

Luke Lerner in Conversation with Alex Fry – Part 1

Transcript

Alex: Luke, are you happy to begin by talking about your personal journey into the church, but perhaps starting with something about your childhood? Growing up, what was it like to be part of a working-class family? But also, what does it mean to you to be working class?

Luke: That's a good question. So, church has always been a significant, well, I say always church has been a significant part of most of my life. My mum is a Methodist lay preacher and so I used to get dragged around to church a fair bit when I was a kid. But as soon as I was old enough, they let me choose when I was fairly young, and my choice was to stay at home. And I then came to a faith of my own when I was about 16 in a little tiny Baptist Church in a village that was that was quite Pentecostal in its leanings. And shortly after that ended up in an Anglican church plant where I grew up in Aylesbury. Because there were no young people in the village church and they thought it would be good for us to join a church with other young people. And we had a really, really good youth work and good youth worker in that Community Church. And that was the start of a lifetime really, of wrestling with what it means in practise to be a Christian. My youth workers were missionaries, so that that was always kind of in the back of my mind. In terms of growing up working class, this is where it gets tricky, how we define class because in many ways you could probably say that I had quite a mixed upbringing. My parents were pretty poor when they got married young at 19. I mean they used to have to use it. You know, they used the removal boxes with a tablecloth over it when they moved in to their first married house. They had to live with my grandparents for a long time after they got married. But by the time I was born, they were actually sort of doing all right. My dad had left school very young to be a printers apprentice, which is a very physical job. But by the time I was born, he'd worked his way up to being a sales director in a company, I think by the time I was born. And so we had a fairly comfortable, I would say aspirational, upper working-class, lower middle-class, almost life. So I was really, I was encouraged by my mum at least to focus on education and to try and try and do well at school, so I had a better life than they did, was the sort of narrative I grew up with. But when you want to talk about class, this is where it gets interesting. You know, I find people often want to talk about estates or growing up on an estate or whatever. And I would suggest that my understanding of what social class is, social class is a network of social, economic and labour relationships in a society that relate to how we work, how we have access to the means of production and which is often land and but it's not just those labour and economic and political relationships. It's a whole web of relationships to do with education, to do with culture, to do with all sorts of things, religion that kind of reproduce those labour relationships over the course of time. And so I say class is not always an easy thing to define. But for me personally, my definition would be that it's both the web of labour relationships and the web of other stuff, socioeconomic, political, cultural, that reproduces and maintains those class relationships in a society and in a global village that we live in now of course, I suppose the key thing to say about my understanding of class as a kid, my nan who's the child of an Irish immigrant, she grew up telling us to be very suspicious of them. And them was the people that ran the show and she to have these colourful phrases, I hope you got a bleep box. But she used to say things like you can't stop them shitting on you but never let them rub it in. And after there was this kind of class angst. I don't know if it was ever really named as class, but there was this sort of angst against those that this, this elusive them that I grew up with.

Alex: What struck me there was, well, one of the things that struck me there was your very mixed church background, grew up in the Methodist Church, found yourself in the Baptist Church before you were in an Anglican plants. Yeah. Now, I I wouldn't be surprised if each of those experiences of

church had very different cultures and whether even the Anglican plant was perhaps different culturally to the wider Church of England. So I I just wonder whether you can tell me about your class experience of being in each of those places.

Luke: Sure. I mean, again, it was very mixed and complex I would say. Certainly by the time I was old enough to really have a clue what was going on when I was in the Anglican Church plant. I don't think I really had much of a conception of, I mean, I was very, very idealistic. So in my mind I thought, well, where I've come from and my background shouldn't be any barrier. In fact. I mean, I was a bit of a fundamentalist really. But you know, I sort of thought, well, if anything, being from a less privileged background means I should be sort of more qualified to to do mission and ministry and stuff. But I was very naive to the kind, to these structures and relationships that maintain, I mean, I was quite aware that most of the clergy that I met were of a different social class to me. And I was very aware that I was different, that I behaved differently, my family was different. You know, the kind of things we did to relax were very different. Uh, the kind of house we lived in was different. And but I don't know that I really had much language or understanding to process that as a young person.

