

Let Justice Flow

An Introduction to Social Justice



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Understanding Social Justice



It might be said that all of the world's most popular religions are, fundamentally, focussed on two priorities, namely, enabling human beings to live together in life-enhancing community in harmony with the rest of creation, and helping people to relate to the divine. This is summed up in the 'Golden Rule' which is present in virtually every manifestation of religion and faith around the globe, 'Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.' (Luke 6:31)

For Christians, these two aims and their centrality to life and faith are perhaps best expressed through Matthew 22:37-40, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'

The Anglican Bishops' Pastoral Letter of February 2015 puts this well by stating that, '[a]s followers of Jesus Christ we believe that every human being is created in the image of God and is therefore to be treated with respect and with dignity. But we are not made in isolation. We belong together in a creation which should be cherished and not simply used and consumed.'

From the beginning of Genesis, right through to the close of Revelation, a strong focus on this search for respect and dignity in community, which we refer to today as 'social justice', can be strongly felt.

Understanding Social Justice

The prophet Amos wrote:

'Let justice roll down like water,
like the torrent that roars down
the parched river bed
when God's rain has fallen on
the hills.

Let righteousness flow like a
spring that never stops,
that even in the heat of summer
brings life to the dry ground.'

(Amos 5 : 24 from 'The Book
of Books - the Bible retold' by
Trevor Dennis)



In Old Testament Hebrew, there are two words for justice; 'Mishpat' (מִשְׁפָּט), concerning the rule of law, involving the punishment of criminals, and 'Tzedakah' (צְדָקָה) which relates more to distributive justice. The latter looks towards a time when all people will have a fair share of the resources of this world with understanding that no-one should be without the basic requirements of existence. It is evidently the latter which Amos referred to.

Micah then echoes this by asking 'What does the Lord require of you?' answering boldly, '[t]o do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6 : 8).

Through their concern with social justice, the prophets offer a vision of God's future, a future of equality and righteousness in political, social, economic and religious spheres. It is as a result of these visions of how things should be that they are often so critical of the way things are.

This sense of scepticism, as well as the call to continue in the struggle against injustice, continues in the Gospels, with Jesus Himself telling us how we must act:

'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me'

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25 : 35 - 40)

As Jonathan Sacks puts it, 'We must speak the silent cry of those who today suffer from want, hunger, disease, powerlessness and lack of freedom - we need to recover an older tradition that spoke of human solidarity, of justice and compassion, and of the non-negotiable dignity of individual lives.' (The Dignity of Difference, Continuum Publishing, London, 2002)

We need to listen for God's word for our world today and do all we can to make a difference to world trade, to climate change, to equality, to poverty in the UK and to the stigma around mental health and disability. These are only a few of the issues which need our attention if we are to build God's Kingdom of faith, hope, justice and love.

**Let Justice Flow:
An Introduction to Social Justice**

How To Use This Resource

Each section of this resource offers material for at least one session for children's and youth groups to help them understand and engage with the issue in question (e.g. 'World Trade', 'Climate Change', etc.). Some are split into sub-sections to allow more topics within the issue to be explored over a number of sessions (e.g. 'Poverty in the UK' and 'Equality'). In both cases, each section and sub-section contains enough material to cover at least 1 ½ to 2 hours' session time.

This resource is designed to be used in whatever way is most relevant or useful for each group or context in which it is used. Leaders are encouraged to choose the material that will work best with their group. There is no need to do everything!

Each section (and sub-section) contains the following elements:

Understanding.../Introduction

Some information to help groups grasp the basics of the issue in question and how it affects people.

Why Should Christians Care? – Some words of inspiration to help groups grasp why it is that Christians ought to be involved in doing something about the issue.

Games

A few light challenges and activities to slowly introduce the issue to the group.

Activities

More detailed tasks to allow groups to delve further into the issues and how to respond to them.

Questions for Discussion

Some questions to encourage groups to think more deeply about the underlying factors behind an issue or involved in tackling injustice within it.

Biblical Reflection

A chance to look more closely at one of the crucial Scriptural texts in relation to the issue.

Prayer

Some inspiration for conversation with God about these crucial issues.

Taking it Further

A few additional suggestions for the group to consider.

Additional Resources

A few additional materials or organisations for the group to consider.

If you require any more information or have any questions regarding anything covered in this resource, please contact the Pilots Desk for assistance on 020 7916 8637, by e-mail to pilots@urc.org.uk or by post to Pilots Desk, URC House, 86 Tavistock Place, London, WC1H 9RT.

Climate Change

Understanding Climate Change

Our climate is changing. Temperatures are getting hotter, rainfall patterns are unpredictable and sea levels are rising. Scientists are now 95% certain that climate change is occurring as a result of human activities, such as burning fossil fuels.

Some of the effects, such as increases or decreases in temperature, sun levels and amounts of rain

are visible across the globe. Others cause concern in specific parts of the world, such as the Pacific islands, where land is slowly being swallowed up through rising sea levels.

Many of the foods and clothing, not to mention much of the technology we use, could be at serious risk as the planet finds itself unable to provide us with the habitats and resources we need for life as we know it.

It is important to be aware that the world's poorest people are usually affected first and worst, yet they do the least to cause the problem. They simply use what they need, yet often suffer so much because of the pressure which others put on the planet.

