the margins would have felt hypocritical.

It could be my story

ELLEN GREENHAIGH is involved with Church at The Centre in Bolton.

In my everyday life, I don't talk or think about being on or in the margins, and I don't think like that about the people I'm slowly learning to share my life and time with. But, like many of them, the truth I sometimes forget is that in a few months, a few days, another year or so [the personal story of marginalisation shared at the event] or something like it could be mine. In my journey there have been people who have quietly offered harvest gifts or something to take home to help my health, well being and finances.

**“If they've cancelled
Jeremy Kyle because of
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they going to cancel
Universal Credit?”**



We listened to work with people on the margins in a shelter for abused women, in a halfway house for released prisoners, and in a safe house for people working out of substance use. We heard about poverty truth and reconciliation and about growing confidence through gardening. And we heard a harrowing testimony of living in the complex deprivation from universal credit.

ELIZABETH GRAY-KING

Both victims and oppressors

ANNA RUDDICK is a community theologian from Urban Life.

We have explored and heard a wide variety of situations and circumstances in a range of contexts. But we have named marginality across them all: Marginalised means stuck and trapped, invisible and ignored, unheard, not expected to do anything, ASHAMED.

It strikes me that we're probably all better at naming our marginality than at naming our power.

The dynamics of victim-hood and scapegoat have threaded through our conversations. We feel often like the victims, and perhaps like the margins are scapegoated in our society.

Paulo Freire names the truth that we all are both victim and oppressor, to separate the two into different camps doesn't do justice to the complexity and mixed-ness of our humanity. We have expressed anger and pain today. Our own and that of others we care about.

Perhaps for those of us in ministry in marginalised situations we can accompany one another in shame and shaming situations. Believing in and seeing the personhood of others when they themselves cannot, when they are mired in shame.

VISUAL NARRATIVE

Feedback from World Café open table discussion told of anguish experienced from institutional church. We heard that to bring Christ to people in the margins, needs must be met first, that truth needs to be told and the lies about those in the margins needs to be challenged. To challenge, we need to understand where the power operates. We heard about strength in small churches and groups, challenging the notion of size as indicator of success.

ELIZABETH GRAY-KING



MISSION IN THE MARGINS

Everyday Church in action

ANGELA HUGHES is URC Community Minister at Stainbeck Church, Leeds.

Stainbeck Church is a small but active URC congregation of 40/50 members situated two miles north of Leeds city centre. It is surrounded by mixed housing estates including pockets of high deprivation and cultural diversity. One estate has a high percentage of Asian residents and includes an Islamic Study Centre. There is an increasing African presence with occasional asylum seekers and refugees.

The Church is active within its LCC (Leeds City Council) Cluster and has a significant role within it. The Minister chairs a local Interagency meeting which draws together all those who work in the area including statutory services and local churches. The Church also has good links with two of the local schools – one of these is a through school *i.e.* Primary and High.

Over the past 15 years the church, which was built in 1931, has made alterations to its building which has been opened up, made accessible, comfortable and as welcoming as possible. Alongside this the congregation has gradually embraced this model of ‘community ministry’ where we work *with* the local community for the well-being of all. The relationships that are made enable trust to be built and ultimately faith to be shared. People may not ‘come to faith at that point’ but the love of God will be seen and felt and have touched them in some way. This is the way our Mission Outreach works.

Along the way we have established an ecumenical charity ‘**Interact: Church and Community Partnership**’. This partnership is ‘owned’ by the churches (currently 5) and is overseen by a Community Worker. It enables many opportunities for our congregations to get to know those living around us in ways that are non-threatening and fun.

We are also part of another ecumenical charity ‘**Thrive Leeds**’ which enables some of our youth and children’s work including Messy Church.

Stainbeck runs a weekly **Community Café** within which we have a small project called ‘Solutions’. A very small team of people who can work any in need of any kind – whether through Universal Credit, debt, unemployment, mental health – or simply loneliness.

We also have a **Lunch Club** for the elderly and receive many referrals from the local Medical Centre.



We are a member of **Leeds Citizens** (linked to Citizens UK) through which we have enabled local residents to lobby our councillors and appropriate local Council Officers to finance the rebuilding of dangerous steps, install lighting and handrails to make the estate a safer and more attractive place to live. Residents have learnt skills of communication and negotiation which have changed their lives.

I call the work we do ‘Community Ministry’ and I am a ‘Community Minister’. As a church we are very ordinary and everyday but through God’s grace some of the outcomes are ‘extra-ordinary’ and our work becomes very ‘special’.

Ann Morisy’s 1997 book *Beyond the Good Samaritan* remains my ‘go-to book’: a useful, even prophetic book for emerging churches who want to be serious about their missional responsibility and engage with community needs.

In this context, I see glimpses of the kingdom of God when lives are changed or transformed.

- A young man deeply in debt, unable to cope with his alcoholic partner or their three children could hardly look us in the eyes when he first made his way to the Café. A few weeks later when debt was being managed, loan sharks exposed, partner in rehab, he was confident and smiling and ready to search for a job. That first visit was life-changing for him.
- A young woman, depressed, children in trouble at school, partner in prison thought that nothing could get better ever again. Now a volunteer with us she is managing her family, her partner now at work and a new start is possible.
- Perhaps a bus fare to the job centre, a food bank voucher, someone to speak for them to doctor, housing officer or DWP, support with form-filling or access to computer, or simply a listening ear – lives are changed.

Sometimes long-term support is needed, but often it is the timely word or action that makes all the difference.

Making a lasting contribution

SIMON LOVEITT has been a Church Related Community Worker for the United Reformed Church for 30 years, and currently works on the Manor estate in Sheffield.

Church Related Community Work has been around in the URC since 1981, and has been recognised as a parallel ministry to the role of Minister of Word and Sacraments since 1987. It is a ministry of engagement and transformation, both within the Church and in the community, using Community Development principles. In England, Wales and Scotland, there are currently 15 CRCWs in post, and three at various stages of training.

Early in my ministry, I was asked two challenging questions:

- Who would notice if the church wasn’t there in your community?
- And who would care?

“Early in my ministry, I was asked two challenging questions. Who would notice if the church wasn’t there in your community? And who would care?”

