

Justice, Empowerment & Faith: the future direction for Christian social action

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‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.’ Jeremiah 6:16

Introduction: Wednesday evening, November 2023, South London

Two weeks ago, I was running my church’s drop-in evening meal called *The Vine*. Each week, we have between 20 to 30 local people coming along. It is a very simple format: we chat, play games, have a quiz and eat a meal together. It’s a modest but positive contribution to our community’s well-being.

Our guests always have a wide range of needs but what struck me forcefully this week was the desperation of many of our guests and the increasing ratio who are rough sleeping in the freezing conditions. One of our guests who is street homeless was struggling with a severely infected leg wound. We phoned a doctor who is part of the church congregation to ask for advice, renewed his disintegrating dressing and sent him off to A&E.

I have been working with people affected by homelessness for a long time but I found myself deeply affected on Wednesday night by the scale of the issues we are witnessing. I am not naïve enough to think we can meet all the needs presented but the guests’ injury seemed to be a tragic metaphor: so many churches and charities are trying their best to apply first aid to the terrible wounds inflicted by poverty and homelessness.

The first-aid is an illustration of much needed compassion and kindness. But we also need to think more strategically and intentionally about what is happening in our communities and what will address the core underlying issues.

As the coordinator of *The Vine* I can be tempted to see ‘success’ as lots of guests coming along and a full rota of volunteers enjoying their service to the community. And both these factors are good things. But we need to look deeper at what these forms of project reveal about the state of our country and how our response should be best channeled.

We must avoid what the prophet Jeremiah accused the religious of his day:

‘They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. “Peace, peace,” they say, when there is no peace.’ (8:11)

The rise of social action

Despite the on-going decline in church-going, the last 20 years has seen a significant rise in church-based social action initiatives. Food banks, pantries, community supermarkets, larders, debt centres, Street Pastors, night shelters, warm hubs and community meals have all expanded at significant rates. The

number of new homeless charities has rapidly expanded with the growth of church-based night shelters and more generally, there has been a boom in Christian-led initiatives engaging in poverty.

I have been involved in this growth through my professional roles. I worked for 8 years for the Shaftesbury Society and led their Community Mission team whose aim was to help urban churches set up community projects. When I was CEO of the West London Mission (part of the Methodist Church) I helped set up the Westminster Churches Night Shelter. And now my work for [Hope into Action](#) is to house people affected by homelessness in partnership with local churches.

In many ways, I applaud this growth of initiatives because its evidence of a growing social conscience, especially within the evangelical tradition of the church. Thirty years ago, I used to attend events such as Spring Harvest and hear very little relating to poverty or community engagement. But times have changed with a significant shift in a theological commitment to addressing poverty and a host of practical models which churches can replicate.

Just over twenty years ago, Faithworks, fuelled by the energy and vision of Steve Chalke galvanised and popularised the social action movement. It was a high profile addition to the networks of agencies such as the Shaftesbury, Church Urban Fund, Church Action on Poverty and the Churches Community Work Alliance. It coincided with the New Labour years when a significant amount of money was invested in communities.

Since 2010, in the wake of austerity and David Cameron's 'Big Society', there has been the rise of franchises and replicable models such as Street Pastors and Christians Against Poverty's debt centres. [The Cinnamon Network](#) have championed these and a host of other models for community engagement.

The largest and most politically significant of these franchises has been the the Trussell Trust's food bank network. I first heard about food banks when I met Chris Mould at a conference back in 2004, but I never imagined the scale and significance they would achieve.

But the growth of such initiatives and schemes must pose questions. I believe that those involved in Christian social action need to be self-critical and honest and grapple with questions such as:

- Has these forms of social action been effective in reducing poverty?
- Have they equipped Christians with a greater sense of justice?
- Have they been an effective way of witnessing to the Christian faith?

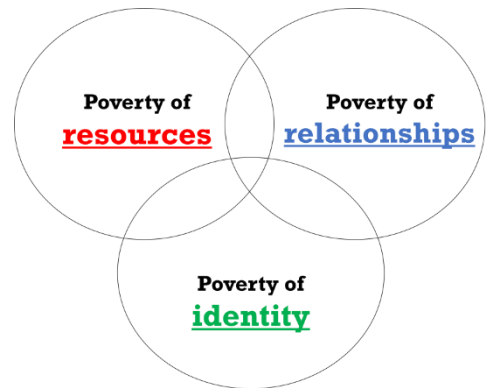
I believe that the growing poverty, homelessness and destitution in the UK means we are standing at the crossroads that Jeremiah speaks of. What is the 'ancient way' that God calls us to seek and walk in? What should be the future direction for Christian social action?

After discussing the nature of UK poverty, I will highlight three 'sins' of social action and then propose three ways forward.