Climate change is affecting everyone, so we all need to work together to support our neighbours throughout the world. We need to speak out about this important issue and take steps to lower our own carbon footprints. We need to join together and take action to these threatening changes to our climate, once and for all.

Through this section, participants will learn a little about how climate change is affecting their own lives, as well as the lives of others throughout the world. They will hear stories from Commitment for Life and Christian Aid partners and will identify practical steps which can be taken in support of the crucial fight against climate change.

Why Should Christians Care?

A Christian Aid paper from 2007 entitled 'All Creation Groaning' by Paula Clifford suggests that climate change is, above all, a justice issue.

For too long we, as human beings, have taken the words 'subdue' and 'rule over...every living creature', from Genesis 1:28, to mean that we are free to do whatever we like with the gift of creation. This has resulted in careless, selfish attitudes towards creation which have led to increased and more rapid changes in the climate around us.

However, the Psalmist tells us that, '[t]he earth is the Lord's, and everything in it'. (Psalm 24:1). Colossians 1:16-17 also speaks of the centrality of God in creation, '[f]or by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'



The world we live in is not simply a possession to be exploited, but a crucial part of God's ultimate plan, a plan which will always focus on love, peace and justice; a plan which will always give us 'hope and a future' (Jeremiah 29:11).

Humans, therefore, are here to be stewards of the earth, to 'work it and take care of it' (Genesis 2:15) rather than squander and spoil it. We have a responsibility for the wellbeing of all the creatures which share the earth with us.

The struggle for climate justice is one with a strong biblical imperative. It is about allowing everyone, and everything, to live life to the fullest extent possible, as is the will of God!

Games

The Island Game – Due to climate change, island communities fear for their homes as sea levels rise. Split the group into pairs and give each pair a sheet of newspaper (an island). The pairs must stand on their island without stepping off and touching the sea (the floor). Count down ten seconds, during which all participants must remain safely balanced on their island. After each round, fold the paper in half. The pair that is able to stand on the smallest island without stepping into the sea wins. Why not challenge the group to see how many people they can get onto a single island?

Tripa Chuca (Dirty Guts) – Tripa Chuca is a popular game in El Salvador, where climate change is a real problem. The game is played in pairs. Each pair is given a sheet of paper with two sets of numbers from 1-20 spread randomly across the page. The first player begins by drawing a line connecting each number 1, without touching any other number or line on the page. Player two must then draw a line connecting each number 2, again, without touching any other number or line in the page. The game continues with each player taking it in turns to connect the numbers in sequence. The game will become increasingly difficult when players approach the higher numbers, as there will be more and more lines to avoid! If a player touches another line or an incorrect number, they lose.

Activities

'For the love of...' Heart Collage – The Climate Coalition's 'For the love of...' campaign encourages people to think about the things they want to treasure and protect by asking them to write or draw the things which they cherish the most on heart-shaped cards. Why not take this a bit further? Provide the group with coloured paper, pens and magazines and ask participants to draw or find images of the things that they love. Stick these images together to make one, giant heart-shaped collage. Participants could also write a short sentence explaining how climate change does or might affect these precious things.

Mini Campaign Banners – Have the group make mini placards using lolly sticks and paper with a message about climate change. Send these placards to their local MP, asking them what they are going to do to tackle climate change.

Environmental Refugee Simulation – For many people the effects of climate change, particularly in the shape of extreme weather conditions and rising sea levels, leave communities with no choice but to relocate. Christian Aid has produced an excellent simulation activity encouraging participants to imagine that they are part of a family from Bangladesh, a Commitment for Life partner country, forced to move away from home due to climate change. Visit http://learn.christianaid.org.uk/Images/disaster-zone-secondary-simulation-game_tcm16-70582.pdf or contact the Pilots Desk for more information.



Questions for Discussion

- Is climate change worth caring about? Or is it something which is going to happen anyway, despite our efforts to avoid it?
- Can you imagine what it must be like to live in a place where your home, livelihood, food and family are at serious risk because of climate change? How would you react? Who would you go to for help?
- What more could governments worldwide, and international organisations such as NATO, the EU and UN do in tackling climate change? How might they be persuaded to do more?

Biblical Reflection

Read Matthew 6:25-34.

This passage could easily be interpreted as a call against action on climate change. 'Don't worry!' Jesus says, 'God will take care of everything.' Does this mean that we shouldn't worry about climate change?

It is important to remember that this passage is referring to situations where people are worrying about themselves, where their food will come from, how they will afford their own clothes, how they will care for their responsibilities. Me, me, me!!!

Jesus is clear in His reply, that God will provide all we need to take care of ourselves. What Jesus is even clearer about, though, in the speeches He gave, the stories He shared and the miracles He performed, is that God gives us what we need for a purpose. We do not receive what we do because we want it, or even because we deserve it, but because God has entrusted us with two great responsibilities, to love Him and love our neighbour, as it is only in carrying out these two fundamental duties that we can make the world a safe, loving and just place for all.

Put simply, God looks after us so that we can look after others.

Prayer

We believe, gracious God, that it was your love which created the beautiful world around us, a world which you ask us to care for with compassion.

But we realise that it is a fragile world, and we do not always care for it in the way you desire us to.

We pray for world leaders, asking that they will take the problems raised by climate change seriously.

We pray for those campaigning to combat climate change, particularly for the work they do among the world's most vulnerable communities.