These questions have been the drive for me to try to ensure that the Church makes a significant and lasting contribution to its society. In 30 years of ministry, my work has been diverse and wide ranging, including working on: financial inclusion, neighbourhood regeneration, environment, community cohesion, neighbourhood partnerships, community safety, housing, community celebrations, youth work and developing and sustaining community centres, Messy Church, parade services, and theological reflection.

The Manor is a sprawling ex Council estate, south east of the City centre of Sheffield, with a population of about 15,000 people. The Manor and Castle Ward is currently the most deprived ward in Sheffield. The challenge to the Church on such an estate is how you can still be relevant and make a difference to the lives of those living there.

It became clear, over 8 years ago, that an ecumenical approach was the best way to achieve our aims. The Manor Church and Community Project was established in 2013, by the Anglican, Methodist and United Reformed Churches (with Trustees from each denomination and the local community) to develop and support the community in the Manor area of Sheffield. I was appointed in 2014, and a £500,000 project redeveloped the William Temple Church building into a multi-use community resource and worship centre.

I hope we are one of the spiritual, pastoral and prophetic hubs in our community: a place of hope, of transformation, of community. Among the things we are involved in are:

- Development of activity sessions for families which includes crafts, worship and food attracting between 50 and 100 children and parents per event, and Stay, Play and Eat holiday activities, with our partners (Nursery and MASKK) which again attracts between 50 and 100 parents and children.
- Taking leadership roles in the development of uniformed organisations (Beavers, Cubs and Scouts). This is based at St. Swithun's Church, replacing a chaotic and dysfunctional youth club. Sixty boys and girls attend Beavers, Cubs and Scouts held on two nights.



- Manor After School Kids Klub (MASKK), which I chair. Now based at Temple Park Centre, it provides after school clubs, holiday provision and special needs activities for young people.
- Run, with our partners the S2 Food Poverty Network, the foodbank for the Manor community. In the sixth richest country in the world, there shouldn't be a need for this! However, the foodbank distributed 55 tons of food to 9,400 people in 2018. We work very closely with the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Sheffield Credit Union to provide practical support to the Foodbank clients. In April 2018, an S2 Food Club was launched, helping some of our long-term clients to get back on their feet.
- Environmental Projects, such as community clean-ups with RSLs and community, and putting hanging baskets on shops and community buildings across the Manor.

What's worked well, and what have you struggled with?

What has worked well has been our approach to partnership – we don't do anything in the community on our own. Community celebrations, such as a bonfire and Everyone's Festival/Family Fun Day, have also been a great success.

We struggle with a lack of Trustees, and people leading chaotic lives.

Many in the community are 'on the margins'. The Manor is the most deprived community in Sheffield, and that is despite the huge development of new housing taking place – 2,000 houses in the next few years. There is a 'revolving door of support'. But the community is changing. There is new housing on sale for £150,000, or over £1,000 per calendar month in rent, alongside social housing. There are 12 different Residential Social Landlords (RSLs) which makes it challenging to have a co-ordinated approach.

There is certainly a lack of understanding in the Church (outside of the local context) of what a CRCW is and does, though this has improved. Churches are waking up to the need to engage in their community.

What does/should 'being Church' look like in a marginal context?

- Any community involvement is great.
- Be concerned about, and engaged in your community.
- Be the spiritual, pastoral and prophetic hub in your community.

VISUAL NARRATIVE

How is the church built in the margins? People do what they do - hospitality, conversation, companionship, partner working, eating together anywhere and at any time. They engender trust and hold space no matter how long or how difficult it is. They know it's hard work, akin to sowing seed in concrete. In the margins, the people of Jesus know that because they are gathered, Jesus is there; that it is God's work not theirs.

ELIZABETH GRAY-KING

God invites

we, the body, are

Jesus

it's just what we Do

when they



Trust they ASK



the Kingdom of God is like sowing in concrete

the only pattern Jesus left us was a meal

holding space

Ministering in the margins

Roo Stewart interviews **KIRSTY MABBOTT**, a URC Church Related Community Worker in Coventry.



Roo: Kirsty, we first met at the 'In the Thick of It' event when you so movingly shared some of your story. I'd like to hear some more about it, but first can you tell us a little of what your current role entails?

Kirsty: I'm the CRCW [Church Related Community Worker] minister in Coventry working with two churches: one in the city centre and the other in east Coventry. My projects and ministry are diverse because of the different demands of the two areas. In the city-centre church, I work with the homeless and vulnerably housed, refugees and migrants, and families who are disadvantaged financially. In the community I support in east Coventry, deprivation is more hidden; families are struggling but the local authority doesn't deem the area a high priority.

Roo: Do you do this on your own?

Kirsty: The church is active with the local community and I feel well supported by small congregations who are very keen to help. The people in the congregations are mostly older, but they are committed. We host vulnerable homeless people in-house at one of the churches three times a week and take part in the Coventry Winter Night Shelter. We have formed a good working relationship with the council. I am always on the lookout for more help.

Roo: What are the highlights of working with those often kept on the margins of society?

Kirsty: It's easier to come alongside the homeless and vulnerably housed than people who are comfortable. There can be trust issues – caused by a social care system that continues to let them down – but once you've gained that trust, people will very easily open up about what's going on in their lives. They've already hit rock-bottom and feel helpless, so they look for people who can really help. They then ask you what your motivation is for helping them: not out of suspicion but out of genuine surprise that you would want to help them.

Roo: And what are some of the challenges?

Kirsty: In east Coventry, where deprivation is more hidden, there is a level of pride and often an unwillingness to ask for help even though some could do with support. There is little sense of community – and no community centre. I'm suspicious that these issues are linked! So we are creating a sense of community from scratch and it's not that easy.

We also have the frustration of getting caught up in red tape when we try to help people. Like, on Wednesday night, we had a young man who couldn't access help from a shelter because he had lost his and was forced to sleep rough.

“We are creating a sense of community from scratch and it's not that easy”

Transforming the unjust structures of society

NIALL COOPER is director of Church Action on Poverty.

