

## GENERAL SYNOD

**'TACKLING INEQUALITY'****1. THE MOTION and SUMMARY**

**That this Synod call on Her Majesty's Government (and all political parties) to adopt an explicit policy of reducing the wealth gap between the rich and the poor and the disadvantages that flow from it.**

The motion began life in the Inner Bradford Deanery Synod in Oct 2017, and was strongly supported by Leeds Diocesan Synod. Approving it will commit us to urge our politicians to identify and address the social injustice in our community that springs from growing inequality of opportunity and resources. It suggests that the 'disadvantages that flow from this' are not limited to the poorest people – rather they impact on all of us, and are continually undermining our attempts to create a healthy society. It suggests that many people in our poorest communities, particularly our young people, are failing to develop their skills and achieve their full potential. It further suggests that such inequality may also be fuelling motivations that are paralysing attempts to comprehensively address other key issues such as climate change and environmental destruction.

The motion is before the Synod at an appropriate time for our country. Our politicians are to be encouraged and supported to listen and respond to fresh prophetic voices; voices that can reshape our vision for a healthy society, including the voices of faith communities. There is much evidence and insight to be explored that can assist us with this. For the health of our society we need to be particularly committed to those who are victims of deep poverty of resources, education, and opportunity, and find fresh commitment to narrow the wealth and income gaps between those who have too much and those who have too little.

The initial paper for the Synod was drafted before the global pandemic caused by Covid 19. The issues we raise below are now even more apparent, and the need to tackle them has gained greater ownership, as we have witnessed our need of often lowly paid people who care, provide and protect us.

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**2. BACKGROUND**

a) 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

b) In October 2017 the Synod of the newly established 'Inner Bradford Deanery' was concerned to explore issues that relate to 'social inequality' in our society. A local faith based group called WRIB (Welfare Reform Impact Bradford) was invited to facilitate this. As a result of its discussions, two motions were proposed and agreed: one that urged the Church of England to be more intentional in adopting the values and lifestyle of Jesus, and the second that focused on matters that derive from the deep financial and social inequality in UK society. In 2018 Leeds Diocesan Synod considered and warmly and comprehensively approved both motions.

e) This Synod has already received and responded to the first motion entitled 'Through His Poverty'. This paper focuses on the second motion, and gives Synod opportunity to respond to it.

### 3. THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNING

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 humankind 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) **The Torah and the Jewish 'Year of Jubilee':** Every 50th year was to be a Jubilee Year when all property would revert to its original owner (Leviticus 25:10-15), *'Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. If you sell land to any of your own people or buy land from them, do not take advantage of each other. Key matters being addressed relate to the restriction of inequality, and the bridling of greed through insatiable land ownership, undergirded by an understanding that 'the earth is the Lord's' – Leviticus 25.31 "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.'*

c) **Old Testament Prophetic Literature;** *"Let justice roll down like waters!"* Amos declares. (Amos 5:24). He urges that social injustice is addressed in Israel, and denounces those who benefit disproportionately from the hard work of poor people (Amos 5:11), and treat them with contempt. He declares that God demands justice rather than worship: *"I hate, I despise your festivals...but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream"* (Amos 5:21-24).

Other biblical prophets are similarly indignant, particularly Micah and Isaiah, and often envisage a society without injustice. Jeremiah praises King Josiah because he did *"justice and righteousness"* and *"judged the cause of the poor and needy"* (Jer 22:15-16). Instead of exploiting the poor himself, Josiah used his power to protect them from being exploited by other powerful people. The prophets frequently taught that the test of justice in a nation is how the weakest are treated, so that they are able to flourish.

d) **Jesus:** In an earlier 'sister motion' it was noted that the Kingdom of God reverses things. Jesus presents us with an 'Upside Down, Inside Out' Kingdom. His mission, in word and deed, much inspired by Isaiah 61, offers 'good news to the poor', and 'sets free the oppressed'. Mary's vision of a God *who 'brings down the mighty and lifts up the lowly'* is mirrored in Jesus practical ministry and in many of his parables. In one such parable, the rich man goes to hell for ignoring the poor beggar at his gate (Luke 16:19-31) and highlights our need to *"listen to Moses and the prophets"* (Luke 16:31).