1. Defining the problem: the nature of UK poverty

Firstly, I believe we need a holistic view of poverty which understands the particular texture of the needs our communities face.

Since 2008, I have used this 3-way analysis of poverty as I reflected on the nature of the poverty I have witnessed and worked to address. Whilst these three factors are seen *in extremis* within rough sleeping they are also evident in less stark ways in the local communities in which I have lived, volunteered and gone to church.



Material poverty, a fundamental lack of **resources** in terms of low income, zero-hour contracts and insecure employment, unaffordable accommodation, debt and the rising cost of living is the most fundamental and obvious factor. These are the factors where the concept of justice is most relevant because they can be affected by the decisions of local and national government. Structural and systemic change always involves the reallocation of resources.

But poverty is deeper than inequity of resources. **Relationships** are increasingly fragile and vulnerable as the ties and commitments that bond families have been weakened. And isolation and loneliness within communities has reached epidemic proportions. These are issues which government action is far less able to directly influence.

Of course, these forms of poverty are all in dynamic relationship to each other because they overlap and inter-relate. If you are materially poor then it places pressure on your relationships. And relationship breakdown deeply affects the resources you have access to.

As people will spot in my choice of font colour, the emphasis and priority given to each is connected to our politics. Those on the left tend to emphasise poverty as chiefly a matter of how resources are distributed, whereas those on the right tend to emphasise the role of relationships and families.

But most deeply of all, people are increasingly affected by a poverty of **identity**, a crisis in terms of how they see themselves and value their own worth. This is evidenced in the growth of illnesses related to people's mental health and struggles for emotional well-being. Perhaps more than ever, many lack a sense of hope, purpose and meaning in their lives.

If we are committed to addressing poverty in the UK today then we must be attentive to the particular dynamics and texture of this fusion of poverties. To do so requires us to be brave and to break out of the silos of conservative and liberal acceptability.

I believe the willingness to break these false dichotomies and challenge tribalism should be a key hallmark of Christian discussions on poverty. After all, the Bible has much to say about both economic justice *and* the vital importance of relationships and family life.

2. The 'sins' of social action

Social action and community engagement is generally viewed positively by others as charitable and kind. But a hallmark of Christian discipleship should be a willingness to examine the weaknesses of our approaches and be self-critical about the effectiveness of what we are involved in. Sin plagues all human endeavour and our social action efforts are not exempt.

We particularly need to watch out for the self-satisfied glow which easily clusters around efforts to help others. The ‘mainstreaming’ of social action has led to the popularisation of simplistic sound-bites such as ‘the least, the last and the lost’ and the temptation of superficial approaches to social action. I have also seen ‘successful’ community projects become a source of unhelpful pride for some churches.

More deeply, we also need to question the underlying assumption that generosity and good intentions inevitably lead to positive outcomes. The reality is that helping resolve complex social problems is complex. All forms of interventions create ‘moral hazards’ which can *displace* problems rather than actually deal with them. We need to be honest that authentic transformation, whether for individuals or communities, is hard. In order for our efforts to be effective and sustainable, our practical displays of *grace* must be accompanied by a commitment to *truth*.

a) The disconnection between charity and justice

The Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara famously said:

‘When I give bread to the poor they call me a saint. But when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist’

It’s a quote which captures the inescapable tension between charity and justice.

As Christian forms of community action have grown it is common to hear people describe it in terms of ‘social justice’ But most of the growth has been within the *charitable* framework: people giving their time and money to benefit those in need on a voluntary basis.

These charitable forms of generosity are often applauded by those with social and economic influence. And this is often because the charitable emphasis does not call for a fundamental shift in power. Power remains in the same hands and can actually be enhanced by the dynamic of charity. Jesus spoke of this dynamic in Luke 22:25:

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that.”

We need to ask how the growth of social action connects to the *underlying issues* which create the needs in the first place? How much does it challenge the social and economic policies which increase poverty?

In the Old Testament, it is *laws* relating to harvesting, selling land and debt which limited economic inequity and enshrined justice for widows, orphans and aliens. It is a matter of mandated *justice* and not just optional charity. And the Biblical prophets, such as Amos, Isaiah and Micah castigate Israel’s social conditions in these terms:

‘They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed’ (Amos 2:7).

The underlying Christian commitment should be a commitment to greater justice. Even if their main focus is practical and charitable, social action initiatives should *contribute* to the public debate about the underlying issues which are exposed through their work. Inevitably, this involves engagement in politics.

Food banks and night shelters are two forms of largely church-based emergency provision which have grown rapidly in the last 15 years. And both are largely run by people who acknowledge that it's a tragedy that such services need to exist at all.