The Old Testament Prophets, Isaiah, Nehemiah, Jeremiah, Micah... all used incredibly strong language to challenge violence and unjust ways in which the rich and powerful steal from and persecuted poorer and more vulnerable members of society. Much stronger language than we would choose to use today:

You destroyed his vineyard and filled your houses by robbing the poor. ‘You have crushed my people and rubbed in the dust the faces of the poor.’ *Isaiah 3:13-15*

Jesus of Nazareth was equally not shy of challenging injustice, of calling out Zacchaeus the tax collector for stealing from the poor, of turning over the tables in the temple, and of proclaiming good news to the poor.

And the Early Church, as we are told in the reading from Acts, “shared their possessions in common and there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and it was distributed to anyone who had need.”

Jim Wallis, the US preacher and activist, tells this story how as a young theology student he sat up all night marking all the passages in the Bible that referred to poverty and social justice – and then proceeded to cut them out of the Bible. And when he’d done so, the Bible literally fell apart.

We don’t need to do that today, because the Bible Society have done the job for us – at least in terms of highlighting all the passages that refer to poverty and social justice, in *The Poverty and Justice Bible*. They are virtually on every page.

So much so that the late Bishop of Liverpool, David Sheppard, famously wrote a book entitled *God’s Bias to the Poor*. More recently, Pope Francis has talked about the need to ‘become a poor church for the poor.’

But what are we to make of the challenge of becoming a poor church for the poor? And what does it mean to transform unjust structures of society in the UK in 2019?

At Church Action on Poverty we ask ourselves these questions of ourselves – and of people we work with – all the time. Some of the ones that come up frequently are:

- Injustices in the benefits system, in the delays, errors and benefit sanctions which frequently leave people with no money for weeks – or months – at a time.
- Injustices in relation to housing and homelessness, that are leading to increasing numbers of people sleeping rough on the streets of Manchester, in the midst of a housing boom – but the only housing that seems to be built are luxury apartments that are way beyond the pocket of even people on reasonable wages.
- Injustices in the education system, which treat any young person who isn’t able to make 5 A-C grades at GCSE as a failure at the age of 16.

- Injustices in the way people with mental health problems are treated as second class citizens by the NHS.
- Injustices in the way that anyone on benefits are labelled lazy, scroungers, and cheats.

One of the worst things poverty and injustice can do is to take away people's dignity; their sense of hope and their belief that they have any ability to change things.

“One of the worst things poverty and injustice can do is to take away people's dignity”

In our response we must avoid making matters worse. There is a kind of response which only talks about people in negative terms. Funders, in particular, love you to describe how ‘bad’ a place is, before they are willing to consider giving you any funding.

The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth is that God is on the side of the downtrodden. God is on the side of those suffering injustice. God is on the side of those who society would count as worthless.

And more than that, every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. Every person is created in the image and likeness of God. Rich or poor. Man or woman. Black or white. Christian, Muslim or of no particular religion. Every person is valued equally in the sight of God.

As a Church, our mission is to celebrate this fact. As a Church, our mission is to recognise the value in every human being, the creativity in every human being, the love and the capacity to be loved in every human being. To recognise that God is already present and active in places that society considers to be marginal, economically useless, ‘hard to reach’ or hopeless is truly radical.

The fourth mark of mission – ‘to transform unjust structures of society’⁵ – is not about charity. It isn't about handing out food parcels or second hand clothes. You'll be glad to know it isn't about setting up more projects, when you're already too busy with what you are doing.

“[We need to] ask difficult questions of people and institutions that are responsible for acting unjustly, and be bold in creating space for people to make change happen”

It demands us getting to know our neighbours – whatever their race, creed or colour. It demands that we listen to their stories, build friendships and take action together. It demands that we ask difficult questions of people and institutions that are responsible for acting unjustly, and be bold in creating space for people to make change happen. To transform the unjust structures of society demands that we accept that the church itself needs to be transformed in and through the process.

But above all, it demands that we stand back from the urge to ‘be the solution’ in order to take seriously the fact that it is those who have personal experience of poverty and marginalisation who have the deepest insights into what needs to change. As the saying goes ‘Nothing about us without us is for us’.

⁵ www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx

Nothing About Us Without Us is For Us

NIALL COOPER, director of Church Action on Poverty, reports on the Salford Poverty Truth Commission.

The Poverty Truth Commission is a unique and powerful way of developing new insights and initiatives to tackle poverty, developed in Glasgow and Leeds over the past decade, and now being replicated in more than a dozen cities across the UK. The key principle behind a Poverty Truth Commission is that decisions about poverty must involve people who directly face poverty. The process is a culmination of relationship building, fact finding and deep thinking over an 18 month period between people with a direct experience of poverty and civic and business leaders within the city.

The Salford Poverty Truth Commission, sponsored by the Bishop of Salford and the Salford's Elected Mayor, was publicly launched in July 2016. It brought together 15 civic and business leaders with 15 people from across Salford who each had their own personal experience of poverty and 'truth' about poverty to share.

In preparing for the launch, the 15 'grassroots' Commissioners jointly produced a graphic map of the key issues and problems they experienced living in poverty in the City. Slap bang in the middle of the map was an image of Salford Civic Centre.

Debbie Brown, Salford Council's representatives on the Commission, recalled her reaction to seeing this at the launch: "The thing that stopped me in my tracks was a picture of Salford Civic Centre – the City Council was identified as cause of poverty. I was devastated! I hadn't expected to see that at all!"