Key additional features of Jesus' teaching highlight:

- Challenge to those driven by financial profit – Luke 12.16-2: *"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who*

*will get what you have prepared for yourself?' "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."*

- Wealth can be a spiritual stumbling block – Matt 19.23-24: *"Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."* And Matt 6.24: *"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."*
- Threat to those who benefit from inequality of wealth and resources: Luke 6.24-25 *"Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep."*

Jesus is pre-eminently 'Jesus of Nazareth', who spent the first 30 years of his life in a community from which 'nothing good can come'. We then see him on the side of the poor, the victimised and the marginalised, despite opposition from his disciples, the crowds, and religious leaders. He invites us to 'follow him'.

**James:** James' letter strongly reflects the 'alternate Kingdom values' of Jesus – particularly in the following that focuses on inequality: *'Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.'* (James 5.1-6)

**Justin Welby:** "In Catholic Social Teaching, there is a foundational principle... that the wealth of the world is given by God for the benefit of every person in the world. To amass an unfair proportion is thus to deprive others. It calls for a vision of God that overcomes, in its beauty and generosity, the innate selfishness of our societies."

**Justin Welby:** "We need a church that listens to God; that hears the voice of the poor, and takes the risk of identifying with the poor. Britain must take radical action to fix "significant and destabilizing" inequality caused by a "broken economic model". We are failing those who will grow up in a world where the gap between the richest and poorest parts of the country is significant and destabilizing." *'Dethroning Mammon'*

**Pope Francis:** "The great biblical tradition..... bids us break the bonds of injustice and oppression which give rise to glaring, and indeed, scandalous social inequalities. Reforming the social structures which perpetuate poverty and the exclusion of the poor first requires a conversion of mind and heart."

#### **4. INEQUALITY IN OUR SOCIETY**

a) The UK has among the highest levels of income inequality in the European Union. The five richest families own more wealth than 13 million people. In the last ten years the number of billionaires in the UK has almost doubled, and their wealth has more than doubled. The richest 1% of people in the UK own the same wealth as 80% of the population, or 53 million people. 'Projections suggest that levels of income inequality are likely to increase over the coming years into the early 2020s, in a scenario where government policy does not change'. *House of Commons briefing paper May 2019*

b) Today most of the 13.4million living below the poverty line are in families with at least 1 person in paid work. One in five workers in the UK is now low paid, one of the worst rates among developed countries. Living in poverty is proven to be damaging to people's physical and mental health and imposes huge costs on the taxpayer.

c) The Grenfell Tower disaster wasn't just a horrific accident with severe loss of life, but illustrated graphically how the less well-off are not listened to by those in authority. Close by geographically, but light years away socially and economically, live London's super-rich. There has been an extraordinary concentration of rewards in the hands of the top 1 per cent, and especially, the top 0.10 per cent. One argument in support of inequality is that it is 'a necessary evil' that provides necessary incentives to innovate, invest, save and work. Yet there is no obvious explanation why the top 1 per cent, especially the top 0.1 per cent, has accelerated away, since Western economic performance has deteriorated in the past decade. *Vince Cable*

d) People who live in southern regions can expect to live substantially longer and spend fewer years in poor health than those who are further north. Closing this gap and reducing health inequalities is one the biggest challenges we face in public health. Health inequalities are underpinned by social determinants of health, which are determined by the broad social and economic circumstances into which people are born, live, work and grow old. *publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2017*

e) Living in an unequal society causes stress and status anxiety.... In more equal societies people live longer, are less likely to be mentally ill or obese and there are lower rates of infant mortality... Rates of violence are higher in more unequal societies. Small permanent decreases in inequality would reduce homicides by 20% and lead to a 23% long-term reduction in robberies... There is a strong relationship between high levels of income inequality and low levels of social mobility..... Children of highly paid individuals are more likely to be highly paid and children of low paid individuals are more likely to be low earners.... *The Equality Trust: www.equalitytrust.org.uk*

e) Maybe the following questions can help us to explore the issue?

1. How are we to apply our Christian faith and beliefs to the issue of social and economic inequality – how does the teaching of Jesus apply to this?
2. What has led to the UK's current high level of economic and social inequality? Is this now at a level of 'unfairness' that is causing serious damage to society?
3. Are we convinced that fresh commitment to reducing social inequality will benefit the richest as well as the poorest? If so, how can we promote this?
4. Do faith communities in general, and the Church of England in particular, have the credibility that enables them to speak out on this issue?
5. Are there particular steps that we should be advocating, such as enforcement of the 'Living Wage' and taxation changes to affect the rich and benefit the poor?
6. Do we have alternative suggestions that can improve educational opportunity and social mobility for those affected by inequality?

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and the Inner Bradford Deanery Synod.

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