Alex: Do you remember being aware of that difference having any impact on you about your sense of belonging or your sense of being part of a Christian community or even your sense of uh, your ability to lead and to minister in, in whatever context that might have been before you were ordained?

Luke: So I suppose over the years I had this growing awareness that that I didn't feel that I really fit and that almost there was something sort of wrong with me in the way I behaved. And I started to see actually, you know, the the, the thing about this that's unacceptable. The church was really kind of coming down with a kind of evangelical piety culture on very working-class sins, you know, to do with like smoking and swearing and things like that. They didn't really talk much about corporate greed or structural sin and all of that kind of stuff. And so I did feel this growing distance, particularly with those in positions of power and influence and leadership within the church, to the point where, and to be honest, I mean I was a cheeky sod when I was a kid and I still am. So that wasn't really appreciated. It wasn't really the done thing. You know you there was a kind of an unspoken culture that I knew I didn't fit into from this very sort of quite blunt working-class background where you say it how it is and that's how you show you respect someone is by saying how it is. Yeah. Which leading on towards the time of exploring ministry. I mean I in those early days I was really encouraged by my youth leaders as a teenager about ministry and I went off like I say to do mission trips overseas for a year and came back to be an intern youth worker. But still there was this invisible barrier and I thought why does it just sort of seem to fall into place for some people? There seems to be this sort of track, you know, this sort of leadership track that people fall into. And I just, it's not happening for me. And in my mind I thought it was like, well, God should just magically make all this work out. I didn't really have any grasp of the sort of structural injustice that can prevent people from the kind of background that I came from entering into the church. Particularly because I mean I've had many friends that did well at school and and were acclimatised to the sort of school environment in fact, Professor Anthony Reddie and I've talked about this before that he says, you know, he he he was of a personality where he did well at school whereas I was a bit of, in his words, a bit of a wide boy. You know, I just, I couldn't I couldn't handle the school environment at all. It was it didn't suit me. So there was all of this tension and and I got really frustrated and disillusioned because I just thought this should be working out. I don't understand why it's not, you know, and and I kind of gave up completely on church for a long time as a result of that. I never really gave up and never gave up on Jesus. But you know, I I I just sort of got fed up with it all really. I thought it was all hypocritical and I knew best and I

became quite sort of arrogant and entrenched and judgmental for a long time. But I wouldn't say that some of that analysis that I made was wrong, but not in a very healthy way.

Alex: Was this before you sensed a call to Church of England priesthood?

Luke: And that was such a windy road. Ultimately, I had this long period away from church that I described, and through one happenstance and another, I ended up in this Christian motorcycle club. And I remember meeting up with these guys for the first time at the Ace Cafe on the North Circular in London. And then, I mean, people always sort of laugh about the idea of a Christian motorcycle until they met these guys because they were properly rough around the edges, these, these men and women in this motorcycle club. And that was the first time I ever really felt like I could be me in a sort of quote, unquote Christian environment. I didn't have to pretend to be anybody other than who I was with those people, which was very refreshing. And I don't know that I still, I mean, I think I developed a language around class by then, particularly through being on the building site working for 10 years as a bricklayer and developing a bit of that sort of class angst and class analysis that that the building site is often a hotbed of. But I met one of the one of the guys in the club was a minister. And after a while he sort of said, look, have you thought about doing any theological education and exploring this call. And I thought, well, that was a long time ago that I thought about all that. And you know, how am I gonna do with theological education now? I haven't got much money. I'm a bricklayer. I, I, I, you know, I'm self-employed. If I don't work, I don't eat. But bit by bit he sort of encouraged me to pursue it and and I was able to start doing theological education part time. So I started what was going to be a diploma in theology with the Church Mission Society because Johnny Baker at CMS was an old friend of of my pal Sean Stillman from the motorcycle club. And that diploma, I mean I remember handing in. I think it was my first essay or portfolio. I'd have a clue what I was doing. I hadn't written an essay since I was at school and I wasn't really good at it then. And I handed this thing and got my marks back and I wrote to my tutor and said, ohh, I've had me marks back. I've got 72. Is that a pass? Because I thought it was like a percentage, you know, and you had to get maybe 80% for it to be passed. And he said, oh, that's a bit more than a pass, Luke, and I sort of discovered, ohh, when I'm actually interested in something academically, I can do it, you know. And then through all that and getting involved in my local Anglican parish church, we moved into Luton. Ultimately, we sold our house and I folded up my construction business and we moved into Luton, where my wife was working in a project with sex workers. And she'd given up being a barber partly due to a bad back. And we sort of sold up and like I said, this very kind of naive view that ohh God will just provide. So we'll sell our house and take a bit of money out of it. Buy a house in Luton and I'll carry on studying and ask churches to support us. And you know, we were getting sort of a bit of financial support from some local churches and individual givers. And I think we were living on about £14,000 a year. And I was like, I can't believe how generous these people are that they, you know, give me this money to have. So clueless. Yeah. A lot of these big name ministers are getting paid 80-90, a hundred grand a year. You know. And there we were struggling away. Our son was born below the poverty line and and working away. And I've got more and more involved with the local Anglican churches and people were interested in some of the stuff I was doing working with the homeless and young men, getting groomed into gangs and stuff like that. And so I got invited to present this thing at the bishops staff meeting, I think it was. And they were quite interested in that. Then got involved in a diocesan project. And one day after we had a meeting at the cathedral about this diocesan project I'd gone on my motorbike with my club colours on and you know they sort of tried to turn me away at the door until I said ohh I'm here for a meeting with the cathedral Dean you know. And then my mate Father Eddie took me out for a Nando's after, there's a good Nandos quite close to the cathedral in St Albans and he took me out and we'd we'd got to know each other a bit. He's a good fella he comes from a working-class background himself and he sort of popped the question

