Church for the Poor Survey Report

November 2016

Introduction

In summer 2016, Church Action on Poverty[1], Jubilee+[2] and Word on the Streets[3] 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 Paolo, 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.
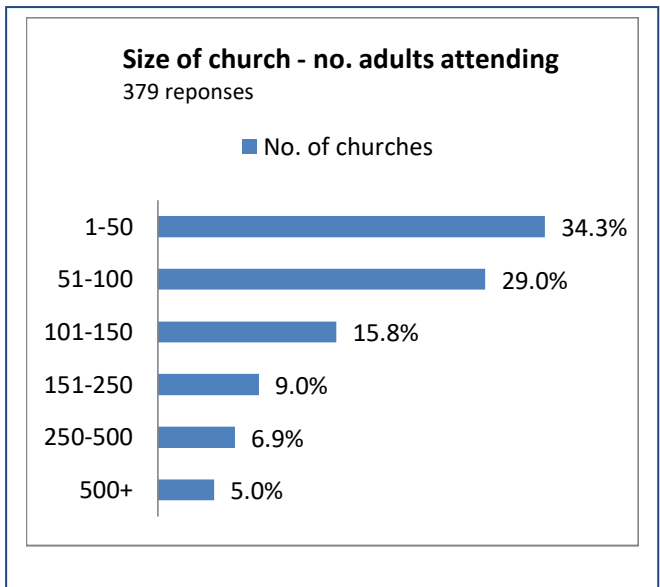
Geoff Knott
Word on the Streets

Promoted by

Demographics

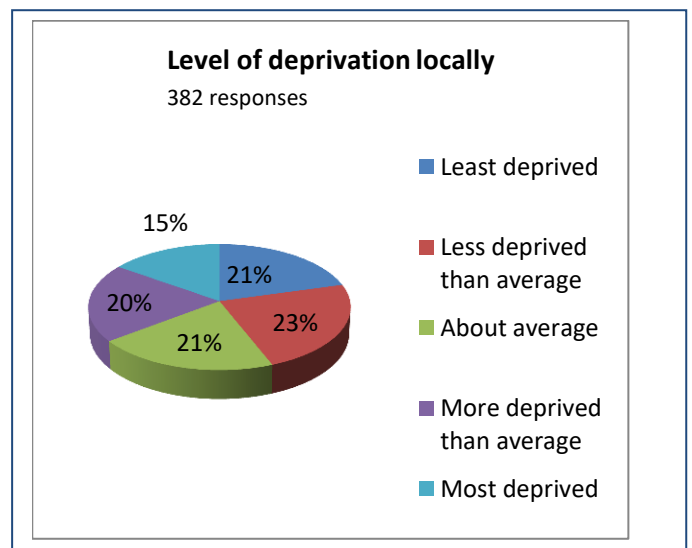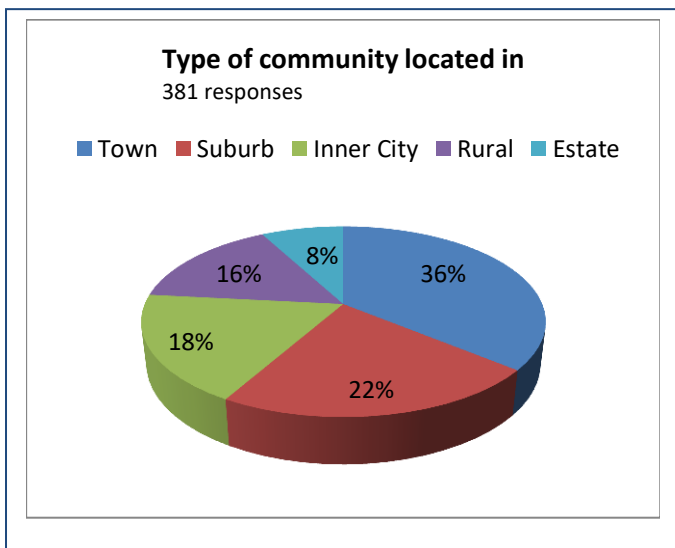Let's look at the sample of 384 responses:

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

Size of church - no. adults attending
379 reponses

■ No. of churches

1-50	34.3%
51-100	29.0%
101-150	15.8%
151-250	9.0%
250-500	6.9%
500+	5.0%

How does this sample compare to national statistics re Church sizes? Christian Research Religious Trends 6[4] 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.

Type of community located in
381 responses

■ Town ■ Suburb ■ Inner City ■ Rural ■ Estate

- 36%
- 22%
- 18%
- 16%
- 8%

Level of deprivation locally
382 responses

■ Least deprived
■ Less deprived than average
■ About average
■ More deprived than average
■ Most deprived

- 15%
- 21%
- 23%
- 21%
- 20%

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[4]

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.