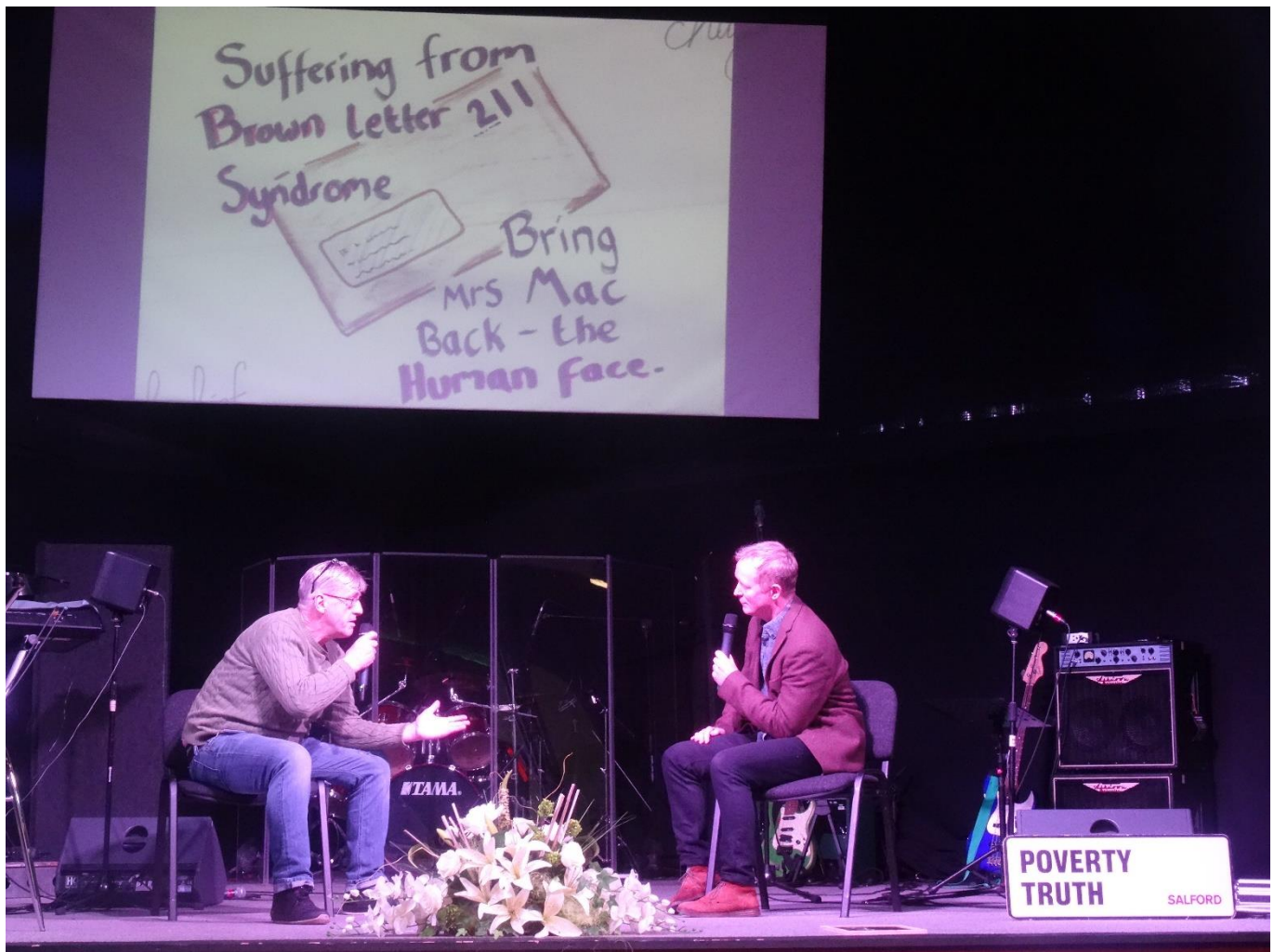
As the Commissioners shared their stories over the coming months, what transpired was that half a dozen of the grassroots Commissioners had traumatic experiences of bailiffs arriving at their front door – sent by Salford Council as a result of Council Tax arrears that had built up. One Commissioner recounted that she was distraught at how a Council Tax debt of less than £100 had mushroomed to over £1,000 once court charges and bailiffs fees had been added, putting her deeper into debt.

As Debbie said, "We heard some real heartbreaking stories of hiding and being afraid of what was going to happen: that was not the city I recognised and certainly not the Council I know".

In response to this, the Poverty Truth Commission brought together several of the grassroots Commissioners with Steve, the head of Council Tax collection in Salford, who was ultimately responsible for sending the bailiffs in. At the workshop Steve carefully explained the process for sending out a series of reminder letters to those who hadn't paid their bills.

"Yes, I remember those" said Patrick, one of the grassroots Commissioners. "They came in brown envelopes, and go straight into the draw. I can't open them. I suffer from 'brown envelope' syndrome."

The most shocking revelation from the workshop was that the first point of human contact that anyone would have during Steve's carefully designed debt collection process was a private bailiff knocking on your door.



Patrick's reaction to this was the key to changing Council thinking. "Back in the day, in Ireland, if I had any problems with the council, I would go and see Mrs Mack. That's what we need to get back to. Salford needs its very own Mrs Mack."

The workshop led to a number of significant changes to Salford's debt collection process – including swapping brown envelopes for white envelopes. As Debbie now says: "We've changed a lot already, taken some steps back to a person centred approach – running coffee morning drop-in sessions for any Salford resident who wants to talk through any problems with Council Tax face to face.

"We've already made a commitment that we won't be using enforcement agents or bailiffs any more for those who are in receipt of Council Tax reduction, and we will only be looking to enforcement agents as a very last resort."

Through the Poverty Truth Commission, the collective wisdom and insights of a group of people sharing their own personal 'truths' about poverty has kicked started a process of culture change at Salford City Council, towards a much more human and people-centred approach to engaging with its citizens.

As Patrick says: "I am not naïvely thinking we can change the world overnight, but if anybody anywhere else needed motivation, just look at what we have achieved in Salford."

What policy can break, policy can fix

PAUL MORRISON is a policy advisor at the Methodist Church and Joint Public Issues Team with particular responsibility for issues around the economy including poverty and inequality.

Announcements you may have missed:

Wednesday 27 March 2019: Government announces that life expectancy falls for the poorest women in the UK. Dropping life expectancy in peacetime is extraordinary. The gap in life expectancy between rich and poor is also increasing, as is the gap in healthy life expectancy. The poorest men are expected to have 19.1 years less healthy life than the richest.

Thursday 28 March 2019: 4.1 million UK children are trapped in poverty, 70% of them are in working families. The annual statistics on poverty in the UK show more poverty and deprivation – despite there being more people in employment.

Monday 8 April 2019: £1.5 billion is cut from social security benefits. The freeze in benefit levels rolls on, delivering huge cuts to in-work and out-of-work benefits. Overall, the freeze will hit around 27 million people but its worst effects are focused on poorer parents and of course their children.

This country has enough wealth so that its children do not need to be held back by poverty, and so that its poorer adults do not die younger. But this is what is happening – the statistics are clear.

