



Church for the Poor Survey Report Executive Summary November 2016

Introduction

In summer 2016, Church Action on Poverty¹, Jubilee+² and Word on the Streets³ promoted research in the UK on the topic 'Church for the Poor'.

This followed a challenge by Pope Francis to the Catholic Church on his election in May 2013 that he wanted to see 'a poor church, for the poor'. What does this mean in practice? In 2015, Pope Francis added, '**A poor church is a church that practices voluntary simplicity in its life, in its own institutions, in the lifestyle of its members, to break down every wall of separation, especially from the poor. It takes prayer and action. Let us pray intensely that the Lord will shake us to make our Christian families protagonists of this revolution. Let's not forget that the judgement of the needy, the little ones and the poor anticipates the judgement of God. Let's do everything we can to help families to persevere amid the trials of poverty and misery that impact emotions and family bonds.**'

The vision is that the Church should be a place that truly welcomes and stands in solidarity with people in poverty – not just seeing them as passive recipients of our charity.

This is a challenge for all denominations and church families.

Let's look at Pope Francis' story more carefully:

On his election, Francis said he was sitting next to Cardinal Claudio Hummes, Archbishop Emeritus of Sao Paulo, Brazil and when the votes reached the two-thirds majority of the cardinals required to attain the papacy, Hummes, "embraced me and kissed me and said: 'Don't forget the poor'. And those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation. He gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man who wanted a poor church. How I would love a church that is poor and for the poor."

He continued, "Christ is the centre, not the successor of Peter. Christ is the reference point at the heart of the church; without him, Peter and the Church would not exist. The Holy Spirit inspired the events of the past days. The Church

¹ www.church-poverty.org.uk

² www.jubilee-plus.org

³ www.wordonthestreets.net

exists to communicate precisely this: truth, goodness and beauty. It should be apparent that all of us are called not to communicate ourselves, but this existential triad made up of truth, beauty and goodness."

So what does it mean to be a 'Church for – or even of – the poor'?

To what extent are churches focusing on people experiencing poverty in their communities, how are they doing this, what barriers exist and what help may be needed?

To answer these questions, a survey was created and this was promoted to contacts of all denominations and church streams across the UK from July- Sept 2016. There were 384 responses which are analysed below. We hope these results inform the Church and related Charities.

If you have any questions about the information, please contact us through the Word on the Streets website.



Geoff Knott
Word on the Streets

Promoted by



Executive Summary

Clarifying issues

Three issues arose from comments in the survey that need some clarification:

Firstly, what do we mean by the 'poor' – people experiencing poverty? As part of the survey, respondents were asked to identify the deprivation level of the postcode location of their church. The deprivation measure combines information from the seven domains e.g. income, education, health. As this is a recognised measure, it would be good to use this as a definition of the 'poor' whilst recognising that other dimensions will exist e.g. relational, spiritual, often as consequences of the above factors.

Secondly, the Church is for everyone. The Church should be for everyone and we should welcome rich and poor alike. There is danger on a focus on people experiencing poverty. The key here is to become a church that *breaks down every wall of separation, especially from people experiencing poverty*. This speaks to me of inclusion rather

than exclusiveness. Allied to this is the danger of doing things TO people experiencing poverty (which makes us feel good) as opposed to involving them as equals as we do things with and for them.

Thirdly, church location is no barrier to connection to people experiencing poverty. In this mobile society, churches draw their congregations from a wide area. Although the building may be located in an area of ‘least deprivation’, they will have pockets of deprivation locally and often also be fairly close to areas of higher deprivation. Churches need to have a mix of strategies to reach all. However, travel for those experiencing poverty could be a barrier and based on a survey⁴ in July by the CofE, Hope and the EA, English practising Christians tend to be middle class (81% have a university degree compared with 44% of the population). The hidden rules and norms⁵ of the middle class can be barriers in themselves.

Churches in the most deprived areas are involved in ‘poor-focused’ social action

Churches in the least deprived areas focus on a reduced set of social initiatives but churches in the most deprived areas are more socially active and diverse. Is this because of the increased needs in those areas?

What are churches in most deprived areas doing more of? (Measuring the absolute difference in % most/least deprived for each social activity and showing at least a 5% difference):

Initiative	Absolute diff in %
Community Improvement eg clean up	23.2%
Helping Homeless get settled	21.5%
Lunches for needy	17.1%
English as a foreign language	16.7%
Addiction (inc. alcohol and drug abuse)	15.4%
Helping jobless back into work	11.8%
Sex workers/trafficking	10.1%
Debt counselling	10.1%

Initiative (cont)	Absolute diff in %
Schools assemblies/RE work	9.6%
Special needs children	9.2%
Furniture distribution	8.3%
Clothes distribution	7.0%
Social enterprises/businesses	7.0%
Asylum-seekers and Refugees	6.6%
Prison ministry and/or ex-offenders	6.1%

Let’s call these **‘poor-focused’** activities.