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 survey[5] 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 norms[6] 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%

[5] http://www.talkingjesus.org
[6] http://wordonthestreets.net/Articles/481670/Hidden_rules_among.aspx

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.

One of the key driving forces of people experiencing poverty is survival[7]. 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 would 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.

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 report below. 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 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, support alongside, 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, is 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.

Understanding the 'Church for the Poor'

From responses made in the survey, three issues seem to need further comment:

a) What do we mean by the 'poor'?

This quote from one of the respondents here is indicative; "I'd love to know your definition of 'the poor'. Some people are so poor that all they have is money."

There are many dimensions of poverty; financial, emotional, mental ability, spiritual, physical, relationships and support systems. These all indicate a lack of resources to thrive.

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 to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation[8]. The domains are combined using the following weights:

- Income Deprivation (22.5%)
- Employment Deprivation (22.5%)
- Education, Skills and Training Deprivation (13.5%)
- Health Deprivation and Disability (13.5%)
- Crime (9.3%)
- Barriers to Housing and Services (9.3%)
- Living Environment Deprivation (9.3%)

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, often as consequences of the above factors.

b) The Church is for everyone

The Church should be for everyone and we should welcome rich and poor alike. The greatest challenge is for our common humanity and our equality in the eyes of God to be understood.

There is a danger that the focus on people experiencing poverty might potentially be over-emphasised to the detriment of other groups within society.

This danger is recognised and the challenge as indicated in my introduction is to become '*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 gives equal weight to the two parts of Pope Francis' vision – a 'poor church' that is 'for the poor'. It speaks to me of inclusion rather than exclusiveness.

Allied to this, in the comments, 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.

This was echoed by Rachel Lampard, Vice-President of the Methodist Conference in July 2016[9], *"I wonder if we as Church sometimes struggle with the urge to fix people, to sort them out, rather than be a church of the poor? And how much does this relate to our desire to be the host of every party? Being the host also puts us in a place of control. Our house, our rules. My bat, my ball. Do we really know and understand what it costs sometimes for people to step over the threshold, accept our hospitality, our agenda? What would it mean for us to become guests instead? To receive rather than to be in a position of power, where we assume we only need to give? What does*

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[8] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/467901/English_Indices_of_Deprivation_2015_-_Frequently_Asked_Questions.pdf

[9] https://blog.church-poverty.org.uk/2016/07/13/stop-trying-to-fix-the-poor-says-methodist-vice-president/

doing justice look like when we put ourselves into the hands of others? Well perhaps it means that we can have a deeper understanding of what people really want and need. It means asking them "What do you need to do?" Then work alongside them to help them achieve their own goals."

c) Church location should be 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.

Let's take the example of the borough of Islington in London. It is one of the most deprived local authority areas in the country, but it is also home to some of the wealthiest and influential people in Britain[10]. Islington's prosperity score of 163 places it in the top 20 most prosperous districts nationally but of the 40,000 children and young people in the borough, 45% live in poverty. This equates to 18,000 children and is the second highest rate in the country. Of these, 73% live in lone parent households.

Churches need to have a mix of strategies to reach all. For example, one of the churches that responded to the survey who is located in a least deprived area also planted a church on an estate in a nearby most deprived area.

However, based on a survey[11] 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 norms of the middle class can be barriers in themselves.

Let's dig a little more deeply into this.

Hidden rules are the unspoken cues and habits of a group. If you are in a group, you understand the hidden rules of that group and the danger is you take these for granted that they are for everyone.

Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D., is an American educator and author best known for her book '*A Framework for Understanding Poverty*'[12] which has sold over 1.5M copies and also her work on the culture of poverty and its relation to education.

The following table from her book illustrates some of the hidden rules of groups defined by the resources they have.

These can be; financial, emotional, mental ability, spiritual, physical, relationships and support systems. (Dr Payne relates this to class although we might be uncomfortable with that attribution).