The view of the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty is that we have arrived here because of political choices about how to distribute the money our economy produces. It is hard to put forward any other reasonable explanation.

“we have arrived here because of political choices about how to distribute the money our economy produces”

It is important to recognise that reductions in taxation and cuts to benefits broadly balanced each other out. The net result was not to reduce the deficit,⁶ it was to change how the fruits of the UK economy were distributed. The stated hope was to incentivise work and reward successful individuals and businesses.

We were repeatedly (and inaccurately⁷) told that “work is the best route out of poverty”. The aim was encourage people to work their way out of poverty. To aid this the Government even attempted to redefine poverty so that a person became less poor simply by getting a job even if they were no better off.

⁶ That happened through economic growth, improving tax revenues and by cutting local authority and departmental budgets.

⁷ Employment is important but 30% of families that move into paid work remain in poverty. Positive changes to family structure produce a higher rate of poverty exits. The reality is complex and the oversimplification of “work is the best route out of poverty” ignores really important information:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130314011914/http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrep157.pdf>

Working for your poverty

What happened next was essentially a nine year experiment testing a set of ideas about the causes of poverty. The results overwhelmingly tell us that those ideas were wrong. More importantly those families involved in the test have been permanently damaged.

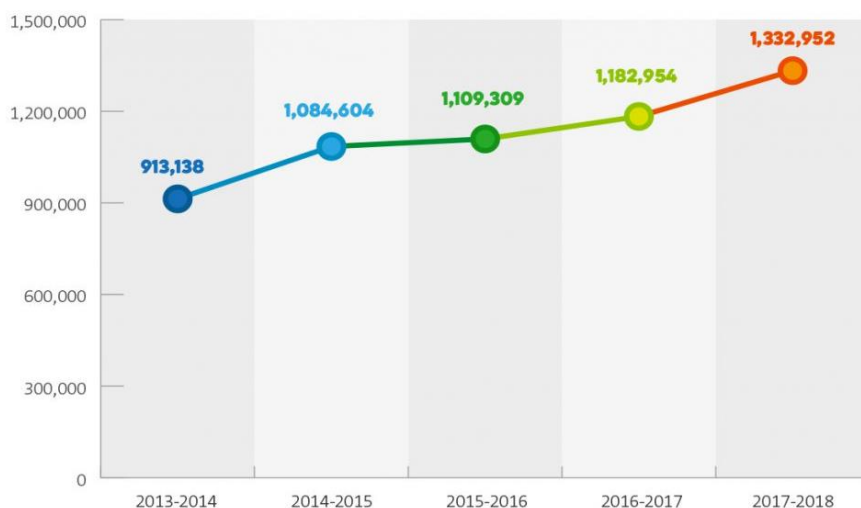
The hypothesis was that poverty was caused by poorer people not doing enough work. The key explanation for these families doing so little work was that benefits provided a disincentive. Sometimes this was viewed as a reasonable response to a bad benefit system and sometimes it was portrayed as the result of poorer communities suffering from a “culture of worklessness”.

Either way the solution was to cut benefits and hence “incentivise” work. Indeed the impact assessment of April’s £1.5 billion cut that takes around £200 from the poorest parents, states that a drop in income will actually **improve** children’s life chances by creating an incentive for their parents to **choose** to enter work.

Should these “incentives” not be sufficient to encourage people to look for work, harsh punishments called benefit sanctions were imposed. These take away the living expenses of families for up to 3 years in order to “end the something-for-nothing culture”.

The number of people in work did increase. I think that the gradually improving economy bringing employment rates back to the pre-2008 economic crisis trend offers a better explanation for this than welfare reforms. There is, however, no conclusive evidence either way as to the effect of the cuts on employment and the government didn’t look for any.

As the numbers in work increased, so did the numbers trapped in child poverty. More work was delivered at the same time as more deprivation, more homelessness, more destitution, more foodbank visits, and more poverty.



This graph shows rising numbers of visits to Trussell Trust foodbanks. There were over 1.3 million visits to Trussell Trust foodbanks in 2018. Trussell represent less than half of UK foodbanks.

In one homeless shelter I visited, they have changed the layout and routine so that their homeless clients can have a shower in the morning in order to get to work on time. **More work did not mean less poverty – it just means that people worked harder for their poverty.** Crucially it also means that those near the bottom recognise that they could be sucked under anytime and that the benefit system will not be there to rescue them. Of all the effects of welfare reform, that deep insecurity is to my mind the most corrosive.

An experiment where we knew the answer before we started

Take money from poor people and that will make them less poor. It is not a new idea – it is a variation of the beliefs of Rev Thomas Malthus who was instrumental in designing the 1834 New Poor Law – but it was never convincing unless you were really motivated to believe it.

The basic flaw was simple. Most family incomes are made up of two components: benefits and earnings. If you cut benefits then earnings must rise by at least the same amount or the family will get poorer. The government's own Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission did the maths. They made heroic estimates about the number of extra hours families could work and found that for many families, especially those with children, they couldn't work enough to earn the amounts cut from their benefits. In effect families would be working more but getting poorer.

The trend is clear. The majority of poverty is in working families. Today 70% of children experiencing poverty are in working families. Cutting benefits and pushing people towards work is a failed poverty increasing policy.

The way ahead

What policy can break, policy can fix. It is possible to use taxation, employment and benefits policies to ensure all children get a decent start in life. Once we ditch the fantasies that taking money away from poor families actually helps them, options open up.

The way forward is to drop the failed ideas and to look to the people who experience poverty. In 2010 the belief was it was disadvantaged people who needed their “culture changed”. Today it is clear that it is government and policy professionals (myself included) who need a “culture change”. We need to recognise that cold, even well intentioned, study of poverty while looking in from the outside is no longer an acceptable basis for policy design.



We need the humility to understand that our expertise in research and data is simply not enough to design good policy. We need to recognise that the expertise of those who experience poverty is essential at every stage of the process.

I have often invoked the phrase “made in God’s image” to say that all people deserve the dignity of having enough to make ends meet. And April’s £1.5 billion in cuts are a further affront to that dignity. Looking at how these cuts come about I am slowly understanding that to be made in God’s image must mean much more. It must mean being included, being valued and having the right to be a partner in the changes that affect our lives.