We ask your forgiveness when our lifestyle choices contribute to climate change and, with conditions getting worse as time goes on, seek your help as we do what we can to make a difference.

Bless us and prepare us for your service, AMEN.



Taking it further

Why not:

- host a climate change awareness event or worship service in your church?
- encourage participants to try some of the Christian Aid Collective's climate challenges, such as taking up cycling, buying nothing new, eating less meat or using less plastic, for a certain amount of time, sharing their progress with the rest of the group as they go? Check out www.christianaidcollective.org/climate-challenge for more information.
- invite someone from your local Christian Aid office (visit <http://www.christianaidcollective.org/> for more information), local councillors or constituency MP to attend one of your group's sessions?

Additional Resources

Christian Aid – A Christian organisation with the fundamental assertion that the world can and must be swiftly changed to one completely free of poverty. The organisation provides urgent, practical and effective assistance where the need is greatest, tackling the effects of poverty as well as its root causes, not least among them, climate change. Find out more about Christian Aid's ongoing climate campaign and relevant materials at www.christianaid.org.uk/ActNow/climate-justice/

Commitment for Life – As the world development programme of the United Reformed Church, Commitment for Life encourages participating congregations to take action, pray and donate money to assist people across the world, including on matters relating to climate change. Have a look at www.urc.org.uk/mission/commitment-for-life/resources.html for more resources and information.

Global Justice Now – A democratic social justice organisation working as part of a global movement to challenge the powerful and create a more just and equal world. The group, formerly known as the World Development Movement, is also a Commitment for Life Partner. Find out more about their energy justice campaign at www.globaljustice.org.uk/campaigns/climate-and-energy

Parliament UK – Contacting your MP is an important democratic means of voicing your opinions. You can find your MP's contact details at <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/contacting-your-mp/> or at <https://www.writetothem.com/> as well as follow their record of speaking and voting in Parliament at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

The Christian Aid Collective – A movement of young people desperate to bring about a world without poverty and injustice. The Collective website has a variety of different resources and blogs relating to climate change. Check out their website at www.christianaidcollective.org, where you can also download the latest edition of 'Do Not Tiptoe' magazine about climate change issues.

The Climate Coalition – This partnership is made up of over 100 member organisations, making it the UK's largest group of people dedicated to action on climate change. There are lots of resources available to support the 'For the love of...' campaign. Check out www.fortheloveof.org.uk and watch the video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka_kQUvojel for more information and inspiration.



World Trade

Understanding World Trade

It can be hard to imagine the difficulties which many farmers, traders, manufacturers and other workers in developing countries face in their day-to-day lives. Their ability to provide absolute basic necessities for their families, such as food and water, depends upon whether or not they can sell their products at a fair price.

The concept seems very simple. Rather than being paid a pittance for their hard work, workers should be paid a fair

price for their efforts, especially when they are manufacturing goods to be enjoyed freely in richer parts of the world. However, this simple theory doesn't always make its way into practice.

Fortunately, customers in supermarkets and stores worldwide are given the opportunity to be sure that producers are paid fairly by purchasing goods with the official Fairtrade logo attached, showing that the product has, indeed, been traded fairly. In 1994, tea, coffee and chocolate were the only fairly traded available on the shelves of select few British supermarkets. By 2014, when Fairtrade celebrated its 20th anniversary, over 4,500 Fairtrade products were available, with an estimated 1.3 million farmers in over 70 countries benefiting from this fantastic scheme.

Buying Fairtrade goods is not simply a choice to make when buying groceries in a supermarket, but to give people the materials, the resources and the life they both need and deserve.

Why Should Christians Care?

The Bible accepts that trade is necessary. What it objects to, however, is exploitative trade.

Amos, writing almost three thousand years ago, sets out this objection: 'Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances.'" (8:4-5)

God, it seems, is unhappy with such corruption, with people taking advantage of vulnerable people to get a sale and trying to devalue the work which others do in order to promote their own.

There are those who argue that the fairness of world trade is nothing to do with people who follow Jesus. They quote Mark 10 : 17: 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's'. Jesus, however, was not trying to separate the political from the spiritual when He said this. Instead, He was claiming that the world is God's and all that happens in it is of concern to God.



A 2004 Christian Aid publication noted that 'while many people in the developed world are reaping the benefits of trade, millions in the developing world are losing out. This is not the outcome of misfortune or accident, but of a trading system, or 'trade rules', whose outcomes are deliberately skewed in favour of the already rich and powerful... Today, as citizens of one of the richest and still most powerful nations, Christians in the UK have a responsibility to...campaign for changes to the rules and institutions governing international trade.' ('Trade Justice: A Christian Response', Christian Aid, London, 2004)

This book also encourages us to pray: so that financial systems may no longer burden the poorest... so that our trade may no longer trap people in poverty; God's kingdom come, God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.'

Games

Kim's Game – Present the group with a tray of fairly traded items, or pictures of fairly traded items, such as bananas, tea, coffee, sugar, flowers and so on. Do not tell the group that these items are fairly traded. Give the group a few minutes to revise the content of the tray before covering it. Have the group write down as many items as they can remember. Once the game is over, ask the group what they think connects the items on the tray. The answer is that they are all fairly traded!