What are they doing less of?

Primary school clubs/Summer clubs	-7.0%
Arts - drama, media, music, etc (apart from church members)	-8.8%
Parents and toddlers	-9.6%
Caring for elderly (apart from church members)	-18.0%

From the above you can see that churches in most deprived areas, as well as running more social activities, are focusing on the needs of the population around them. Looking at these initiatives, you can see that these require some specialist knowledge e.g. housing, addiction and a great degree of empathy with those in need.

⁴ <http://www.talkingjesus.org>

⁵ http://wordonthestreets.net/Articles/481670/Hidden_rules_among.aspx

One of the key driving forces of people experiencing poverty is survival⁶. Many of these initiatives help this – food, shelter, skills, etc.

There is a pronounced tail-off in '*poor-focused*' activities as we move from churches in most deprived areas to more deprived, to average deprivation, to less deprived and to least deprived. Or put another way, the more deprived the area, the more that churches run '*poor-focused*' initiatives.

So if one really wants to be a church for the poor, it would seem obvious that a church should review their social initiatives and refocus some or start some which meet the real needs of people experiencing poverty.

Churches in the most deprived areas demonstrated they were a 'church for and of the poor' in all their activities

Churches in areas of most deprivation felt that they demonstrated they were a 'church for and of the poor' across all *their* activities. The ratings entered were much higher than churches in least deprived areas.

This is shown in; social action and external ministries, use of buildings and facilities, allocation of resources, preaching, worship, social events, children's work and youth work, prayer and Bible study and decision-making. However, there is still room for improvement in churches on most deprived areas as ratings for six out of nine local activities did not achieve an average of 'good'.

Two values to note:

1. Preaching. These values are similar in churches in most deprived and least deprived areas. Does this mean that churches in least deprived areas preach about Christianity and poverty but then do not follow that through into action?
2. Churches in least deprived areas feel their denominations do a good job of support for being a 'church for the poor', but the churches actually in most deprived areas are not so sure.

Churches in the most deprived areas are heavily engaged in strategies to reach people experiencing poverty.

As you might expect, churches in the most deprived areas are heavily engaged in strategies to reach people experiencing poverty. This contrasts greatly with churches in least deprived areas. The biggest gaps are:

- Gathering, building relationships and listening to people experiencing poverty 44.7% absolute difference.
- Social action and creating a place/events for those responding 31.0%
- Social action based at your church building 28.5%
- Creating a community without recognisable 'church' trappings 26.9%
- Bringing on leaders from poor backgrounds 23.6%

There is a good level of partnership between churches regardless of location - mostly foodbanks I suspect given the number of churches in all areas involved in this activity.

⁶ Framework for Understanding Poverty Dr Ruby Payne

Reactions to the challenge, hindrances and needs

Respondents agreed that the 'Church for (and of) the poor' is a gospel imperative and necessary for both the church and people experiencing poverty. However, it is difficult and a long way from reality.

There is recognition of the calling and an enthusiasm to pursue but the journey is seen as difficult not least because of issues in the church and lack of leadership on strategies to reach people experiencing poverty.

Churches should learn from what churches are doing in most deprived areas as described above and in more detail in the full report. This should provide many ideas and insights as to possible actions.

Hindrances or difficulties were first of all, lack of resources. Contributing to this are: the old adage that 80% of the work is being done by 20% of the people; the time poverty of people today with busy work and family lives; and the age profile of the congregation. However, it is not only people but money for the initiatives, the resources it takes to keep buildings and practices going and the money that needs to be remitted to denominations.

Some questions about resources need to be asked (not least):

- Are people from the congregation being equipped and released or does the load fall on church leadership?
- Are leaders from the congregation being intentionally developed?
- Are there possibilities to involve volunteers from the local community?
- What teaching and envisioning is being given regarding Christian service?
- How is a church working with other churches?
- What are the priorities for activities (not just social ones)? Should some existing activities be stopped?
- Are denominational leaders empowering local leaders to make changes?
- Do denominational leaders know the demands they are putting on local leaders to keep the 'system' and current structures going?