Seeking the Common Good

JENNY SINCLAIR is the founder director of Together for the Common Good (T4CG), a charity working to strengthen the bonds of social trust. She leads T4CG's body of volunteer associates who call and resource people across the churches to fulfil their vocational responsibility by putting Common Good principles into practice.

The beautiful landscape around Scargill seemed a world away from the pressures of the city, but there is hidden poverty even in those hills.

Jesus said, the poor will be with you always. The point is, we as Christians are called to be with people who are poor, to live a common life.

It takes people who are attentive to suffering to notice when someone is struggling. So it was a privilege to spend time with individuals dedicated to supporting communities who are routinely tuned out, ignored and sidelined by mainstream society. You understand what the impact of exclusion can mean. Exclusion can mean humiliation and it can lead to the breakdown of trust between estranged parts of society to the point where some sections feel utterly disenfranchised and discarded.

I was prompted to start Together for the Common Good eight years ago when I realised that the churches, in this time of social and political upheaval, have a key role to play to strengthen the bonds of social trust. The Church is called to be relational.

Our inspiration is rooted in a remarkable partnership between church leaders in Liverpool a generation ago. They disagreed a lot in terms of churchmanship and doctrine but saw the damage that the culture of individualism was doing to our life together. At a time of political division and social unrest, they resolved to work together for the good of the city, building bridges across divides.

What we draw from their legacy is their solidarity with disadvantaged communities and their instinct to build relationships between estranged groups to build a common life. They brought complementary gifts from their different Christian traditions: in particular Catholic Social Teaching and the principles of the Common Good, the hospitality of the 'outward-facing' church, the sense of a personal call to mission and responsibility, the idea of a church not only *for* the poor but *of* the poor.

But we are not naïve enough to inherit their legacy wholesale. This is a new time and it warrants new responses. Now, in a time of national upheaval, we think this inspiration is not only for church leaders, but the whole people of the Church.

Our work calls people to fulfill their vocational responsibility, by putting Common Good principles into practice and by working with others of different opinions, classes and backgrounds in shared purpose: in particular with people who have been held in contempt, ignored and dispossessed. To build a common life.

We build capacity through resources for churches and schools, through relationship building and events, and everything we do is in partnership.

But before rushing to action, it is vital to understand the causes behind our country's current malaise, to be clear about what is going on.

There is a dealignment between the political class and the governed. This is why our current political system is struggling to cope because the orthodoxies of left and right no longer reflect the values divides that have evolved over the past couple of decades.¹

We are in fact seeing the dying days of the old settlement, and given that it hasn't been working for large sections of our society, that may not be a bad thing, even if in the meantime we see all manner of morbid symptoms. What comes next must be a new settlement for the Common Good, and the churches can play their part to pave the way for that.

The breakdown in social trust that we are seeing is the result of decades of individualism. We've seen an extreme individualism on the right - the economic system has been captured by neo liberalism, which has seeped into all areas of our lives, commodifying human beings and nature, bringing degradation to our most vulnerable communities. And we've seen individualism manifested on the left - with an over-emphasis on rights that ferments a culture of grievance, the poison of identity politics, and eventually a 'war of all against all', driving people apart.

We have lost the language of mutual obligation and responsibility. In fact, individualism is contrary to our nature. Its effects are dehumanising. As Christians we know we are social beings. So frankly more is expected of us.

Therefore, before rushing to action, we need to check if what we are doing is properly anchored in our own tradition and not easily swayed by political ideologies.

In our tradition, each of us is called by God to contribute to build the Common Good according to our unique gifts and skills – one may be patient, another may have accountancy skills, one may be good at making things, while another may have the opportunity to shape the procurement policy of a big company. Everyone is needed to play their part in God's great creative participation.



But we are also called to bridge divides, to listen, and to work with people we may disagree with or who take a different view, or who are marginalised. We are the ones who should stay in the room when others give up. As Christians we must refuse to be tribal, to resist the comfort of the echo chamber and the culture of mutual contempt. As Christians, more is expected of us.

The Common Good pivots on a proper understanding of the human person and honours the sacred nature of every human being. This is our definition:

“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.”

If, as Christians we are to honour God’s call, then we are each called to be his hands and feet in the world in our own unique way, not to be like anybody else. That may involve being the kind of person who notices when someone is struggling, as Hilary the prison chaplain so movingly shared with us in her testimony about the young inmate for whom it mattered so much to be remembered. Or it may be the person who strives to set up a community land trust to ensure affordable housing in perpetuity. We are called in thousands of different ways. We need to make it easier for more people to see how they can play their part. Sometimes those who want to make a constructive contribution are put off getting involved, effectively disenfranchised, by a politicised activism which seems only to be for the usual suspects.

But there are many ways to answer God’s call to build the Common Good. Imagine where we would be if the gifts of all the people of the Church were released? That’s why our work calls and resources people to play their part by putting Common Good principles into practice.

For example, Subsidiarity, arguably one of the most important of the Common Good principles, is often the least well understood. It helps us understand that responsibility and decisions should be taken closest to those they affect; that a higher authority should only do things which cannot be properly done at a lower or local level. So, when we are running a soup kitchen we should honour the dignity of guests by allowing them to be involved, not just to come as a recipient.

Similarly, the state should not usurp the responsibilities of the family or the community. It is very revealing to run scenarios under the lens of Subsidiarity, from domestic decisions, to social action projects, to government policy. That is just one of the principles, but together, they form a powerful framework for good judgement which is firmly rooted in the gospel.

Common Good Thinking helps us reimagine a culture that overcomes division and puts people and communities first. It is a call to rehumanise, and on many levels. On the personal level by overcoming echo chambers and rebuilding trust, but also on a structural level by rehumanising systems that have lost their soul, working for just financial systems and influencing the culture. It is about building back more love into the system.

“It is about building back more love into the system”

Churches are called to a unique vocational responsibility too, each has a particular role to play depending on its location and who is involved. Churches in estates, as we heard from Andy, need to be with people where they are, to be responsive, providing sustenance as well as meaning and belonging. Churches are strategically well-placed to play a key role in building a society in which people are no longer marginalised but involved. Well-placed not only by virtue of crossing pretty much all socio-economic boundaries, but not least by being located in place and in every neighbourhood.