over Nando's and said have you ever thought you might be called to ordain ministry in the church. And I just started laughing because I thought, well people like me don't get ordained in the Church of England. That was my first thought was, well, course not. You know, they're never gonna, you have to be posh and go to Oxford or Cambridge. And you know, I just thought he never gonna never, never in a million years is this gonna happen. And he said, you'd be surprised. He introduced me to a couple of his mates, a guy called Rob. He's a biker. He's up in Halifax, I think, and he said can I just write to the bishops? The church I was at was in Vacancy, so he wrote off to the Bishop and I got sent to do all the different stages, you know, vocations, adviser, DDO and every stage. I thought, you know, I've played a game that is, you know, every stage at some point they're gonna say no. And an old mate of mine called Buckshot, who's a priest in New Zealand and a biker, said when you go for your first meeting with the DDO, you don't dress up smart, don't you know, be you. So I went on my motorbike. I'm very lucky that I got DDO, Father Quentin, who, you know, he saw past the surface level stuff. It helped that he liked old cars and motorbikes and stuff. So that was that really. I mean, I think, you know, the other, the other ministers I knew were as surprised as I was when I got my results back from my bishops advisory panel and I was recommended to train. I was expecting it to be a no. So I got to college and I thought, well, at some point through the training I'll probably get kicked off. And I got through that some point during the curacy and had a few bumpy bits in my curacy, not with the local church, but, but yeah, here I am, you know, And I just, yeah, I find it quite bewildering really in many ways. I wonder whether the Church sometimes regrets their decision. But yeah, here we are and and I meet all kinds of incredible people training for or doing ordained ministry in the Church of England and who do buck the trend. I wonder if as the Church is becoming less wealthy and powerful, it maybe is opening up a bit more to different sorts of people.

Alex: Having this 'no' in the back of your head are all these different stages, what kind of impact does that have on you?