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[10] https://www.islington.gov.uk//~/media/sharepoint-lists/public-records/democracy/information/factsheets/20112012/20120303whatisthepicture
[11] http://www.talkingjesus.org
[12] https://www.amazon.co.uk/Framework-Understanding-Poverty-Ruby-Payne/dp/1929229488/ref=sr_1_2

	POOR	MIDDLE CLASS (COMFORTABLE)	WEALTHY
POSSESSIONS	People.	Things.	One-of-a-kind objects, legacies, pedigrees.
MONEY	To be used, spent.	To be managed.	To be conserved invested.
PERSONALITY	Is for entertainment. Sense of humor is highly valued.	Is for acquisition and stability. Achievement is highly valued.	Is for connections. Financial, political, social connections are highly valued.
SOCIAL EMPHASIS	Social inclusion of people they like.	Emphasis is on self-governance and self-sufficiency	Emphasis is on social exclusion.
FOOD	Key question: Did you have enough? Quantity important.	Key question: Did you like it? Quality important.	Key question: Was it presented well? Presentation important.
CLOTHING	Clothing valued for individual style and expression of personality.	Clothing valued for its quality and acceptance into norm of middle class. Label important	Clothing valued for its artistic sense and expression. Designer important
TIME	Present most important. Decisions made for moment based on feelings or survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Traditions and history most important. Decisions mad partially on basis of tradition and decorum.
EDUCATION	Valued and revered as abstract but not as reality.	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money.	Necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections.
DESTINY	Believes in fate. Cannot do much to mitigate chance.	Believes in choice. Can change future with good choices now.	Noblesse oblige.
LANGUAGE	Casual register. Language is about survival.	Formal register. Language is about negotiation.	Formal register. Language is about networking.
FAMILY STRUCTURE	Tends to be matriarchal.	Tends to be patriarchal.	Depends on who has money.
WORLD VIEW	Sees world in terms of local setting.	Sees world in terms of national setting.	Sees world in terms of international view.
LOVE	Love and acceptance conditional, based upon whether individual is liked.	Love and acceptance conditional and based largely upon achievement.	Love and acceptance conditional and related to social standing and connections.
DRIVING FORCE	Survival, relationships, entertainment.	Work, achievement.	Financial, political, social connections.

Looking at the last row for example, it illustrates that the driving forces of the poor are survival, entertainment and relationships whereas for the middle class, the criteria against which most decisions are made relate to work and achievement. For the wealthy, decisions are considered based on the effect on finance, political and social connections.

Using money for security is grounded in the middle class and wealthy. Those in poverty see money as an expression

of personality and it is used for entertainment and relationships.

Words are used to resolve conflict by negotiation in the middle class and wealthy but what if you don't have the necessary words or even respect them if you are in poverty? Violence is often the way to resolve issues.

You can see the problems here for a church wanting to help the poor. Hidden rules govern so much of our immediate assessment of an individual and his/her capabilities.

There is a danger that a church which is mostly 'middle-class' will assume their hidden rules apply to the poor. They will create plans and strategies based on their rules and will only really accept people into their group that understand and conform to the hidden rules. If you really want the church to be for all, then something has to change.

Therefore churches in more affluent areas can feel completely disconnected from people in poorer areas, or unaware of any poverty that exists locally.

Added to this people experiencing poverty may not be able to travel relatively long distances to attend a church and therefore will not connect.

Involvement in social action

Churches in the survey were asked to record their involvement in a range of specified social action activities. The activities are listed by below in order of highest involvement by churches. These are compared with involvement in my National Church and Social Action 2014, 2012 and 2010 surveys[13] (where possible).

Thinking of organised activities of your Church in the local community in the last 12 months, what external ministry areas have you been involved in by practical action? % of churches in the sample running a particular activity. 370 responses:

Answer options	'Church for Poor'	2014	2012	2010	Church Poor Rank	2014 Rank	2012 Rank	2010 Rank
Food distribution	73.51%	80.20%	61.60%	7.80%	1	1	3	16
Schools assemblies/RE work	47.30%	66.10%	63.80%	2.8%	2	3	1	24
Parents and toddlers	43.51%	70.00%	62.70%	70.60%	3	2	2	2
Festivals/Fun days	38.92%	54.60%	58.80%	5.00%	4	4	4	18
Caring for elderly (apart from church members)	37.84%	44.10%	44.90%	53.90%	5	6	6	3
Cafe open to public	37.30%	38.80%	38.40%	5.00%	6	9	8	19
Asylum seekers and refugees	36.76%	15.90%	13.00%	17.00%	7	26	25	13
Children's club - up to age 11 (apart from church children's ministry)	33.24%	50.20%	50.80%		8	5	5	
Arts - drama, media, music, etc (apart from church members)	30.54%	31.70%	31.10%	1.80%	9	11	9	29
Lunches for needy	27.30%	27.80%	25.10%	5.00%	10	13	12	19
Clothes distribution	24.32%	23.80%	20.90%	7.80%	11	16	17	16
Primary school clubs/Summer clubs	21.08%	31.70%	33.10%	6.00%	12	12	10	17
Addiction (inc. alcohol and drug abuse)	20.00%	24.70%	24.60%	18.80%	13	15	13	10
Youthwork - 12-18 (apart from church youth ministry)	17.84%	42.70%	42.90%	74.50%	14	8	7	1
Helping homeless get settled	17.30%	18.10%	14.70%	36.50%	15	23	23	8
Debt counselling	16.22%	43.20%	26.30%	43.60%	16	7	11	6
Community improvement eg clean up	15.41%	22.50%	16.40%	48.60%	17	18	19	4
Bereavement counselling (apart from church members)	13.51%	18.10%	15.80%		18	22	21	
Street patrols	11.62%	27.80%	22.60%	28.40%	19	14	15	9
Special needs adults	11.08%	19.40%	15.00%	3.20%	20	21	27	22
Visiting sick (apart from church members)	10.54%	17.20%	22.00%	2.80%	21	25	16	23
Prison ministry and/or ex-offenders	10.00%	19.40%	12.40%	17.40%	22	20	22	11
Fitness/Sport (apart from church members)	9.73%	19.40%	16.10%	2.10%	23	19	20	27
Preschool nursery	9.19%	11.00%	14.40%	2.10%	24	29	24	28
Mental health/Stress counselling (apart from church members)	8.92%	11.50%	9.90%	3.90%	25	28	28	21
English as a foreign language	8.38%	10.60%	7.90%		26	31	30	
Helping jobless back into work	8.11%	18.10%	9.60%	17.00%	27	24	29	12
Marriage counselling/courses	7.30%	33.00%	23.70%	45.70%	28	10	14	5
Parenting help/courses	7.30%	22.90%	17.20%	36.90%	29	17	18	7
Furniture distribution	6.76%	14.10%	12.70%	2.10%	30	27	26	28
Sex workers/trafficking	5.68%	7.10%	2.80%		31	37	37	
Special needs children	4.59%	8.40%	7.90%	15.60%	32	36	31	14
Helping with literacy	4.59%	5.70%	6.50%	10.60%	33	38	33	15
Social enterprises/businesses	4.05%	10.10%	5.90%		34	32	34	
Adoption services	2.97%	9.70%	1.70%	1.40%	35	33	38	30
Relationship advice (apart from Marriage Course)	2.70%	11.00%	4.00%		36	30	35	
Recovery from divorce and separation	1.89%	8.80%	4.00%		37	35	36	
HIV/AIDS	1.35%	1.30%	0.80%		38	39	39	
Pregnancy/Post-abortion help	0.81%	8.80%	6.80%	4.60%	39	34	32	20

The average number of initiatives per church in the sample is 7.0. In the National Survey 2014, it was 8.9. It would seem a first glance at the percentages of churches running an activity that this sample of churches is far less engaged in social action than those of the National Survey, although the ranking of each social action is similar.

How true is this as this sample contains a lot more smaller (1-50) churches than the National survey (34.3% vs 20.4%)? So you would expect less initiatives overall to be undertaken.

Looking at the average number of initiatives according to church size in this sample shows this sample is indeed less engaged; the number of initiatives by church size 1-50 adult members is 5.9 in this sample vs 6.8 in the National Survey, 51-100 7.0 vs 9.0, 101-150 7.5 vs 10.3, 151-250 8.5 vs 12.0, 251-500 9.0 vs 12.7.

Focusing in on the 'Church for the Poor'

Regardless of the level of engagement in social activities, could there be some insights into being 'a church for the poor' by looking at the social action activities of churches in least deprived areas versus those in most deprived?

Let's take a look:

Here are answers to the same question above, '*Thinking of organised activities of your Church in the local community in the last 12 months, what external ministry areas have you been involved in by practical action?* but analysed by the level of deprivation in the postcode where the church who responded is sited. Only social activities being offered by at least 12% of the churches in the sample at those locations are listed:

Churches in most deprived areas (57 responses)	% Churches	Churches in least deprived (76 responses)	% Churches
Food distribution	73.7%	Food distribution	72.4%
Schools assemblies/RE work	54.4%	Parents and toddlers	50.0%
Asylum-seekers and refugees	42.1%	Caring for elderly (apart from church members)	46.1%
Festivals/Fun days	40.4%	Festivals/Fun days	44.7%
Parents and toddlers	40.4%	Schools assemblies/RE work	44.7%
Lunches for needy	36.8%	Asylum-seekers and refugees	35.5%
Community Improvement eg clean up	35.1%	Cafe open to public	35.5%
Cafe open to public	31.6%	Children's Club - up to age 11 (apart from church children's ministry)	32.9%
Children's club - up to age 11 (apart from church children's ministry)	31.6%	Arts - drama, media, music, etc (apart from church members)	31.6%
Addiction (inc. alcohol and drug abuse)	29.8%	Clothes distribution	21.1%
Caring for elderly (apart from church members)	28.1%	Primary school clubs/summer clubs	21.1%
Clothes distribution	28.1%	Lunches for needy	19.7%
Helping homeless get settled	28.1%	Addiction (inc. alcohol and drug abuse)	14.5%
Debt counselling	24.6%	Debt counselling	14.5%
Arts - drama, media, music, etc (apart from church members)	22.8%	Youthwork - 12-18 (apart from church youth ministry)	14.5%
English as a foreign language	19.3%		
Youthwork - 12-18 (apart from church youth ministry)	19.3%		
Helping jobless back into work	15.8%		
Primary school clubs/Summer clubs	14.0%		
Prison ministry and/or ex-offenders	14.0%		
Sex workers/trafficking	14.0%		
Street patrols	14.0%		

It is interesting that foodbanks feature as the top social initiative regardless of the level of deprivation in the area. This is probably because the foodbank in a town or borough is often run in co-operation by several churches.

However from the above it appears that 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 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%
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 the 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.
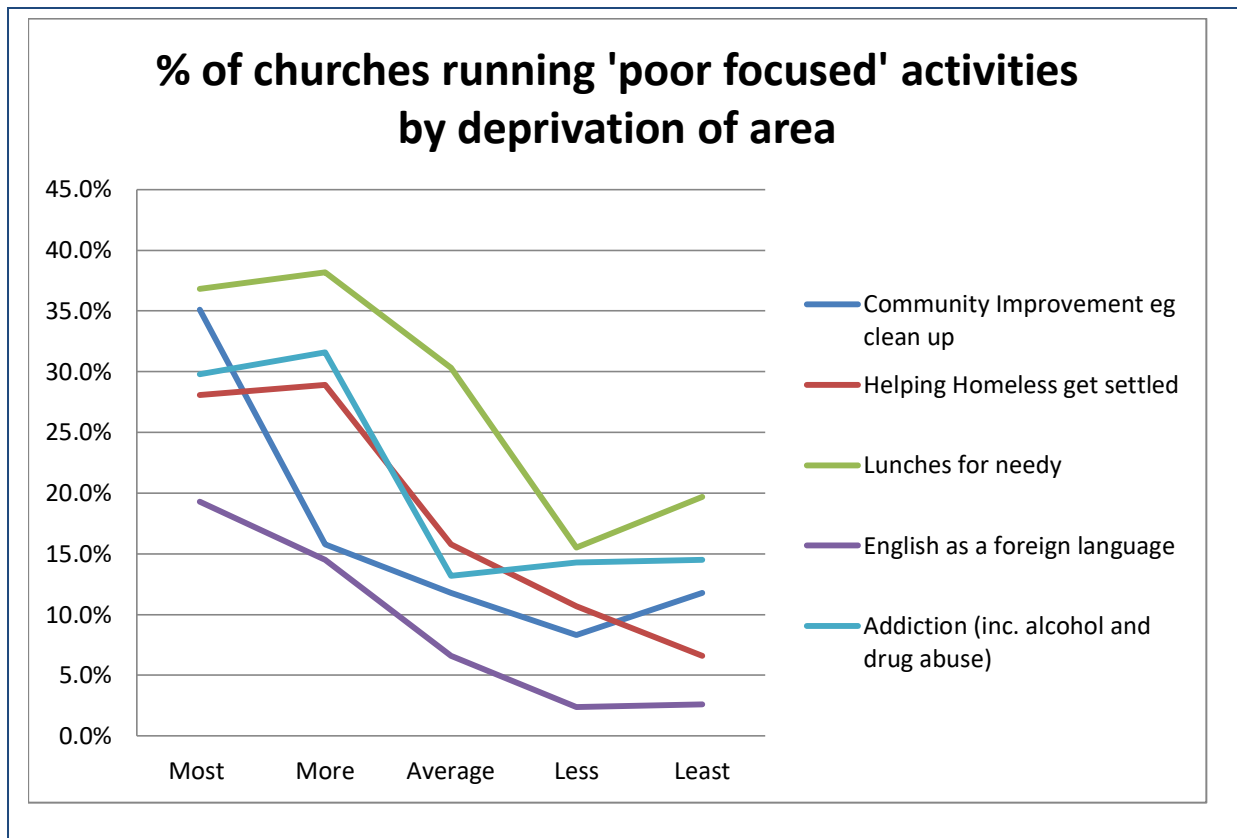
One of the key driving forces of people experiencing poverty is survival[14]. Many of these initiatives help this – food, shelter, skills, etc.

