

GENERAL SYNOD**Disadvantaged Communities****Summary**

We rejoice that there is growing traction in the Church of England for urging and energising a movement that is encouraging renewal and reform inspired by the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. (See GS 2038) The above motion began life in the Inner Bradford Deanery Synod, and was comprehensively supported by Leeds Diocesan Synod. It urges that we look again at the way in which Jesus was so alternative in his capacity to prioritise and include people on the margins, and that we need to explore more deeply what this means for the church today. We recognise that whilst pioneering progress is being made, there is need to be ever more intentional and committed to such reform. To do so, we suggest the need to ask questions that are challenging and yet vital, not only for the growth and renewal of the church, but for the health and well-being of our society.

This document offers a few such questions, but there will be others that need to emerge. We urge Synod to give this search a high priority, and to be courageous in responding to the convictions that are the result.

Motion from Leeds Diocese

That this Synod call on the Archbishops' Council to commission a study that explores:

- (a) the reasons why, in contrast to Jesus, the Church of England is generally less effective in communicating with, and attracting people from, more disadvantaged communities, and
- (b) ways of addressing and reversing this situation.

Background

1. The Leeds Diocesan Synod, and one of its predecessors, the Bradford Diocesan Synod, sponsored two earlier motions that were brought to this Synod, both of which expressed concern about recent social welfare reform changes – particularly in challenging the so-called bedroom tax, and the imposition of increasingly punitive sanctions upon benefit claimants. In both these matters this Synod warmly supported Leeds' judgement that these reforms, in their outworking, were often harsh and unfair in their treatment of people, and the General Synod responded warmly and sympathetically to the proposals that were enshrined in the motions.
2. In October 2017 the Deanery Synod of the newly established Inner Bradford Deanery was concerned to explore issues that relate to social inequality in our society. A local faith group called WRIB (Welfare Reform Impact Bradford) was invited to facilitate this. As a result of discussions, two motions were proposed and agreed.

3. This paper focuses on the first of these motions. It is helpful for you to appreciate that there was a substantial change of direction during the course of the Deanery Synod debate. Initially the Synod explored a motion that focused on issues of social and economic Inequality that were identified as a concern in the life of the Church of England today – and that would have led the Synod to urge the wider church to be more energetic in highlighting and addressing such things. However, in debate, the Synod became convinced that the Church needs to question how well we match up to Jesus' remarkable capacity to care, relate and communicate with people and communities who are often excluded and denigrated, and how this can be improved. The Deanery Synod agreed that this is a more important question, and so this is now the focus of their motion.
4. In 2018 Leeds Diocesan Synod considered and approved both motions. The Synod debate gave opportunity for members to reflect on how the C. of E. communicates and relates to people and communities who are victims of the UK's high level of social and economic inequality. The first of their motions is the concern of this paper.

Theological Underpinning

5. As Synod addresses the motion we suggest that members reflect on the following:
 - a) **Genesis:** We are all 'imago dei', made in the image of God, and so we are each of us more than we can imagine or conceive. Genesis 1.27 "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created Them". 'All are equal....but some are more equal than others' often results in people and communities being denigrated. Our God given task is not only to stand alongside these who are diminished and disadvantaged, and help all people to realise their place and value, but to challenge the forces and power structures that undermine this.
 - b) **Old Testament Prophetic Literature:** the exposure of greed and oppression of the rich upon the poor is a regular feature. Passages such as Isaiah 58 – and particularly v.9-12 "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always..... Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins, and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings." Our own restoration as God's people will spring from adopting such priorities. John the Baptist and Jesus were substantially inspired by Isaiah, and it was from Isaiah 61 that Jesus chose to quote the passage below when he described his mission to the folk in Nazareth.
 - c) **Jesus:** The Kingdom of God reverses things. Jesus presents us with an 'Upside Down, Inside Out' Kingdom where the poor have priority, and serious challenges are presented to the rich. Jesus' mission, in both word and deed, inspired by Isaiah 61, is to bring good news to the poor, and to set free the oppressed etc. Mary's vision of a God who "brings down the mighty and lifts up the lowly" becomes mirrored in so many of Jesus' parables and in his practical ministry. His inclusion of marginalised people is even more marked by it taking place in the face of persistent opposition by the religious authorities of his day, and even by his own followers. Moreover, these

values had been birthed and fostered during 30 years of life in the marginalised community of Nazareth. He is pre-eminently Jesus of Nazareth, from which it was assumed, nothing good can come.