Luke: So I would say my life has been defined by an experience of precarity. So for 10 years I was a self-employed bricklayer. You know, if you got hurt or you didn't get any work in, you were in trouble. I felt that sense of precarity. Me and my dad nearly ended up homeless when I was a kid. That's a whole another story. And that sense of precarity was even stronger because I sold up my business. You know, I by the time I started training for ordination, I'd given up all my financial support. I was getting to do this kind of self-supporting ministry. So the fear was, you know, if I say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing, like literally how am I gonna feed my family? And I don't have the luxury of a high earning spouse. My wife just got her first GCSE a couple of years ago at the age of 40 and all six of the rest of her siblings haven't got one between them. You know, we're not, we're not high rollers in our family. So I didn't really know what I would do if it went wrong. Don't have that many... I'm too lazy to be a bricklayer now. I'd be I'd be too slow. So it it felt very frightening and I think, you know, there's a lot of research that suggests that feeling of precarity has a tremendous impact on your physical and mental well-being and the kind of levels of adrenaline and cortisol running through your blood when you feel that feeling of precarity. And if I'm being really honest, there were moments where I kind of came up against this 'them' that my nan had told me about in the culture of the Church of England. Particularly as a curate when you're kind of expected to get your head down and shut up and get on with it. Where I felt I was in a place where I kind of had to choose between compromising some deep ethical values and or lose my job at the end of the day. And because there's this quite, it's quite opaque, the leadership culture and everything in the Church of England. So I never really quite knew what the rules were. I never really quite knew if I was pushing it too far, you know, I never, I heard all these rumours about this little blue book that gets kept on your file and you know, all of this sort of thing. And I mean and that really played into my suspicion as sort of authority that I grew up with or certainly

suspicion of institutional authority anyway. So it really had quite... I mean there were times when it made me feel really unwell during my curacy. I mean I ended up taking medication for anxiety and depression and the lockdown experience didn't help much with that. I mean there was even at the moment, you know, where I understand that the systems were under immense about pressure. But I was due to be ordained in 2020 and obviously due to the lockdowns, we weren't able to have this the ordination service. So there was a point where they kind of said, well we don't really know how we're going to pay you if we don't ordain you. So we're not really sure what we're going to do. And then that was kind of left for what felt like an eternity. It was probably only a week or two this feeling of like what the hell am I going to do. Like I've got family to feed what on earth are we going to do? And and for some people and. And speaking to some of the those leaders, they would say, well, we don't you know, you can trust us, we're the church. We're not gonna see you out on the street. And that's like, I'm not really sure about that idea. If I can trust, you know, I don't know you. I don't know. The Church of England hasn't always shown itself to be a very trustworthy institution, despite there being many lovely individuals involved. So I think some of the core of the culture, most of the individuals I've met in positions of leadership, are very well meaning and nice people and very fortunate to have an excellent suffragan Bishop in the area where I am, who I get on with really well, who I respect a great deal. But there is something in the culture which feels quite sick and unhealthy to me.

Alex: And you mentioned just then that you didn't think that the institutional church had always shown itself to be trustworthy. Would you mind just speaking to that a little bit, unpacking what you mean?

Luke: Ohh. Well, you know, there's just a few little bits like a involvement in the colonising of the majority world and supporting capitalism and hiding up abuse and and you know, all these various different little peccadillos that the Church of England has been involved in over the years. I mean the church as the established church. We are married to a state that has shown itself to be profoundly unjust at staggering levels. We're not talking about a little minor things. We're talking about, you know, in places, genocide effectively. So yeah, this idea that we can trust the church because it's the church is, is profoundly daft to me.

Alex: And I wondered whether you could talk us through your experience of the discernment process? I know you said that you felt, you know, you had a good DDO. Yeah. But what about examining chaplains, if you ever had to see them? And even the process of the BAP itself, I think it was called BAP then.

Luke: Yeah, it was. Yeah, that's right. But like I say, I, you know, for one reason or another, I felt I really connected with my DDO and I really felt that he helped steer me through the process and a couple of times had to sort of encourage me to tone things back a bit in what I wrote and things like that. I think it's pretty likely if I'd been in a different diocese, had a different DDO, pretty likely it would have been game over within a couple of meetings. I could be wrong on that. But that's the feeling I have, and having spoken to other people from similar backgrounds to me that have been elsewhere and they've had that experience of a of a door kind of slammed in their face. The bishops, the bishops advisory panel, I was beginning to get a little more acclimatised to the Church of England by the time I got to that. The worst part of it, the bit I was most nervous about was probably either the academic ability bit or the kind of proving you have a ministry in the Church of England bit. But those were both fine. The hard bit was the pastoral interview as they used to do it in, and I remember walking into the room. This is how I remember it anyway, I might be wrong making it up from trauma or something, I don't know. But I remember sitting down and I'd looked up the person that's going to be interviewing me to try and suss him out. Classic