The next hindrance is just as big an issue as it will involve culture change. This is the issue of a 'middle class' church. It is 'an elephant in the room' which needs to be exposed and talked about. Good people are doing good things but there is evidence of barriers to the poor. Some of the comments illustrate the issues better than I can:

"Middle-class white Christianity - based on intellectual activities - bible reading, preaching etc. We get the bible concept of remembering the poor - but expect them to fit our idea of what church should be like - rather than taking a radical, and biblical approach to discipleship!"

"I think many of our congregation, who are all good people, are actually frightened of those who are poor. Because the poor generally look and speak differently and often behave differently our congregation is not sure how to interact with them."

"Entrenched attitudes among the comfortable."

"People have become comfortable in their own little cocoons in church and do not want it to change they don't want it spoiled."

"Social and political attitudes towards poverty that infiltrate the church fellowship."

"An aging comfortable social club type of church that has a long history of holding themselves above the poorer sections of society"

"Most of our church members are comfortably off and have little experience of poverty themselves. I think they see the poor as 'other', as 'not like us'. They do not seem to see it as an integral part of their faith to give time and/or money to helping the poor."

There needs to be a culture change and that takes leadership and time. One leader who has taken the church on this journey found the following:

- there needs to be a heart change – loving people who are different than us
- as well as teaching, start helping people experiencing poverty – walking with them not just giving things to them
- review existing actions and be bold enough to close or refocus - only start actions if there is a leader to lead
- review what views and attitudes are expressed in all communications
- keep working at it – it takes time and patience

The hindrance above ties in with the other hindrances that were reported; no direct contact with people experiencing poverty, busy doing what we do, lack of vision, not knowing enough about poor and understanding theology re poor.

The support that is needed is:

- a whole range of information including deeper insight on their community, current issues, ideas, models, talks, case studies, speakers, Bible studies, meeting poor people, networking
- training and guidance including others who have done it, first steps, ready-made projects, facilitation
- resources – money and people
- denominational support
- partner with others – churches and charities
- leadership – vision, pioneers, buy-in, dynamic, choosing leaders from poor in denominations

For churches at an early stage, more information and practical help is needed to help leaders and congregations. Denominational encouragement, leading by example and support would be greatly desired, along with being bold enough to manage radical change – ‘new wine in old wineskins’.

Leadership, leadership, leadership

Reflecting on the above, I feel the fundamental need to becoming a church for the poor, one that breaks down every wall of separation, especially from people experiencing poverty, seems to be leadership.

Leaders with a real heart for the poor. Leaders who can take a church through a journey of change. Leaders who can rethink church. Leaders who are empowered and empowering. Leaders who are not afraid to break the mould, stop the irrelevant, try new things. Leaders at both local and denominational level.

Those leaders need a team around them that are committed to the vision and are there for the journey. So the make-up of teams needs also to be reviewed. Remember this sequence; vision, strategy, plans, organisational design. Vision leads to strategy which leads to plans which needs an organisation to deliver. Vision changes least. Organisation changes most. Don't try to deliver new vision, strategy and plans whilst keeping an old wineskin.

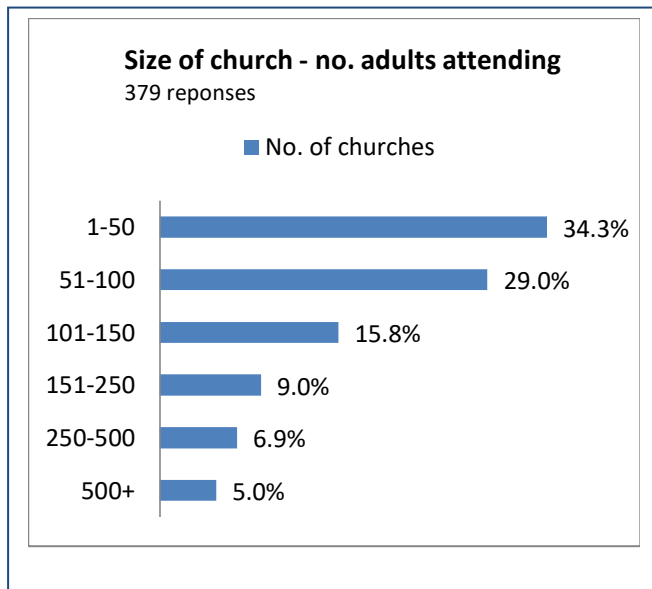
Culture change takes time and requires patience. Some in the church may not want to go on the journey, others will be excited and say ‘at last!’. Tap into enthusiasm, persist through setbacks, celebrate breakthroughs. The journey up a mountain is not a straight path! It is also in the journey, not when you get to the destination, that God will change people.

