



More than Food

This is a personal article by Val Potter, County Ecumenical Officer for Dorset. It is a 'Features' paper from the website of Churches Together in England with the intention of engaging further debate about a topic of common concern in 'churches together'.

The South West Regional Churches' Forum brought together Christians and representatives of church groups who give out food to those in need in the region. We learned about underlying causes of poverty and explored ways in which the churches can respond, not only in meeting immediate need, but how together we might become agents of change so that food banks are no longer necessary.

From April, a significant proportion of the population will be affected by more than one cut in public spending as well as inflation rises in energy, food and rented housing. Poor households spend a higher percentage of their income on these compared to average and wealthier households. We are called to give bread to the poor, but also encouraged to ask why the poor have no bread. As we respond pastorally to vulnerable people, we are called to speak prophetically and to seek social justice with them.

'When I give bread to the poor they call me a saint, when I ask why they are poor they call me a Communist' Bishop Camara of Brazil.

The facts of poverty

Ruth Levitas, Sociology Professor at Bristol University, presented statistics from both national surveys on poverty and food bank users themselves. A shocking 36% of recipients of food are children, and the poverty survey showed that the number of people in England lacking 3 or more basic essentials for living (e.g. damp-free home, 2 meals a day, adequate heating) has doubled since 1989, despite a tightening of the list of items considered essential.

Who uses food banks?

Many were surprised by the number of food banks in rural areas as well as in the cities and larger towns. Users were mainly either on low incomes and thrown by a change in circumstance (illness, unexpected expenditure) or caught up in benefit changes or delays. All food banks offer a listening ear and many sign-post to other agencies or share premises with other services such as job clubs, money advice or second hand shops. There was a concern that older people are under-represented in usage, despite their eligibility, so suggested that information be made available in appropriate places.

The way ahead

Whilst applauding the efforts of churches and community groups to meet local need there was an underlying unease at the state of the country that such needs continue to exist and to be seen to be increasing. The discussion groups offered 3 challenges for the churches to consider:

- To use opportunities to challenge the myths and stigmatisation of those in need. See www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandliesaboutpoverty

- To engage with the political process to contribute to the debate on economic policies and the priorities for the use of shrinking public funds.
- Whilst acknowledging the need for basic necessities it is important to challenge the materialistic values of the world. True happiness is to be found in loving relationships with each other and inner peace with God.

Can the Church re-discover its prophetic voice?

Martyn Goss, social responsibility adviser for Exeter Diocese, followed the group discussion with a challenge to the churches:

'From my perspective of church & society we need not only to pick up the pieces and heal human brokenness, but also to ask deeper question as to why they are broken in the first place. What are the causes of food poverty in Britain? Are there more systemic questions about justice and equality? How do we address these?

We are called not only to pastoral care but also to prophetic ministry.

The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) are those who literally 'speak out' in the face of fragmentation and oppression. They read the signs of the times and speak in favour of the weak and vulnerable, and they ask not for care as much as for justice or righteousness. The '*nevi'im*' voice the concerns and fears of the '*anawim*', those who carry heavy loads – including the hungry, the thirsty and those who depend on the economic generosity of others. They are forth telling (not *ro'ehim*) and thus speak truth to power...

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and the later 8th century prophets had three specific roles:

- * to warn of what happens as covenantal practice and divine guidelines are ignored. Amos warns against those who add field to field, vineyard to vineyard, and so on...
- * to call for a change of heart, and for a change of policy or practice on behalf of the decision makers in favour of the whole community. Micah calls for humility, kindness and justice...
- * to give rise for hope for the people of God, for all humanity, and for all life. Hosea speaks of Israel blossoming like a lily or a cedar tree refreshed through divine care.

When society seems numbed or hypnotised as to what is happening, the prophetic ministry calls for a different view to the dominant culture and to energise alternative lifestyles.

So if we put ourselves in this prophetic position today what do we need to say and who do we need to say it to...? How can we be more prophetic to promote better health and well-being? Why do individuals, families and communities go hungry in the South West? Why do we waste so much food in the region where about 30% is discarded every day? Where are the signs of hope for the longer term in the face of food poverty now? Should we plan to put ourselves (food banks) out of business?!

Can we move from being providers of first aid to agents of change?'

Val Potter May 2013

www.cte.org.uk/features