Scavenger Hunt – Print seven copies of the Fairtrade logo, or one copy cut into seven pieces. Write one letter on the back of each piece so that they come together to spell "BANANAS". Hide the pieces of paper around your meeting space and challenge the group to find them all. Once all the pieces have been found, challenge the group to find the word which the letters make up. This can be done with any word, provided there are enough pieces of paper to contain each of the word's letters. For a bigger challenge, why not have the group search for more than one word at the same time by printing the letters of different words onto differently coloured paper?



Activities

Fairtrade Symbol Craft Work – Ask the group if they know what the Fairtrade symbol looks like. Can any of them describe it? After some discussion, show the image to the group and ask them what they see. What do they think it means? Get creative and have the group make their own Fairtrade images, either by copying the existing one or designing their own. Why not experiment with different styles and materials, such as drawing, painting, paper maché, collage, play dough and so on.

Shoe Factories – Have a leader draw round their shoe on two pieces of A4 paper. Split the group into two. Give each group one of the shoe outlines and about 20 sheets of blank A4 paper. Give each participant in one group a pair of scissors and a pen each. Give the other group only a few pairs of scissors and pens. Challenge each group to make as many 'shoes' as possible within a time limit (perhaps 5 minutes) by cutting the shoe outline out of blank A4 sheets.

One group will be in a better position to perform this task and it is likely that the participants will notice this! This, however, is the reality faced daily by countless people around the globe as they seek to make a living without the appropriate resources whilst others, with more, make the money they need more easily. Perhaps have a second go, but this time switch the levels of resources in each of the groups. At the end of the activity, both groups will have experienced the difficulties that some parts of the world encounter in their daily working lives.

Fairtrade Supper – Host a Fairtrade evening with your church community. Perhaps ask people attending to bring Fairtrade food items with them to share, or organise, within the group, who will bring fairly traded starters, main courses and desserts.

Questions for Discussion



- Should we buy local, organic or Fairtrade products? Is it worth it?
- Is it right to buy clothes that come from factories with dangerous work environments and low pay for workers? How can we avoid this?
- Is it our responsibility as Christians to push for equal trade laws? Is Amos right in suggesting that the world is God's and all that happens in it is of concern to God?

Biblical Reflection

Read Luke 3:10-14.

In this passage, a crowd asks John the Baptist what they need to do to inherit 'eternal life'. Surprisingly, instead of telling them to perform a ritual, adhere to a new creed or join a new organisation, as many other prophets and teachers of the time demanded, John tells everyone to turn their thoughts away from themselves and to think seriously about the needs of those around them. When they have extras, they should give them away. If they are responsible for collecting money or goods, they should only take what they are entitled to.

This is a great indicator of the direction God is taking the world in preparation for the coming of Jesus. People are no longer to live only by rules and regulations, but according to the effect of their lives on others.

Some might wonder if John's call to be 'content with your pay' means that Christians shouldn't fight for more pay, but, while it's wrong to be greedy, if the pay offered to workers is genuinely unfair, then it is clearly the will of God that something be done about it!

Fairness, in the eyes of God, is the key to a life of plenty for all!



Prayer

Gracious God, we pray for all those involved in the fair trade movement.

We pray for those who provide regular, stable and fairly paid work, especially for those who often find themselves disadvantaged, marginalised or otherwise pushed out.

We pray for supermarkets and other shops which stock fairly traded products and provide their customers with honest information about the products they sell.

We pray for big corporations which, knowingly or otherwise, exploit the poor. May they, through the work of the fair trade movement, come to know that another, fairer way is possible.

We pray for ourselves as consumers, that we may think more deeply about where and how we spend our money.

In your name we pray, AMEN.

Taking it further

Why not:

- buy Fairtrade goods yourself, encouraging friends and family to do the same? Try keeping a record of your purchases. They'll all add up to make a significant impact!
- encourage your church to become a 'Fairtrade' congregation?
- support local and national charities working within the Fairtrade movement (e.g. Christian Aid, Action Aid, Oxfam)?

Additional Resources

Action Aid – A human rights awareness group that aims to alleviate poverty worldwide. Find out more about free trade here <http://www.actionaid.org.uk/trade/free-trade>

Parliament UK – Contacting your MP is an important democratic means of voicing your opinions. You can find your MP's contact details at <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/contacting-your-mp/> or at <https://www.writetothem.com/> as well as follow their record of speaking and voting in Parliament at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

Pit - A fast-paced card game simulating the trading of stocks, raising questions about courtesy, morality and fairness. Suitable for children aged 11+.

The Fairtrade Foundation – A global movement working towards the fair buying and selling of food and other products. Find out more at <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/>

Traidcraft – A UK-based movement advocating fair commerce and an active campaigning presence for trade justice. Check out <http://www.traidcraft.co.uk/> for more information.



Poverty In The UK

Understanding Poverty in the UK

Poverty in the UK has always been with us, but in recent years the experience of poverty has become a daily reality for wider groups of people than ever before, affecting people in work as well as out of work, the old and young, as well as people from a whole range of different social backgrounds.

The effects of poverty can very easily spend most of the time hidden from public view. People who can afford to choose which supermarket to visit and which items to buy are unlikely to know what it's like to visit a foodbank where there is little to no choice and limitations on the amount you can take. Those who are fortunate enough to enjoy employment might not necessarily see the pain and suffering those reliant on the benefits system regularly experience.