working-class thing and they've been involved in homeless chaplaincy. So I thought, ohh, well we've got a good common ground there to talk about and I won't be walking in the room And the guy was holding like a stack of papers and he sat me down and the if I remember correctly the first words out of his mouth were, you've lived a colourful life haven't you? And my heart just kind of sank and I thought, well, not really, no. I I I'm like a choir boy compared to a lot of my pals, you know, And I've not lived that colourful in life. But then I realised sort of quite how sheltered the lives of a lot of people are or how maybe other people had the sense not to be quite so honest about their lives in their paperwork. I don't know. But I was just shocked. I thought, do you mean I've had a colourful life? I've just been altogether quite boring, I'd say, compared, you know, and compared to who are we talking compared to Mother Theresa or are we compared, talking to Pol Pot? I don't know. So yeah, that was a bizarre experience. Um, the other advisors, I mean all the advisers were OK and fine, you know, just the whole thing was just strange and bizarre to me. I think the reality is, you know, because of the life that I've had, I've had to learn to be fairly independent and just get on with things. So I just sort of gave it my best shot and got on with it and tried to be authentic. I suppose. One of the really interesting things that came out of it was the the, the one advisory point they put on it was about my ability to communicate. And I remember the DDO getting this letter and said what the hell are they talking about? You're a brilliant communicator. Like that was a bit bizarre. Couldn't quite get my head around that. But the training experience, however, I really enjoyed. There were moments I found tough. I trained on a mixed mode pathway between the Church Mission Society and Cuddesdon. So I stayed based in Luton doing this parish based pioneer ministry chaplain at homeless day centre various other things. And so I'd I'd go and do these lectures at CMS which is where I'd done my undergraduate and while I was doing the pioneer ministry and and I really loved a couple of things about it. One it was very mission focused which is it was about praxis, you know which is what got me excited. But secondly it was it was theology very much taught in a global perspective. So we spent a lot of time looking at liberation theologies. And so this was all the stuff that had really kind of liberated me through my training. It gave me language to talk about my own experiences but here in the UK. So I started thinking a lot about, well, yeah, I'm reading Gutierrez and and and all these other people from around the world, Aloysius Pieris and you know and people like that. But I thought, I really want to see what this looks like in my own context and work on that. So that was ace and that's really fun people there. Then the Cuddesdon bit, do you know what? I've really enjoyed Cuddesdon. It was like going on retreat because I'd go off for the weekend and, you know, hang out and have fun and be out in the countryside, which was a big change to being in the middle of Luton. And so yeah, I had a positive experience. I think I would have really struggled if I'd done a residential training, both with the being in a college environment rather than doing stuff. But my family, my family would have hated it. I mean, I was becoming more acclimatised. My wife would not have coped if we'd done a residential. You know, it's particularly in a tight knit community like Cuddesdon. She would have found it so alien. I think so. You know, I I'd managed to become acclimatised enough. There were bits where I found it hard. I'd had a few robust discussions with a couple of tutors about things like appropriate music for funerals and what that looked like in my context. But as I say overall the the experience was good and I found it empowering. I mean, for all that the church does, that drives me crazy. She's paid for me to have an education which has liberated me. I sometimes wonder whether it's liberated me in a way that the church probably doesn't approve of. But I but I have found that experience of theological education profoundly liberative and positive and enjoyable and affirming. And I guess I've discovered this vocation to academic theology that I never dreamed would be part of my life. So yeah, that's been really great.

Alex: And when you say it's been liberative, do you mean because of you found this love of academic theology? Or do you mean for other reasons?

Luke: Both that and both giving me language and frameworks and stimulation to wrestle and think and talk and discuss about what it means to follow Jesus of Nazareth in my context today in this modern context meet other people from around the world. I've just come back from a week in Thailand, a liberation theology conference, staggering to spend time with people from around the world that are are doing this academic work and praxis, revisiting liberation theologies today. So I, I I'm someone who finds that dialogue between praxis and theology very stimulating as a as a mutually informing conversation. So it's been liberating in that way. It's been liberating because I was always told I was a problem kid when I was at school or that I should be getting better grades, Why wasn't I trying hard enough, et cetera. Because I didn't really fit into that kind of a learning environment. But you know it's given me the tools to sort of educate myself in many ways and and to develop academic relationships with other people. And I mean through doing this work particularly around class has introduced me to others with similar similar but different struggles. You know, looking at things from the point of view, like in the book about caste, about gender, sexuality, all kinds of different lenses to think about class struggle and theology. So that's been a remarkable gift. It really has.