And the Trussell Trust have *politicised* the voluntary efforts of their food bank network by publishing their statistics around food bank usage and their research about what has driven the rise of food bank usage. And the reason these statistics are powerful is because the numbers connect to raw experience. These are not desk-top reports written by think tanks but conclusions drawn from front line engagement.

In homelessness, the fundamental injustice and inequity of the UK housing market lies at the heart of our housing crisis. Charitable action is needed but these local efforts need to combine to speak collectively about the need for more affordable accommodation in the UK. It is encouraging to see the growth of Citizen's UK, which has engaged a huge number of people in community organising where collective influence is brought to bear on issues concerning local people.

We need to accept the premise that our practical work has political implications. We should be prepared to speak out or contribute to voices which are focussed on how systems and policies need to change. As Desmond Tutu put it:

'Christians should not just be pulling people out the river. We should be going upstream and seeing who is pushing them in.'

b) *Dependency: the disconnection with empowerment*

The growth in poverty leads to a growth in responses to these needs. And the hard truth is that not all these responses are helpful or effective in addressing the problems. This is a sensitive subject because often there are very good motives and strong faith which lie behind people's generosity and kindness but there is also a naivety about what actually helps.

A huge amount has been learnt in the last few decades about what helps majority world countries overcome the poverty and challenges they face. The book *Dead Aid* by Dambisa Moyo (2009) argued powerfully that 'aid' given from richer countries actually served to disempower poorer countries and make their economies and poverty worse.

And there is something similar that we have to grapple with in our response to UK poverty. In homelessness, the emphasis on going onto the streets to give out food and practical resources often falls into this problem. There is an immediacy to giving out food and resources in this way but is it effective in helping people resolve the issues they face?

Robert Lupton is a Christian who has worked for 4 decades in urban America and his book *Toxic Charity: how churches and charities hurt those they help* hones in on this problem. He defines the problem with too much social action as disempowerment:

'Dependency. Destroying personal initiative. When we do for those in need what they have the capacity to do for themselves, we disempower them.'

In his follow-up book, *Charity Detox*, he further analyses the problem as being when agencies use crisis-type responses to chronic, long term problems:

'Much of the giving in America is misplaced. We respond generously to stories of people in crisis, but in fact most our charity goes to people who face predictable, solvable problems of chronic poverty. An emergency response to chronic need is at best counterproductive and, over time, is actually harmful.'

This is a problem in Christian responses to poverty. The 'crisis' approach is easy to fall into because these approaches are straight-forward, easier to set up and popular with volunteers. And the growth in UK social action over the last 15 years has not been in projects focusing on empowerment but mainly those services which distribute freely in the way Lupton critiques:

'And yet, charities and churches continue to use crisis-intervention strategies that foster dependence...they continue to feed a man a fish, when they really need to teach him how to fish.'

Empowering people to overcome their chronic issues is far harder but far more important. Running a group for 10 people which helps them cook for themselves might be more beneficial than giving out free food to 100 people if it empowers these people to take sustainable steps out of poverty. The UK has a huge amount to learn from the US if we are to avoid the extreme and entrenched forms of inequality which blights their nation.

We urgently need a conversation about how social action initiatives make a shift towards a more empowering way of working.

There are shifts towards empowering models, such as the growth in the [Food Pantries](#) and [Community Groceries](#) where people become members and pay for food. And church-based social businesses, like [Grace Enterprises](#) in Nottingham, empower people affected by homelessness and poverty by supporting them into work. These are some of the most exciting initiatives in Christian social action.

c) *Secularising: the disconnection from faith*

Despite the on-going rise of Christian social activism, one of the constant challenges is how Christian organisations and projects (large or small) *maintain* an active connection with the faith that birthed them. The homeless sector is full of agencies which *used* to be Christian.

Sometimes faith becomes *faded* due to a lack of passion or commitment or departure of a key person. Sometimes it is lost due to *fear* of what funders or other stakeholders would think. And sometimes faith just become *fossilised* with the token involvement of the founding church. Rather than something dynamic and creative at its heart of the organisation, often faith becomes little more than a slightly embarrassing footnote in its history.

There are many reasons why this happens. Some are to do with a more questioning post-Christendom context where faith needs to be justified and defended rather than just accepted. Some are do with the practical challenges of conforming to employment law, equal opportunities and a wide range of regulation. And some are do with underlying lack of theological confidence which drives a wedge between churches and the social action they develop.

We desperately need more people who are comfortable expressing their faith openly and confidently within secular contexts and not allow faith to be air-brushed out. We need people who are able to 'bridge' between the 'religious' worlds of church, theology and spirituality, and the 'professional' worlds of strategic partnerships and statutory funding.