Given the regularly invisible nature of poverty, churches need to be able to recognise signs of poverty within their congregations, amongst children and young people as well as adults, in order to better provide appropriate assistance. This extends to supporting people in the community through, for example, forming partnerships with external agencies.

As with many of the issues in this resource, the reasons behind this growth in poverty, the ways in which it eats away at all aspects of people's lives and the work which must be done to tackle these effects are too complex to explore in full here.

The focus here, then, will be on the need for foodbanks, the prevalence of homelessness and increase in debt, topics which society must take serious note of and seek to overcome if an end to the scourge which this longstanding issue is ever to be achieved.

Why Should Christians Care?

It can be very easy to think that poverty is permanent and that there is, therefore, no point in trying to tackle it. Scripture thinks differently, however. In fact, the struggle to achieve justice in this regard appears to play a fundamental role in the service to which God calls all people from the earliest times.



In Exodus 16, the people of God were led out of slavery into the desert. They grew increasingly hungry, in need of nourishment. Special food fell from Heaven, known as 'manna'. There was plenty to feed all and then some, yet the people were told only to gather as much as they needed. In this, the economy, or 'oikumene' of God is established as being different to that of the Capitalist systems adopted by many societies today. For God, it's not about the survival of the strongest, the most devious or even the hardest working, it is about fairly sharing all the resources which are available in order to ensure that no-one is missed out or left behind.

The trouble, as with World Trade, is that this model of economy is not easily accepted today. Even when we do everything in our power to care for the vulnerable among us, we still find ourselves with our own bills to pay, mouths to feed, travel expenses, taxes...the list of pressures goes on.

Perhaps most famous among Christ's encounters with people in a position to make a difference in this regard is his self-initiated meeting with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), in which he enters the tax-collector's home to quietly, but very effectively, challenge and transform the corrupt way in which Zacchaeus' methods and strategies were preventing those around him from supporting either themselves, or the rest of the community. Jesus convinced Zacchaeus that changing his ways could offer great benefits to the whole community, including himself.

When asked why he spent so much time with those who kept such control over people, Jesus answered, ' "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." ' (Mark 2:17)

For Jesus, then, the requirements are clear. If we want justice, we must seek to change both the way we look at resources and economy ourselves, as well as the way the world does, no matter how difficult either of these aims may be!

Prayer

Generous God,

We pray regularly, 'give us this day our daily bread', knowing that the gifts of the earth come from you.

We know, through the story of manna from heaven, in which the people are told to gather only as much as they need, that we must share out the gifts you give us fairly.

So, forgive us that, today, while some eat, others go hungry.

Forgive us that, while some are rich beyond belief, others don't have anywhere decent to live.

Forgive us that, while those with riches and power are held on a pedestal, others, with less, sit undeservingly in the judgement of those around them, who often suggest that their poverty is of their own making rather than the responsibility of all.

In our weakness, we fail. But, in your strength, you always restore us. Be with us, Lord, and help us to get it right.

In your name, AMEN.



Foodbanks

Introduction

Foodbanks have increased in number all over the United Kingdom. People who do not have the resources cannot buy groceries in supermarkets and, consequently, must visit foodbanks to collect what they need to feed themselves and their families.

People from different backgrounds and in various situations need to use foodbanks, including those who are unemployed, without savings, unable to earn money due to illness or disability, as well as those who come to the UK to flee violence or persecution in their homeland. Foodbanks are run, often by charities, faith communities and volunteers, to provide fundamental goods and resources for people who would otherwise go without. As difficult as it may be for some to believe, there are significant amounts of people in the UK who would literally starve to death if it weren't for the hard work and effort put in by those who provide fundamental foodbank services.

People visiting foodbanks do not have a choice of food, as others do. They must take what is on offer. They are also limited in the amount they can take and how often they can come to collect food.

The need to use of foodbank services is significantly impacting the lives of an increasing number of people in the UK. This cannot be ignored. Something must be done if this trend is to be reversed.

Game

Foodbank Dominoes - Prepare a set of dominoes with images of food and essentials one would expect to collect from a foodbank. Encourage the group to play dominoes, all the while remembering that the number of dominoes they hold, as well as whether they will win or not, is not as a result of talent or ability, but chance, just as it is for many who find themselves needing to use foodbanks.

Activity

Foodbank Role-Play - Encourage the group to think about what it must be like to visit a foodbank by setting up a mock foodbank. For younger groups, a set-up similar to 'playing shop' might be enough to help the children to think about what it's like to run and use a foodbank. For older groups, however, it might be helpful to go into some more detail, having them share out the following activities whilst thinking carefully about what these involve:

Make Vouchers - What sort of information is needed to make sure the people collecting food are really who they say they are? How can you make sure they only get what they're entitled to? Do you think it is right to limit food distribution when people are so desperate?

Lay out the stall - What's the best way to store the food? Might people steal it if they're hungry? What are the similarities and differences from setting up a mock supermarket?

Collect food - How does it feel, having to collect food in this way? Given that you are hungry and unable to buy food, will you try to get extra food? Do you think this is a fair system?

Serve at the stall - How does it feel having to limit the amount of food these hungry people will receive? How do you keep order in such a difficult circumstances? If hungry people try to get extra food, is it right to help them?

Take some time after the activity for members of the group to share their thoughts on this experience with one another.