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

If the above is true we should see a tail-off in the above activities as we move from churches in most deprived areas to more deprived, to average deprivation, to less deprived and to least deprived.
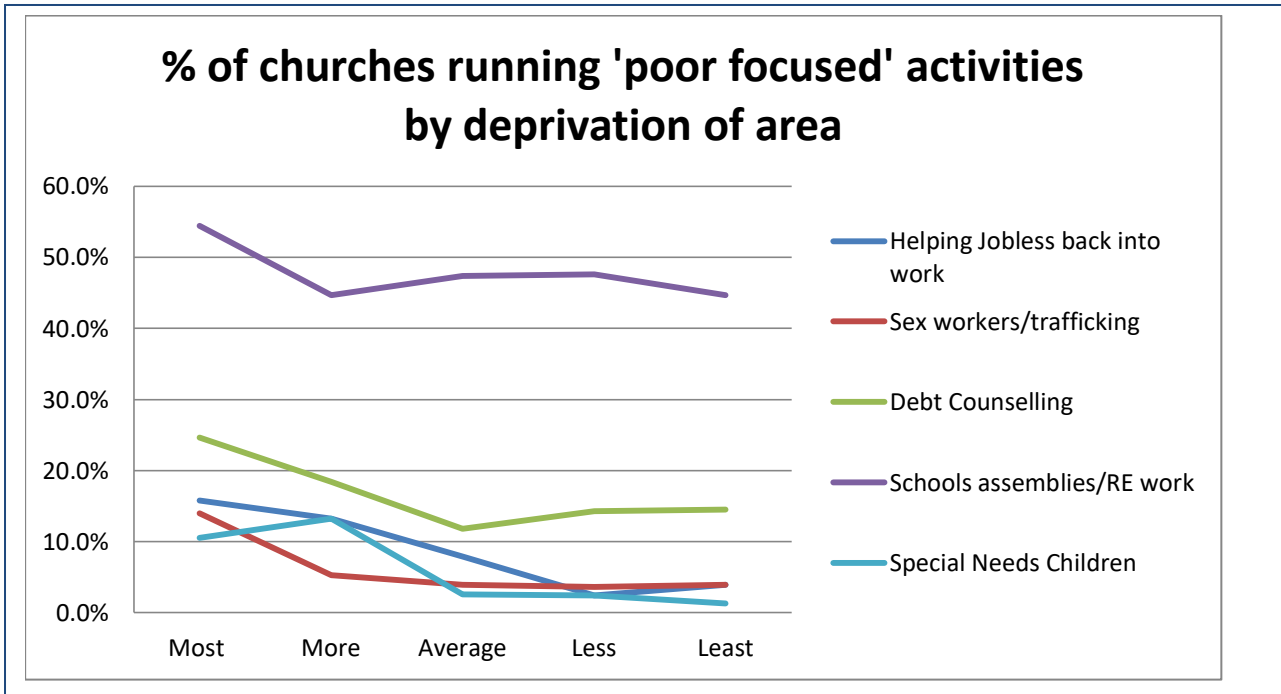
This is what the data show:
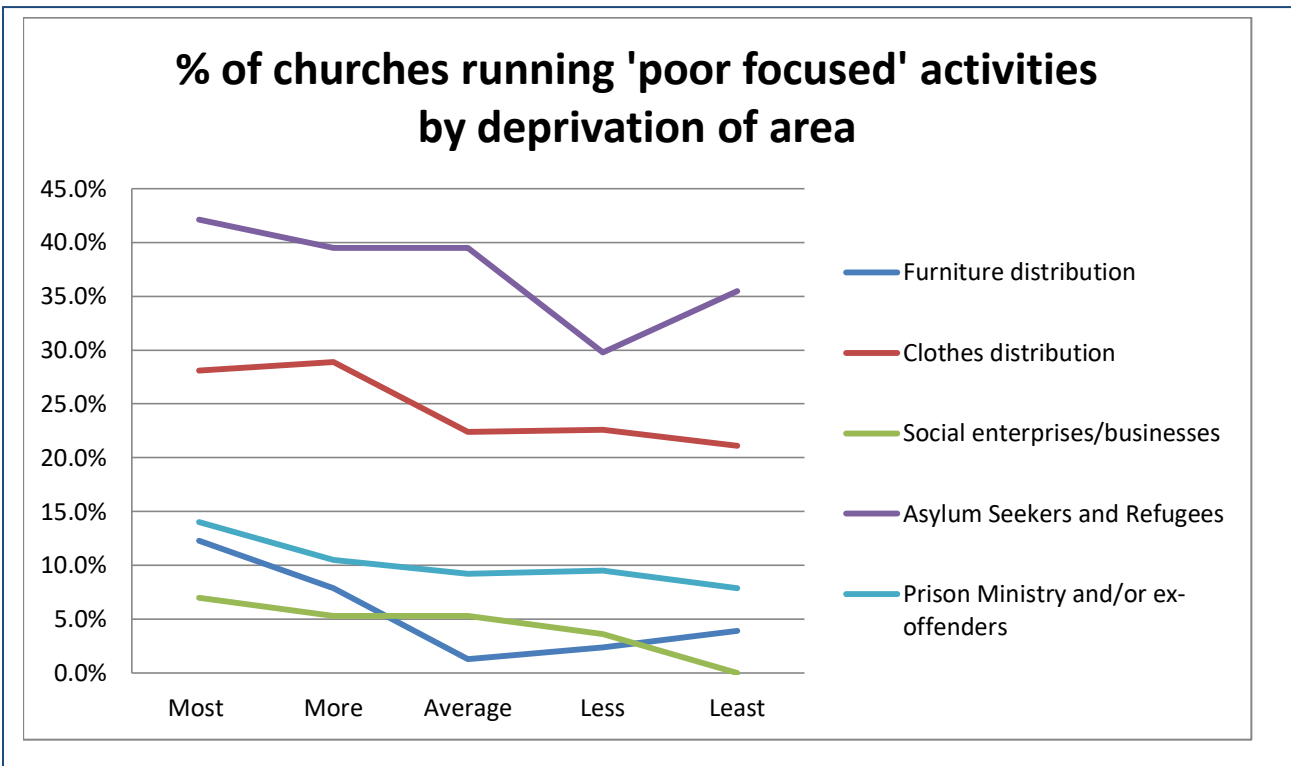
Top 5 'poor-focused' activities