At *In the Thick of It* the most inspiring stories I heard involved building relationships with people in communities which have been pretty much abandoned, where the message is one of belonging and value: ‘you are needed’, or ‘we can’t do this without you.’

This is where I have seen glimpses of the kingdom of God. Where every human person is honoured, and with tenderness. To be human together in a shared life.

But many people across the churches do not realise the potential of the gift they have to give, when they could play their part at a critical time in our country, to help rebuild the bonds of social trust. Some modest capacity-building could make a big difference.

It’s our view that the Common Good is the antidote to individualism, and so we have designed a workshop to equip people across the churches. We call it *Here: Now: Us People* - and here’s why:

- **Here** - because we, the people of the churches, are each rooted in a place - and we act through our local institutions, projects and communities.
- **Now** - because we are at a critical point in the history of our country where the Church has a vital role to help heal divisions and strengthen civil society.
- **Us** - because we, as Christians of different traditions are called to take action, as individuals with unique vocational responsibilities, and together as allies, across our differences.

© Jenny Sinclair. For more information about the *Here: Now: Us People Common Good Training Workshop*, email workshops@togetherforthecommongood.co.uk or visit www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk

VISUAL NARRATIVE

*Finally, how can change happen from the margins?
The answer was beautifully simple - invite those who can change structures into the circles of those who are on the edge. Let there be space and time for the structure representatives to listen well without undue confrontation. It is deeply human nature to be relational, and change will occur when those relationships become collective voices. One person in the margins may make little impact; many persons, welcoming a structure agent to listen, can make an enormous impact. People on the margins can grow to believe that collectively, they can grow hope and that change will be real.*

ELIZABETH GRAY-KING



5. SUMMING UP

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Pulling the threads together

ANNA RUDDICK is a community theologian from Urban Life. These are her closing reflections from the event.

Marginality

Ironically, the Margins have offered us a good point to gather. It has struck me that in this space we have been inclusive of a variety of marginalities and marginal contexts: rural, urban, estate, town, issue-based, identity. Often at 'urban' events you are aware of some who are not sure their context 'counts' as urban, or who assert the poverty in the suburbs and the countryside – all true, and perhaps a natural consequence of defining a particular kind of context. Here the concept of marginality as we have defined it together has allowed us to share and talk across such divides, in that sense it has felt to me an inclusive space.

Personhood

I have heard in our conversations the importance of acknowledging the personhood of all and of aligning ourselves with others in our places. Becoming undefended churches on the same team as their communities and owning our own vulnerability. Vulnerability is vital because that's how connection happens. And owning our own power, that we, and each person in our communities is significant, what they do or don't do matters, we all make a dent in the world. And when we are connected we can make a bigger dent together against the people and systems which marginalise us.

Trust-worthy

I have heard a call to be 'trust-worthy'. To be a safe person for someone struggling against poverty to share themselves with. To do this we must love the truth of people, however messy, ugly or complicated it may be. And we must stay.

It takes courage to love and sit with the truth. But it also creates the possibility of change. In my research I saw that the combination of a challenge to our perspective i.e. exposure to difference, and an affirmation of our personhood i.e. acceptance as we are, creates room to experiment with new ways of seeing ourselves and the world. It creates the possibility of change.

Hope

I have heard moments of hope during our time together. Here are some of them:

Hope is: 'would you tell them I'm coming' – a person reaching out for other persons, and on receiving a positive response: 'I'll know someone'.

Hope is 'keeping the possibility of the transcendent alive in a situation'

Hope is shared humanity which says 'I'm there too', owning our own vulnerability and in doing so communicating to someone that they are not alone, that their circumstances are not because they are faulty.

Hope is humanising the DWP by inviting them to come and visit.

Hope is knowing that it's the Spirit's job not just ours.

Hope is holding onto the potential of light even when it seems dark.

Hope is the abundance of five thousand people fed and satisfied and basketfuls left over.

I'll finish by sharing a story told by Rob Bell. It is a story about the Rabbi from Krakow. This story originated in 18th-century Eastern Europe. The rabbi from Krakow, so the story goes, had a fantastic, magical, mystical dream. He had a vision. And in the rabbi from Krakow's dream, he had a vision of a bridge in a far away city, and under the bridge was buried a treasure. So he wakes up from his dream, he packs his stuff and heads out.



Many, many days, on an arduous journey, he makes his way to the city he saw in his dream. He gets to the edges of the river. He's standing in the weeds, and he's watching the bridge. He's trying to figure out where the treasure is buried.

One of the guards who stands sentry on the bridge, sees him in the bushes and says 'Hey, you there. Come out! What are you doing here?'

And the rabbi says, 'I had this dream. And in this dream I had a vision that under this bridge there's some treasure buried.'

And the policeman begins to laugh.

He bursts out laughing and says, 'You believe dreams like that? If I believed dreams like that, I would believe there's treasure hidden under the bed of some rabbi in Krakow.' At which point the rabbi says 'Thank you very much, sir.' And he heads home.

May you, my brother and sisters, be rescued from the lie that the peace, love, joy and grace of God is somewhere else... for somebody else. May you discover, taste, hear, see, experience that which is right here, Jesus said: 'Within.' Amen.

The margins as a meeting point

DAVE HERBERT is Moderator of the Northern Synod of the United Reformed Church. Here, he reflects on the experience of participating in the ‘In the Thick of It’ gathering.

A colleague once said to me if you want to get to the heart of the gospel go to the edges – socially, spiritually, economically. Speaking for myself, I was glad to be reminded of life beyond servicing and maintaining the core of institutional denominational life and to wander into the once familiar margins of the ‘vineyard’ of discipleship, that being ‘in the thick of it’ in terms of kingdom-living is as true on the margins as in the middle of the institutional church’s structures.

The conference felt like a unique opportunity to gather practitioners from across the country and from across a range of denominations, in many ways operating in fairly isolated contexts, being provided with an opportunity to be together and draw strength and inspiration from shared faith, values and perspectives.

In The Thick Of It was enhanced by its ecumenical nature – I drove to the conference with two Roman Catholic women as passengers, both engaged in long term community development work in their own communities in the North East, which gave me a chance to learn more of their work and mission context. That was even before the conference had begun!