- d) **Paul:** Paul's experience of ministry, particularly in Corinth, leads him to alternative Kingdom values that are expressed by him declaring, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are." (1 Cor.1.27-28). Paul further declares that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," (Galatians 3.26), and we observe the impact and benefit of these values upon the early church. In addition, Paul's advice to Timothy includes a strong plea that he ministers to those who have been snared by the lure of material wealth, and that he is watchful about the threat this might bring to him. (1 Timothy 6.3-21)
- e) **James:** James' letter strongly reflects throughout the alternate Kingdom values of Jesus – particularly in the following: "My brothers, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism. Suppose a person comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes, and say, "Here is a good seat for you" but say to the poor man, "you stand there" or "sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen my brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith, and to inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him. But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you.....?" (James 2.1-end)
- f) **Francis of Assisi:** The tale is told that Francis of Assisi had an audience with Pope Innocent III. At their meeting the Pope showed Francis some of the great wealth of the Vatican, and boasted, "We can no longer say with Peter silver and gold have I none". To which Francis replied, "Neither can you say, 'rise and walk'."
- g) **Soren Kierkegaard:** "When the prosperous man on a dark but starlit night drives comfortably in his carriage and has the lanterns lighted, aye, then he is safe, he fears no difficulty, he carries his light with him, and it is not dark close around him. But precisely because he has the lanterns lit, and has a strong light close to him, precisely for this reason, he cannot see the stars. For his lights obscure the stars, which the poor peasant, driving without lights, can see gloriously in the dark but starry night."
- h) **Historic Christian resurgence:** Such resurgence has often been accompanied by a new passion and purpose for more effective inclusion and communication with poor and marginalised people and communities, and by new priority to challenge matters of social injustice. Obvious examples include the emergence of the Franciscan movement in Europe, the Evangelical revival in the 18th century in Britain, the 19th century Catholic movement, and the Christian liberation movement.

Decline of the Church in the UK

6. Whilst the decline in membership of the Church of England has taken place across all social groups in the UK, the steepest decline has been in the poorest areas. We

are cognisant of the restructuring the Church Commissioners have done about their grant monies and their refocussing of funding on lowest income communities. However, even more needs to be done to alleviate what is now a serious threat to the future of the C of E's presence in many large and poor urban and rural areas. In the Diocese of Leeds we see striking examples of this. In some areas small elderly congregations now struggle to survive in large church buildings constructed to serve the growth of such communities as a result of rapid industrial development or in new urban housing estates communities that replaced earlier poor standard housing. Valiant attempts continue to sustain Christian presence and effective ministry, with fine examples of Christian communities 'punching above their weight' in responding to local need, and in encouraging local people to explore the Christian gospel. The Diocese of Leeds is active, making use of Strategic Development funding to pioneer new church growth initiatives which are being targeted in large urban areas, and there are new Christian missional communities being forged that are spearheading some of these initiatives.

7. Nevertheless, nationally there is evidence that the tide continues to recede. For example 3.4m people live on social housing estates in England. 0.7% of people on estates attend church compared with 1.7% nationally. Despite the renewed emphasis on estates ministry decline in attendance is nearly 4 times faster on the estates than the rest of the country. Deeper questions need to be asked of the wider church so that the church can focus on why this is currently the case.
8. Why does the church struggle – maybe the following questions can assist:
 - Can the church recapture Jesus' priority for marginalised people and communities on the margins, and become hungry for the Holy Spirit to bring about a fresh transformation of our own ways and words and works. If so, what would this look like, and what should the church do to take a step forward?
 - Can the church reclaim Jesus' alternative teaching and lifestyle model, that urges those who follow him to embrace poverty, lowliness, simplicity and servant-hood, in a society that is preoccupied with prosperity, and demands we seek power and prestige, leaving many in our poorest communities ever more marginalised?
 - Can the church identify the barriers that exist in some of the models of ministry and styles of worship the church has fostered, that often exclude people who live in our poorest communities from finding the joy of the gospel and from flourishing in the God-given potential they should be able to realise?
 - Can the church identify the institutional pressures, attitudes, and behaviour in the church, nationally and locally, that lead to advantage being given to the church's work in more prosperous areas, (for example in deployment of staffing and financial resources) and so undermine the church's capacity to stand alongside, and communicate with the poorest people and the communities they belong to?
 - Can the church learn from churches that are benefiting from becoming increasingly diverse through the welcome they are offering to the stranger and explore what lessons can be learnt from their experience that can be applied more widely?

- Can the church identify and strengthen other signs of hope that are preparing the way for the spiritual resurgence that is due in our land, and ensure that these models are being identified and affirmed? These might include new and more appropriate methods of training that are enabling the church foster improved communication and inclusive ministry development.
9. The above questions do not only raise questions about financial resourcing. More importantly they enable the church to seek and embrace a transformation that gives greater integrity to our claim that we are followers of Jesus of Nazareth. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.” 2 Corinthians 8.9

Revd. Canon Gordon Dey on behalf of Leeds Diocesan Synod and Inner Bradford
Deanery Synod

**Published by the General Synod of the Church of England
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