The Working Group Task

A working group was asked to explore ways that churches can reach and disciple more people who live in contexts of poverty: a group of people that the church has struggled to reach in recent generations, and who are part of the focus of the Church Commissioners Renewal and Reform strategy. The group is made up of clergy and lay people who have experience of ministry in contexts of poverty across the Diocese.

The Challenge

Poverty in the Diocese of York

More than one in three people in the Diocese of York live in poverty.

The Diocese has a total population of 1,411,969 people living in 470 parishes. According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015, 90 of these parishes are classified as being in the top 20% most deprived in England.¹

The total population of these 90 parishes is 550,453, which represents 39% of the total population of people whom we are called to serve. Many of these people live in the large urban areas of Hull and Middlesbrough and also the coastal towns and villages of the Diocese, with a small percentage around York and Selby.

While this conveys the scale of poverty within the diocese, the depth of poverty in some places is also striking. 27% of the population of the diocese live in parishes are classified as being in the top 10% most deprived in England. 10% of the population live in parishes that are in the most deprived 1% nationally, all within or around Hull and Middlesbrough. Within Middlesbrough there are two of the three most deprived parishes in the country.

A small number of rural parishes also fall within the top 20% most deprived category; however, we also know that much rural poverty can be hidden in smaller pockets.

What is Poverty?

People can be impoverished in different ways, experiencing a poverty of resources, relationship or identity. These problems are closely interlinked, trapping individuals and whole communities in a "Web of Poverty."²
Living with poverty of resources means more than just not having enough money. It’s about the profound sense of vulnerability and dependency that comes from living hand-to-mouth with no safety net. It means living on a low and insecure income, without any or with limited access to the public resources many people take for granted – everything from a good education and public transport, to libraries and leisure facilities.

Poverty of identity occurs when people lack a strong sense of self-worth and a belief in their own ability to respond to challenges. Where these are missing it can lead to depression, low self-esteem, low aspiration, poor mental health and a sense of hopelessness.

Poverty of relationships arises when people have no sense of belonging to anyone or anything, when they lack strong and supportive relationships. This can leave people feeling unworthy of love and unable to give or show love themselves, leaving them isolated and expecting to be let down by others.

The above web is true of people living in urban and rural areas, but there are elements which are particularly characteristic of rural poverty, including seasonal unemployment, unaffordable housing, and fuel and transport poverty.

Listening

So often people in poverty are ‘done to’ rather than having the agency to change things themselves. In response to this the group has begun by listening to people who live and minister in deprived areas: people who are experts in their field, through years of trial and error, with limited or insufficient support. There were seven gatherings across the diocese, listening to approximately 100 people who live and minister in areas of deprivation, in rural, urban, and coastal areas, and seeking answers to these questions:

- What do we long to see?
- What might we do to achieve this?
- How will we know when we have achieved this?

Vision, Approach and Outcomes

Vision – what do we long to see?

We long to see Christians and churches building real, long-term relationships with adults and children, that offer the opportunity to share God’s love and have the potential to bring about transformation in individual lives. This can only happen when churches grow out of their communities and Christians are enabled to live alongside people in their communities. This is long-term work and can be costly: people and churches need the support and resources to enable them to sustain their presence in our poorest communities.

We long to see churches where all are welcome, where people struggling in poverty are equal, are listened to, and can contribute. We long to see local leadership – people from poor communities leading the church in those poor communities, and churches being ‘owned’ by their communities, becoming culturally like the communities they serve, full of a mix of people, with a deeper understanding of local issues and able to respond to the pastoral pain in deprived communities, for churches not just to be about Sunday mornings.

There is a vision for lives transformed, people growing in confidence and self-esteem, knowing they are loved and have purpose and opportunities in their lives, and the opportunity to know God's love in Christ.
It is important that church ministry is not a financial burden for the deprived communities, and for the people of those communities to not think churches are after their money. Church Growth in these contexts often brings additional needs for pastoral care and not money.

**Approach – what will we do?**

Three interlinked proposals have emerged that could help make a difference:

- **Churches as community hubs.** This already happens here and there, offering safe places of hospitality and welcome, working in partnership with supporting charities or agencies. We need to do more of this to be present and accessible.
- **Community ‘chaplains’.** We may seek a better label for what we envisage – lay, local, community leaders, given confidence to be out there where people spend their time, commissioned and paid for the time they give.
- **Community leaders.** People experiencing poverty to be leaders in their own communities. This would lead to re-imagining the shape of ministry in deprived communities and the way the learning might be offered and shared.

Churches need to be present and engaged in communities, providing community facilities and working in partnership with other churches and agencies. Long-term investment is required to enable this to happen, making buildings fit for purpose, and support is needed in applying for grants.

Developing indigenous leadership is vital, for local people to grow in confidence and share their gifts. We want to see mission apprentices and enablers, and for chaplaincy/diaconal ministry to be based in communities. There are already people in poorer communities who with the right funding and nurture can become indigenous leaders. Resources need to be culturally relevant and appropriate for non-literate people. People and resources need to be developed to work with different groups within communities.

**Outcomes – what would this look like?**

If we do these things, we will see churches at the heart of their communities, lives and communities that are transformed, and people responding to the love of God.

Growth means churches that are growing in social diversity and age range, growing in confidence about who we are and what we do, growing in local leadership and growing in numbers. This growth is costly and chaotic, when people start coming to church, they bring with them their needs from complicated, damaged lives, with very few resources. This growth requires more resources from the church to meet these needs.

Growth in reaching people struggling in poverty will happen outside of Sunday mornings, and outside the church building through a variety of ways expressed in hospitality and support. Growth needs to be measured beyond Sunday church attendance.

Growth will include people coming to church and staying, which can be hard when there are very few reasons to stay. Growth looks like someone coming to faith and deciding to stay in their community because they have understood the Gospel which tells them ‘this place may look awful, but people are people, and God loves these people just as much, and probably needs you to stay’. For generations the church has been a way for people to get out of marginalised communities, and that has to change. We need to inspire and support people to
stay, develop them as leaders and work towards more people in senior church leadership who have lived and worked in deprived areas.

**Culture change in the Diocese**

The working group envisages changes in the emphases within the way the diocese operates:

- a better understanding across the Diocese of the nature of ministry in areas of poverty
- a different distribution of existing Diocesan resources, so the way we organise our finances is good news for poorer communities.
- recognition that church growth in poor communities may not lead to an increase in financial giving; growth can in fact be very costly in deprived communities
- investment in and support for indigenous leaders, including suitable training and mentoring.
- recognition that the role of lay people is vital: we need to invest in lay people to help them to have the confidence to know they are really loved by God and they can make a difference in the community where they live
- re-imagination of the shape of ministry in deprived communities: possibly fewer priests, more diaconal and lay ministries, such as children, family, and youth workers, living locally and working together, serving in places where people already meet and gather
- encouragement of vocations to serve in deprived areas – both in clergy and lay people
- encouragement of people who live in deprived areas: we need to celebrate the riches of the church in deprived areas

**The way ahead**

There is lots of work ahead! We want to be part of what God is doing. Jesus says ‘Blessed are you poor, yours is the kingdom of God’ (Lk 6:20)

July 2018

---

i The English Indices of Deprivation 2015 are based on 37 separate indicators, organised across seven distinct domains of deprivation which are combined, using appropriate weights, to calculate the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015 (IMD 2015).