'Poor-focused' activities 6-10:

% of churches running 'poor focused' activities by deprivation of area

Legend:
- Helping Jobless back into work
- Sex workers/trafficking
- Debt Counselling
- Schools assemblies/RE work
- Special Needs Children

'Poor-focused' activities 11-15:

% of churches running 'poor focused' activities by deprivation of area

Legend:
- Furniture distribution
- Clothes distribution
- Social enterprises/businesses
- Asylum Seekers and Refugees
- Prison Ministry and/or ex-offenders

The trends are very clear. The more deprived the area, the more churches run 'poor-focused' initiatives.

'Church for and of the poor' in all activities

Churches in the survey were asked to *rate the extent* they felt that certain of their activities e.g. prayer demonstrated they were a 'church for and of the poor'.

The ratings were; 'Not at all', 'To a small extent', 'Somewhat', 'To a good extent', 'To a great extent'. By allocating a weighting of 1-5 to each of these, we can calculate an average for the sample. So an average of 3.5 would be between 'somewhat' and 'to a good extent'. Obviously, a higher average would indicate activities were focused on people experiencing poverty.

These were the results, contrasting churches in most and least deprived areas.

To what extent do you feel that your church is truly a 'church for and of the poor' when it comes to… Average of churches. 2=To a small extent, 3=To a good extent, 4=To a great extent.

	Most deprived (57 responses)	Least deprived (79 responses)	
	Weight	Weight	Difference
Social action and external ministries?	3.43	2.80	0.63
Use of buildings and facilities?	3.32	2.45	0.87
Allocation of resources?	3.05	2.58	0.47
Preaching?	2.96	2.86	0.10
Worship?	2.93	2.57	0.36
Support from your denomination or stream, regionally or nationally?	2.87	3.03	-0.16
Social events?	2.78	2.32	0.46
Children's work and youth work?	2.74	2.33	0.41
Prayer and Bible study?	2.59	2.48	0.11
Decision-making?	2.57	2.15	0.42

Churches in areas of most deprivation felt that across all *their* activities (not their denomination) they demonstrated they were 'a church for and of the poor' – much more than churches in least deprived areas.

This is shown in the choice of social action, use of buildings, allocation of resources, social events, decision making, etc. **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.

'Church for and of the poor' in strategy

Churches in the survey were asked what strategies, if any, they using to reach people experiencing poverty. A number of strategies were presented and respondents were asked to tick all that applied to their churches.

There was also an opportunity to enter free text if a strategy was not on the list.