Poverty In The UK - Foodbanks



Questions

- Are there any alternatives, in providing the most vulnerable with the food they need, to the strict management and limited choices which foodbank systems offer?
- What do you think could/should happen to reduce the need for foodbanks?

Reflection

Read Isaiah 58:3-7.

The prophet shows, in this passage, that God expects our faith and worship to be translated into just and compassionate action towards others, especially those in need, offering redemption from the things that oppress them, such as fear, hunger and poverty.

Yet, whilst following God's regulations and procedures to the letter, these fundamental values and principles had, it seems from this passage, long been forgotten by the Israelites. God's response is clear. They only did these things because they felt they had to, not realising the importance behind their actions. So the prophet offers some very practical advice. Share food with the hungry, open homes to the homeless and give clothes to the naked.

Serving God isn't simply about following rules or carrying out rituals. It is about understanding that, in doing as is asked, we must answer God's call to bring justice and peace to the world, rather than simply doing things out of a sense of obligation. We must ensure that all we do, then, fits in with God's values, not just tradition or rules.

Taking it Further

Why not:

- look into the way foodbanks are viewed, run and received in other European countries, the USA and beyond?
- explore the possibility of running a foodbank from your own church building or encouraging church members to volunteer with existing foodbanks?



Additional Resources

Faith in Foodbanks – An online resource produced by the Joint Public Issues Team, a social justice partnership between United Reformed, Methodist and Baptist Christians, as well as the Church of Scotland, designed to encourage individuals and congregations to consider their role in supporting foodbanks, not to mention tackling to causes behind them. Available to download from <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/FaithInFoodbanks-Full-Resource.pdf>

Feeding America – A US-based organisation offering interesting information, insight and statistics about hunger in the USA and efforts to tackle it. Have a look at <http://www.feedingamerica.org/> to find out more.

Parliament UK – Contacting your MP is an important democratic means of voicing your opinions. You can find your MP's contact details at <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/contacting-your-mp/> or at <https://www.writetothem.com/> as well as follow their record of speaking and voting in Parliament at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

Trussell Trust – A UK-based charity specialising in the set-up and provision of local foodbank services. Download useful information and advice on foodbanks and how you can support their work from <http://www.trusselltrust.org/>

Poverty In The UK - Homelessness

Homelessness

Introduction

The gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' continues to grow in our society and hardship is becoming a way of life for many people. So many stories are told of the struggle and pain people have to face, on a daily basis, as they seek the comfort and shelter a home can provide.

Some living on the streets have been evicted due to high rent exceeding their earnings, or as a result of unemployment, as well as abuse or overcrowding at home.

Benefits are available for Job Seekers and those on low incomes, but the rules and regulations surrounding these strictly govern who can receive them, how much they can receive, for how long and under what conditions.

There is currently no benefit support for people under the age of 18, and so accommodation must be provided for them through the appropriate Social Service procedures. However, due to cuts, oversubscription and the natural limitations of such systems, they often fail to provide exactly what is needed. Quite often housing is provided in an area where surroundings, service and amenities are poor.

No figures for homelessness, no matter how officially or thoroughly researched, will ever be able to truly provide an adequate measure of need. The stories of suffering repeat themselves over and over again with changes in the economic situation making it harder all the time, especially for young people. This can easily lead to deterioration in people's health and wellbeing, both physically and mentally.

Game

House of Cards - Have the group build a house from a deck of cards. Secretly brief one or two participants to sabotage the efforts of the group (e.g. blowing on the cards, shaking the table, etc.) without the rest of the participants finding out. See how long the group can go on without realising that things are not quite as they seem. Many people affected by homelessness try to find ways out of their situation, but just when they think everything's going well, life can throw more challenges in their path and, just like a house of cards, things can very easily tumble down again.

Activity

Homelessness Challenge- Give each member of the group a large cardboard box and a blanket or sleeping bag. Find an appropriate space outside. Make sure you have permission to use the space and that all reasonable steps (including a risk assessment) have been taken to ensure the safety of the space. Challenge the group to use the box and blanket or sleeping bag to make a sleeping shelter. Stay outside for at least half-an-hour, if possible. Once the challenge is complete, invite the group back inside for some warm drinks and food. Encourage them to talk about how it felt to be outside, any fears they experienced, what they think it would be like to be outside all night.



Poverty In The UK - Homelessness



Questions

- What can you find out about the level of homelessness in your community, town and nation, as well as globally?
- Does, or could, your church give any help to homeless people or homelessness projects?

Reflection

Matthew 8: 20 and 17: 1-9

Christ was a miracle worker. He could easily have built a house for Himself in every place he visited, but He didn't. Instead, he put Himself in the position of the most at risk in society, refusing to judge them, instead, becoming one with them, in solidarity and love.

When Peter, James and John witness Jesus, Moses and Elijah together, Peter's immediate response is to build a tent. They want to remain in this moment forever by turning their surroundings into a dwelling place where they can stay forever, basking in the glory of their Lord and ancestors.

This was, indeed, a very special occasion, in which Jesus was clearly recognised as God's son. However, this was not a place for the disciples to remain. It was a place to rest, recharge, learn, grow and develop, in order that, when they returned to the world, they would be better placed to serve God's purposes.

Home is not about hiding. It's about preparing. If we are to bring justice and peace to God's world, we must use the blessing of our homes, if we have them, to serve God's purposes, just as Jesus taught us.