The ecumenical makeup of the conference brought an added dimension as the different coloured threads of varied spiritual traditions and denominations made up a kaleidoscopic confluence of people who would not ordinarily have the opportunity to reflect on their varied ministries together.

It was refreshing to see how the gathering resisted the usual pattern of key note speakers, instead making space and creating mechanisms for us all to be able to listen to one another and capitalise on the gathered wisdom and collective experience of what it means to be in the thick of things yet on the margins, or even the margins of the margins. I sensed people found it most helpful to find a variety of platforms to share and to be heard.

The varied format of each session, with changing pace and dynamic, changing levels of collective and individual engagement, held attention and inhibited inner wanderings! The provision of theological and artistic reflection as the conference progressed, courtesy of Anna Ruddick and Elizabeth Gray-King, enhanced the depth and breadth of thinking over two days peppered with prayer and worship.

Cross pollination, mutual support, being heard, listening attentively and with compassion, made for an experience that was spiritually and vocationally enriching, encouraging, and enlivening.

The commonality of issues and challenges which emerged from disparate communities across the country confirmed widely reported shortcomings in the direction and implementation of social welfare policy. Could such gathered experience enhance the Church’s prophetic voice when it comes to speaking to government and enabling the cry of the poorest and most vulnerable to be heard? It was helpful to have a presence on the part of Church Action on Poverty and Heart Edge.

“Could such gathered experience enhance the Church’s prophetic voice when it comes to speaking to government and enabling the cry of the poorest and most vulnerable to be heard?”

Finally, Scargill House proved an ideal venue providing an appropriate size and setting, whose bucolic tranquillity provided a striking contrast to the environments from which most of us had come. Birdsong and bleating sheep provided the acoustic backdrop to our work, rather than sirens and the hum/white noise of urban life. There was a strong feeling of being hosted by the Scargill Community, a feeling brought into focus particularly when they sang a blessing at our concluding lunch as we all prepared to disperse until... when?

The conference truly felt like the gift it actually was, courtesy of the Council for World Mission. I did think as I came away that it had proved so helpful it would be good to find another opportunity somehow to enable this network to reassemble and reflect, recharge, and mutually reassure, thereby resourcing those vital ministries among some of the most marginalised of our communities in the UK today.



About the event organisers

Steve Summers is Church Related Community Work development worker for the United Reformed Church (URC). **Church Related Community Work (CRCW)** is a distinctive and recognised ministry of the URC concerned with bringing about positive change in local communities. CRCWs play a vital role in the denomination's community presence and engagement. URC CRCWs are called by God, professionally and theologically trained and then commissioned to enable the church to live out its calling. CRCWs use the principles of community development to respond to and challenge the issues facing their particular neighbourhoods and communities, working alongside others.



Website: www.urch.org.uk/our-work/church-related-community-workers.html

Simeon Mitchell and **Roo Stewart** are responsible for the URC's **Church and Society** programme. This helps the Church to speak prophetically about justice and peace issues in the public square, and supports local churches by providing resources and campaigns that help individuals make the links between faith, politics and social action. Most of this work is carried out through membership of the **Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT)**, a partnership between the URC, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Church of Scotland.



Church House, 86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT. Tel: 020 7916 8632.

E-mail: church.society@urch.org.uk. **Website:** www.jointpublicissues.org.uk

Participants

Participants in the gathering were associated with these key organisations and agencies:

Arthur Rank Centre	arthurrankcentre.org.uk
Catholic Association for Racial Justice (CARJ)	carj.org.uk
Christians Against Poverty	capuk.org
Church Action on Poverty	church-poverty.org.uk
URC Church Related Community Work	urc.org.uk/our-work/church-related-community-workers.html
CURBS	curbsproject.org.uk
Estates Evangelism Task Group	churchofengland.org/about/renewal-reform/estates
Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission	gatesheadptc.com
HeartEdge	heartedge.org
IBEX - the Churches working with the Economy	ibexsouthcoast.org.uk
Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT)	jointpublicissues.org.uk
Leeds Citizens	citizensuk.org/leeds
Life on the Breadline project	breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk
Methodist Diaconal Order	www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/the-diaconal-order/
National Estates Churches Network (NECN)	estatechurches.org
Together for the Common Good	togetherforthecommongood.co.uk
UNLOCK	unlock-urban.org.uk
Urban Expression	urbanexpression.org.uk
Urban Life	urbanlife.org
Walking the Way	urc.org.uk/our-work/walking-the-way.html
West London Mission	wlm.org.uk

Questions for reflection and discussion

These questions might help you and your organisation, community or church to reflect on the material and themes in this booklet:

1. Where and how can you listen to ‘people on the margins’ and share stories of how you see God active in your lives and contexts?
2. If you recognise that God is at work in marginalised places today, what do you think are the implications of this for mission, ministry and discipleship?
3. Can you identify a few people who you might meet with to reflect on how God is at work in your context, and explore the implications of Christian engagement with social exclusion?
4. How may ‘change from the margins’ be enacted in your networks and relationships?
5. What steps could you take to ensure that the voices and experiences of marginalised communities inform and enhance policymaking and practice in your organisation or denomination?
6. Are there conversations you could have and, if so, with who, that might lead to ‘redrawing the margins’ and considering how to take the issues forward in your context and at a wider level?
7. Can you identify some potential partnerships with local organisations, communities or churches that might develop contextually-specific responses to poverty and exclusion?
8. How might you seek and support those individuals, organisations and churches who serve or work alongside people in marginalised places? How might you strengthen the voices of such communities in your denomination or organisation’s wider advocacy work and community-based ministry?
9. How might you use this booklet to encourage and facilitate similar conversations between people engaged in ministry in different marginal contexts and to enable participants to learn from, encourage, inspire and support each other?
10. How could you challenge your church, denomination or organisation to prioritise the poorest communities in its mission and use of resources?
11. How can we redesign our economy, to create a society that really is just and compassionate?
12. Where and how could you share this booklet with a wider audience? *Additional copies can be requested from the Church & Society team at URC House – see page 38 for contact details.*



“The truth comes from the edges of society. Jesus’ reality is affirmed and announced on the margins, where people are ready to understand and ask new questions.” RICHARD ROHR