One of the most exciting realities is the ‘post-secular’ space that is emerging. In the 10 years since, I have seen a significant re-emergence in discussions in homelessness conferences and seminar around issues of love, purpose and ultimate meaning. There is a growing confidence in the relevance of faith.

In 2013, the secular research agency, *Lemos & Crane* did a survey of homeless people which gave powerful evidence of how important they saw faith and spirituality. The report sharply criticised the ‘secular orthodoxy’ of the homeless sector which more reflected the liberal perspectives of staff more than the homeless people themselves.

Five years ago I was seconded into central government as an adviser to the Rough Sleeping Initiative with a specific focus on the role of churches and faith groups. And the reason was that in every town and city across the country, the role of these groups are so significant in addressing homelessness. As I found in the 4 years in the role, there is a growing openness in both national and local government to recognize and appreciate the role the Christian play plays in making a difference.

And this is just an example of wider shifts in appreciating Christian spirituality. The impact of influential thinkers such as psychologist Jordan Peterson and historian Tom Holland are illustrations of this development. As Justin Brierley’s 2023 book and podcast is titled, there really is a *Surprising Rebirth Of Belief in God* which should bolster the confidence of Christian activists.

The faith element does not need to be diluted or ‘skimmed’ through social action. In fact, some of the most exciting work is happening where there is a commitment to a ‘full-fat’ approach. Agencies such as Christians Against Poverty and Hope into Action have integrated professional excellence and spiritual passion in ways which enhance and mutually reinforce each other. They have won many professional awards whilst maintaining a strong commitment to their Christian distinctiveness.

Loving God and loving your neighbour are the core demands of Christianity. And whilst many social action projects have been excellent at developing people’s love for their neighbour, we need to keep faith in God at the heart of our work. What God has put together, let no one separate.

3. The road ahead: a future direction for Christian social action

Anyone involved in Christian social action will be familiar with Micah 6:8:

‘Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God’

Probably more pithily than any other verse, it summarises a great strategy for faith-based social action. But we need to go deeper into the 3-fold challenge that this verse brings. One of the most insightful expositions of this verse is in Robert Lupton’s book *Toxic Charity*:

‘Justice and mercy twinned together, these commands lead us to holistic involvement. Divorced, they become deformed. Mercy without justice degenerates into dependency and entitlement, preserving the power of the giver over the recipient. Justice without mercy is cold and impersonal, more concerned with rights than relationship.’

The Micah verse offers us a three-fold response to the sins of social action I outlined above:

a) Acting justly: connecting action to advocacy

We need to look outward to government and the structures of power.

We need to speak up about the underlying issues of injustice which perpetuate poverty. And we need to use the examples from the front line of our work so that we connect actual, real-life action to the job of advocacy. When advocacy becomes detached from real action it becomes warped by the ideology and the politics of the culture wars. We need to speak up about the underlying causes of the poverty we witness and argue for structural justice in areas such as affordable housing, taxation and fair wages.

b) Loving mercy: connecting compassion to empowerment

We also need to look inward to our own practices.

We need to repent of those actions which disempower and create dependency, where we have got stuck in a perpetual cycle of delivering crisis responses to problems which are chronic in nature. We need to strive for relationships which are genuinely more merciful. This will mean being brave enough to radically re-shape projects and initiatives to create more empowerment and greater mutuality.

c) Walking humbly with God: connecting activism to faith

Lastly, we need to look upward to God.

We need to be honest about the widespread dilution and erosion of faith in Jesus within the social action organisations and projects that faith has originally birthed. We need to commit to improving how faith is expressed and integrated in social action in non-coercive, creative and confident ways. We need to embrace the opportunities that our cultural moment affords. Our social action should be a great illustration of our faith in Jesus, not something which masks it.

Conclusion: bold and brave faith

Our country is in desperate need for voices which will speak up about the problems we face in ways which are both radical and authentically rooted in local communities. The majority of what is termed 'the voluntary sector' cannot play this role because it has become a 'commissioned arm' of local and national government. Despite the radical roots of many of its organisations, it has largely become a 'service provider' paid to deliver what government are willing to pay for.

Our country and local communities needs organisations which are able to speak boldly and bravely about the reality of poverty (in all its forms) that we see in our communities. We need to be unafraid to talk about injustice and advocate for those suffering. We need to be brave about the realities of dependency and be focused on what empowers people to find solutions to their challenges.

And most of all, Christian activism must remain faithful to the God revealed in Jesus who calls us to follow him in word and deed. We must remember that reflecting his grace and truth is the best gift we can give to any community or any individual. In the words of missionary theologian [Lesslie Newbigin](#):

"The commitment is not to a cause, or a programme but to a person – at the heart of Christian mission must remain a commitment to serving Christ in his community".