Taking Things Further

Why not consider:

- encouraging your church to do something about homelessness in your local area? Perhaps the congregation could raise funds for a local shelter? Or seek to run a shelter in your church building?
- looking into volunteering possibilities with local projects?

Further Resources

Homeless World Cup – Annual global event bringing homeless footballers from around the world together to enjoy the sense of self-worth and community which the beautiful game brings. Check out <https://www.homelessworldcup.org/> to learn more.

JPIT – The Joint Public Issues Team, acting on behalf of the United Reformed Church, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union and the Church of Scotland, provides information and resources on a range of social justice issues. Have a look at what they're saying about housing at <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/social-justice/housing/>

Parliament UK – Contacting your MP is an important democratic means of voicing your opinions. You can find your MP's contact details at <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/contacting-your-mp/> or at <https://www.writetothem.com/> as well as follow their record of speaking and voting in Parliament at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

Shelter – a housing and homelessness charity providing advice and support to those with housing difficulties. Visit <http://www.england.shelter.org.uk/>, <http://www.scotland.shelter.org.uk/> or <http://www.sheltercymru.org.uk/> for more details

Debt

Introduction

The causes of debt can be complex and multi-faceted. Unemployment, low wages, high rents, changes in benefits legislation, zero hours contracts, short and irregular working hours... each contribute, in their own ways, to the rise in debt across this country, but no explanation could ever cover all of the causes. Facts and statistics can be misleading. They can be easy to manipulate and are always subject to change, not least due to constant shifts in government legislation.



As if this collection of pressures weren't enough, the current culture sees endless payday loan companies, banks, money lenders, credit companies and other financial service providers attempt to encourage, persuade and cajole the most vulnerable into more and more debt, often taking their spiral of difficulties into uncharted depths.

Economic implications can also give way to psychological, spiritual and physical health concerns as pressures mount and deadlines loom. Consequences can include loss of self-esteem and increased risk of depression as well as reductions in quantity and quality of diet, often resulting in malnutrition.

This is not something which can be ignored. It will not go away. It needs serious intervention if appropriate justice and welfare are to be available to all.

Game

Dictionary Game – Split the group into pairs or teams. Have each pair or team look up the word 'debt' in a dictionary. Encourage the pairs or teams to talk about the definitions and to share any experiences they, or people they know, have had in relation to each definition (e.g. borrowing money from a sibling but not paying them back, owing a 'debt' of gratitude to a parent or guardian, being nasty to someone, etc.). How have/did/would/could you repay such a debt?

Activity

Case Studies – There are three case studies, to explore, looking at different ways in which debt can affect people. Split the group so that an equal number of people can look at each of the studies. Encourage someone from each of the smaller groups to read the case study out loud to their small group before discussing the lessons which could be learned from the case stories. Why not challenge each of the smaller groups to find creative ways of presenting their findings to the other participants (e.g. producing a drama, designing a poster, giving a speech, etc.)?

1. *Getting into and staying in debt*

Jane is working full time at his local supermarket for the National Minimum Wage. After graduating from university, Jane wants to be a lawyer and to complete his Masters Degree.

However, she cannot progress any further until she has paid off fees and loans for her first course, which are piling up, especially with the interest due on them, as well as cover the costs involved with joining a legal firm.

Her 5-year-old son has just started primary school, but the school he was offered is outside their catchment area, so Jane has to pay for his bus fares to and from school. Jane's housing situation is dire, with her property in a bad state of repair. Luckily, the area she is living in is going to be demolished for renovation to make the conditions better, but she doesn't have the money to rent a house during this period or to move back in again after the work is done.

To make things harder, she had heating and water bills piling up until she took out a loan from a local company to pay them off. She has also received many letters asking for taxes which she owes.

2. Job Seeker sanctions

Hank is on Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), which means he needs to attend meetings (sign-on) with an adviser to help him find work and record evidence of his job search in a logbook.

However, during one fortnightly meeting, his adviser reprimanded him for being three minutes late and gave him his first 'sanction', meaning that he would not receive any money for the next month. He then filled out a form to appeal against this decision.

As his benefits had stopped, he couldn't afford his phone bill, house bills, travel etc. and it became increasingly hard for him to either find or get a job.

Due to his inability to travel or make/receive phone calls, he missed another meeting with his adviser, so she gave him another sanction, increasing the previous sanction by two more months. Now that he had been sanctioned twice, Hank needed to visit the Job Centre to sign-on daily, but still continue to look for work, eradicating any remaining savings he had.

Hank came in every day he could afford. However, for each day he missed he was sanctioned again, to the point where he has to sign on for the next 5 months on a daily basis without any financial help. Hank has started to think he will never get out of this whirlpool of sanctions.

3. Low wages, High rent

Stephan is renting a room in shared accommodation. He works in the city centre and has to commute every day for an 8:30am start. He finishes at 6.30pm. These are the most expensive times to travel. Rent in his area is also very high and his landlord has been increasing the amount of rent even more to compete with others.

At work, Stephen is working for the National Minimum Wage. He has been struggling to pay his rent recently because his pay cannot cover the increasing costs. He is now in arrears payments and is on the verge of losing his accommodation. He has tried to apply for a second job and to get more hours in his current position, but the majority of the jobs he has been applying for do not pay more than the National Minimum Wage and the company he works for is only hiring internally (giving jobs to staff who already have positions in the company).