Prayer is key along with guidance from the Holy Spirit. May you hear His gentle voice clearly.

Demographics

Let's look at the sample of 384 responses:

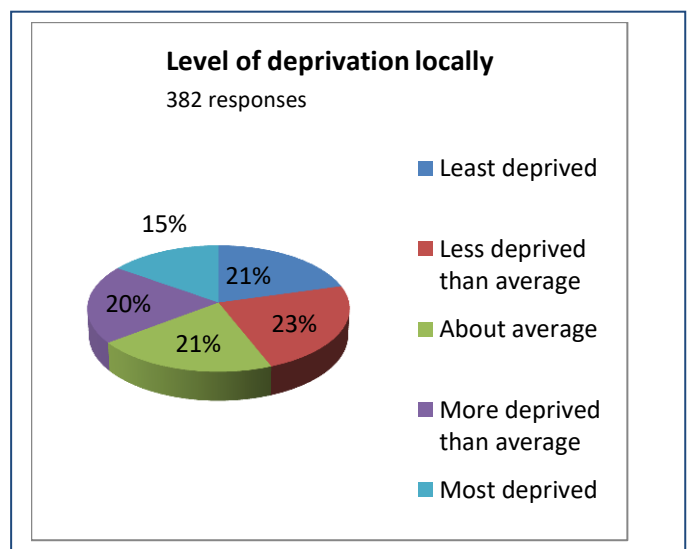
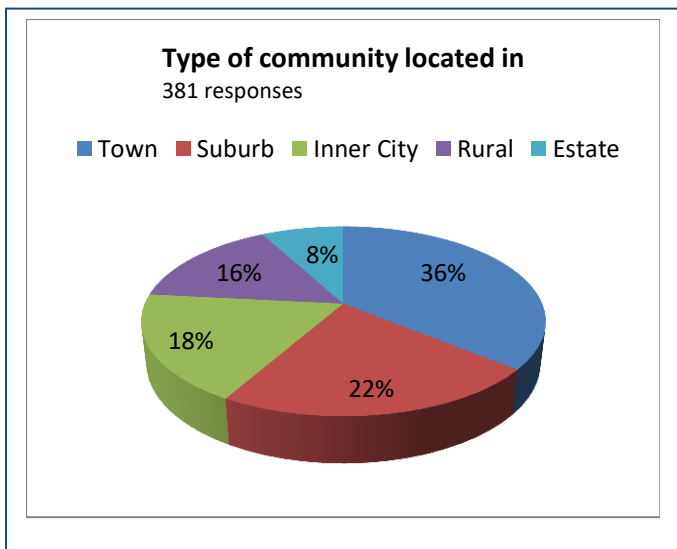
Denomination or Stream	
377 responses	
Church of England	132
Methodist	97
Other	32
Catholic	29
URC	25
Baptist	24
Ecumenical e.g. Methodist/URC	18
Quaker	8
Newfrontiers	7
Church of Wales	5



How does this sample compare to national statistics re Church sizes? Christian Research Religious Trends 6⁷ shows nationally the following statistics re Church size:

- 49% of churches are 50 adults or less.
- 21% are 51-100
- 11% are 101-150
- 13% are 151-300
- 4% are 301-500
- 2% are 500+

So the sample is biased towards medium and larger sized churches and under-represents small churches.



⁷ <http://www.christian-research.org/religious-trends/uk-church-overview/>

The churches in the sample are spread quite evenly across areas which are rated differently in terms of deprivation.

They are also spread well in those areas according to church size:

Adults attending	Deprivation of Area church is located in				
	Most	More	Average	Less	Least
1-50	6.9%	7.4%	6.3%	7.4%	6.3%
51-100	4.0%	6.1%	6.6%	6.9%	5.5%
101-150	1.6%	3.2%	3.4%	4.5%	3.2%
151-250	0.8%	1.6%	2.6%	2.4%	1.6%
250-500	1.3%	1.3%	0.8%	1.1%	2.4%
500+	0.5%	0.8%	0.8%	1.1%	1.8%

Region of UK where church is located	
380 responses	
North East	16.1%
North-West	14.7%
South East	13.7%
South West	13.2%
East Midlands	11.8%
West Midlands	10.0%
East Anglia	7.6%
London	7.4%
Wales	2.9%
Scotland	2.4%
Channel Islands	0.3%
Northern Ireland	0.0%

South-East, London, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are under-represented.