Alex: Right. It's really encouraging to hear that there's some positives in terms of your well-being and not. Not completely negative.

Luke: Ohh Yeah, completely. And you know what? Sometimes there's a bit of a narrative about all if we, if we want to include more working-class people, we need to dumb down the theological education. And I find that profoundly offensive. You know, I've been in an environment where people have sort of said or do you think you'll cope OK with the academic stuff before the training? And I was like, well, I'm, I'm getting firsts in every essay. So you tell me, you know what I mean. Like, you know, so I I, you know, that's something my mind found. It worked well for me. It doesn't for everybody. And that's OK. But I wouldn't want anyone from a background like mine to be robbed of this opportunity for a liberative education. I think we're coming to terms with grappling with neurodiversity and accessibility a bit better as time goes by and for those who do find it harder to engage with. So yeah, I'm very, very thankful for this education that I've, I've been given.

Alex: Sure. That's really helpful. Thank you. And what about moving beyond training into your curacy? And then I know you've only been an incumbent a short while, but perhaps also what it's like to be an incumbent as well.

Luke: I found curiously hard, um, for a variety of reasons. I found the whole deployment process really tough because I really, you know, I really felt I was done to. I didn't have any power. I didn't have any choice about where my family was going to live, what school my kid was going to go to, all of that. So I found that hard immediately. And my curacy church, I mean, I loved my time at Saint Paul's in Bedford. It was a very alien environment to me. It was a civic church, mostly quite well to do people and I love them to bits. But there was some culture clashes early on in terms of approach to conflict and leadership styles and they just couldn't handle how blunt I am. It was a big part of it. And I try not to be, but just to say I am, you know. So there was this feeling when the curacy started and it was a job where the fact I'd kind of handed over my life, there's so many aspects of my material existence to this institution became a very apparent. You know, and I'd have conversations sometimes when various things happened to try and make it clear to those decision makers in the inside circles, I've got no place else to go if this goes wrong, you know, and and there's a danger of moral injury if I feel I have to compromise who I am to keep my job or to keep or to stay employable when this is over, you know, and you kind of have the whole Deacon year and writing to the, the Bishop, etcetera, about becoming a priest being approved for that. And then you have the curacy sign off at the end. And all the while this kind of myth of this little blue book hanging in the background. So I found that really tough. Really, really, really tough. Um,

I mean, and. And the phrase that often came to me, especially speaking with, with colleagues from other denominations who had a particular view of the Church of England, I kept coming back to, was, you know, what profit a man to gain the whole world. But lose or forfeit his very self. And there were times when I felt dangerously close to having to do that, to to be able to keep my place in this institution. And there were times when I was ready to let go and just say, OK, well, you know, if I have to go back to the building site or do something else, then that's what I have to do. And so I found it hard. I, like I say, I meet so many great people in the Church of England, so many great leaders at all different parts and and roles within it. But it is a sick system a lot of the time, culturally, I think. And this is where for me, the whole notion of well-being and the whole notion of inclusion and diversity are called into question because, um, well, Fred Hampton from the Black Panther Party used to do the allegory. If he said if I led you up to the quarantine ward in a hospital and and we wanted to create like a diverse diversity and inclusion statement for that quarantine ward so we could include more people inside it, you'd say I was crazy. You know, and you know we don't, we don't need more diversity and inclusion in a sick system, we need a better system. And then the well-being side of it, what what do we mean by well-being? Do we mean being acclimatised to a system where you feel like you have to lose your soul or do we mean a kind of well-being like that sense of well-being we inherit from the Abrahamic traditions of of of Shalom, of peace and justice and fairness, you know of kind of a return to the land and well-being in that very broad sense as a corporate thing, as a broad well-being not just of human life but of all life. And with a with a particular eye on the poor as well in those Abrahamic traditions and and other traditions too. So I think those, those notions of well-being and inclusion and diversity which we use so easily, I really want to interrogate those and say well, what are we talking about here, Inclusion into what? Whose well-being well-being where well-being at what cost? Yeah. So that that's the kind of thing for me really that I've wrestled with.