What strategies, if any, are you using to reach the poor? (tick all that apply):

Strategy to reach the poor	All (330 responses)	Level of deprivation in area	
		Most (49 resp)	Least (68 resp)
Partnering with other churches to create initiatives to reach poor	53.0%	67.3%	54.4%
Social action based at your church building	51.5%	65.3%	36.8%
Gathering, building relationships and listening to the poor	34.5%	65.3%	20.6%
Creating a community without recognisable 'church' trappings	32.1%	49.0%	22.1%
Social action and creating a place/events for those responding	30.3%	53.1%	22.1%
Social action based in the poorer community at a 'neutral' location	23.6%	34.7%	29.4%
Other	18.5%	20.4%	17.6%
Bringing on leaders from poor backgrounds	12.1%	26.5%	2.9%
Helping the poor speak to business and/or authorities	11.5%	26.5%	4.4%
New church plant in the poorer area	6.1%	14.3%	2.9%

Other strategies being pursued apart from above:
- Giving to and volunteering for local charities - 14 mentions
- On local authority groups influencing policy – 3 mentions
- Working with other faiths – 3 mentions

As you would 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 - mostly foodbanks I suspect given the number of churches in all areas involved in this activity.

Reactions to the challenge to become a church for (and of) the poor

Respondents were asked, *'What is your reaction to the challenge to become a church for (and of) the poor?'*. There were 343 free text responses.

Themes were analysed. A text response could contain more than one theme e.g. support for the challenge and pointing out a difficulty. The number of mentions of a theme were counted giving an idea of most common thoughts.

These are the themes that emerged in order of mentions:

1. The church for (and of) the poor is a gospel imperative, important, necessary for both the church and people experiencing poverty. 117 mentions.

2. It is difficult, a long way from reality, daunting, feel inadequate, not doing enough. 92 mentions.

3. Challenging, personally excited, want to do it. 69 mentions.

4. There are issues in the church which stop us – elderly congregation, unwillingness, lack of volunteers, resources, middle-class mindset, tradition, church as it is is not attractive to people experiencing poverty. 58 mentions.

5. We are already doing/are. 54 mentions.

6. Lack of leadership, vision, strategy, low priority, pressures from denomination re money. 32 mentions.

7. It should be a church for all – danger of focus on poor and exclusion of others. 27 mentions.

8. Need to understand what to do, thinking it through, where to start. 19 mentions.

9. Hard to do due to location, don't have poor near, hard to identify poor. 19 mentions.

10. Need to define 'poor'. 7 mentions.

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.

The analyses above of what activities and strategies churches in most deprived areas are employing should give ideas and insights as to possible actions.

Hindrances

The next question was *'What do you feel most hinders you becoming a church for (and of) the poor?'* There were 340 free text responses.

Themes were analysed. A text response could contain more than one theme. The number of mentions of a theme were counted giving an idea of most common thoughts.

These are the themes that emerged in order of mentions:

1. Lack of resources – people (time poverty and lack of leaders), money, buildings, ageing congregation, small, lack of commitment. 116 mentions.

2. Middle-class cocoon, club, comfortable culture, respectability, image, selfishness, fear of poor, belief by some members of congregation that problems of poor are own fault. 90 mentions.

3. No direct contact, invisibility, location in affluent area, apathy. 70 mentions.

4. Busy doing what we do. Not church the way we understand it. Internal focus. Need to keep building going. 47 mentions.

5. Lack of vision, no leadership. 41 mentions.

6. Not knowing enough about poor, training, confidence, where to start. 26 mentions.

7. Understanding theology re poor, scepticism re social gospel. 16 mentions.

Lack of resources has come out as the number one hindrance in both this survey and the National Surveys.
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 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 of a 'middle class' church 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 above obviously then ties in with the hindrances that follow: no direct contact; busy doing what we do; lack of vision; not knowing enough about poor and understanding theology re poor.

Support needed

The final question was *'What kind of external support would help you to become a church for (and of) the poor?'* There were 321 free text responses.

Themes were analysed. A text response could contain more than one theme. The number of mentions of a theme were counted giving an idea of most common thoughts.

There were a lot of 'don't knows' but these are the themes that emerged in order of mentions:

1. Information – on our community, current issues, ideas, models, talks, case studies, speakers, Bible studies, meeting poor people, networking. 80 mentions.

2. Training – guidance, others who have done it, first steps, ready-made projects, support alongside, facilitation. 56 mentions.

3. Resources – money to keep the buildings going so we can do social action, volunteers, funding, workers. 46 mentions.

4. Denomination support – be an example, challenge, assess and monitor, advise, clear leading, stop dogmatic requirements, national speaking out. 36 mentions.

5. Partner with others – churches and charities. 31 mentions.

6. Leadership – vision, pioneers, buy-in, dynamic, choose leaders from poor. 25 mentions.

7. Link with churches in poor areas and vice-versa. 16 mentions.

8. Prayer . 13 mentions.

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'.