Unfortunately, he cannot apply for any benefits because he doesn't meet the Job Centre's requirements (as he is currently working over 16 hours a week), even though his wages are so low.



Questions

- What are the likely consequences for people facing serious debt problems?
- What legislative changes need to be implemented by Government to raise the economic level of poorer people?

Reflection

Read Matthew 18: 21-35.

Owing someone a debt which you know you can't pay back can seriously affect your relationship with them. You worry about seeing them, in case they ask for their money back.

In this parable, that's exactly what happens. A servant owes their master a debt and they're worried about it. However, the master is very gracious and decides to cancel the debt. The servant must have been so relieved!

Instead of sharing this compassion with others, though, the servant immediately comes upon someone who, in turn, owes him a debt and, instead of cancelling it, he lashes out at the person, frightening and intimidating them.

The master is absolutely furious when he hears this as he has shown mercy to his servant, yet this has not been shared. The master calls the servant 'wicked' for not responding to his debtor with kindness and forgiveness.

Forgiving another person who owes you a debt can be difficult, whether it's money, gratitude or an apology, but there's a reason Scripture tells us to do it. If we don't forgive people, or cancel their debt when we know they won't be able to pay us back, then we only make bad situations even worse.

Taking it Further

Why not consider:

- organising sessions or classes on debt management, cooking on a budget, etc. in your church?
- inviting an expert to your church to run a workshop on budgeting in relation to low pay, university loans, Job Seeker benefits, etc.?



Additional Resources

Christians Against Poverty (CAP) – A Christian debt counselling service specialising in practical advice, workshops, classes and resources to assist people in their understanding of finance, as well as how to use money effectively. Check out <http://www.capuk.org> for more information.

Parliament UK – Contacting your MP is an important democratic means of voicing your opinions. You can find your MP's contact details at <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/contacting-your-mp/> or at <https://www.writetothem.com/> as well as follow their record of speaking and voting in Parliament at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

Reform Magazine Article on 'No crime, but punishment' – Niall Cooper, Director of Church Action On Poverty, wrote an excellent article on these matters for the April 2015 edition of Reform, detailing the fact that 'statistics cannot convey the harshness of the benefits "sanctions" regime (sic.)'. Visit <http://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2015/04/niall-cooper-no-crime-but-punishment/> to read an extract from the article.

Rethink Sanctions – The Joint Public Issues Team has written a report examining the benefits sanctions regime in detail, calling for a completely different approach to a system which is supposed to protect and nurture people, but instead threatens and belittles them. Have a look at www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/resources/rethinksanctions for more information.

Equality

Understanding Equality

Equality isn't about making everyone the same. Neither is it about getting to a point where everyone can 'agree to disagree'. It is about reaching a stage where all people, no matter who they are, what they believe or the status they hold can truly live together as equals, in peace, possessing the same rights and responsibilities, opportunities and choices, security and protections as every other citizen.

In exploring issues of equality, we need to consider three important realities which affect everyone, even when we don't realise it; prejudice, privilege and power.

Prejudice is in all of us. No matter how committed to diversity and inclusivity we may be, there are always groups and individuals who we find hard to accept. There are also groups we unwittingly forget about and neglect because we fail to acknowledge or understand them.

Privilege is something we might not recognise as being in our possession. It can, however, be very clear to those who do not have it, especially as certain people often tend to enjoy rights and access which others can only dream of.

Power is not as easy to measure as we might hope. It's not just about the role you have or the rights you possess, but your ability to use those rights and to have influence in your role. Many with great titles and responsibilities still find themselves misunderstood, ignored or rejected.

The more we understand these concepts and the role they play in our lives, the greater chance we will have of building a better balance of equality. Sometimes, this will mean making sacrifices in order to allow others to have the chance to access resources and achieve their goals.

Equality is not about making everyone the same, it's about giving everyone the same opportunities. We must make every effort to be aware of the prejudice we have, the privilege we possess and the power we hold in order that we might reject division and inequality in favour of unity and justice for all.



Why Should Christians Care?

For followers of Jesus, one particularly key understanding of equality is found in Paul's letter to the Galatians where, in chapter 3:26-29, he writes that, in 'Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.'

Paul isn't concerned about the differences between humans in terms of looks, status, or even belief. He is purely concerned with whether or not one's thoughts, words and deeds bring one closer to God's values and purposes, or take one away from them, leading towards destruction and despair for oneself and others.

For Paul, Christ's commands to love God and love neighbour are as simple as that. In his way of looking at the world, Christians are called to hold no prejudice, use their privilege for good and be wary of the power they possess. Everyone is entitled to the same rights as everyone else, whoever they are.

The crucial nature of unity and equality in the teachings of Jesus is demonstrated well in Acts 10:24-48 when Peter, upon visiting a group in Caesarea, realises that the assembled crowd is composed of people from varying backgrounds, cultures and traditions. Despite what would have been a very unusual and uncomfortable situation for Peter, he addresses the gathering, saying, "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean...I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right".

The rules have been changed, the barriers dropped. God's call to love, to service and to radical change is for everyone, not just a few. In God's kingdom everyone is equal. There are absolutely no grounds, therefore, for division or injustice.

Prayer

Gracious God, we pray that you will help us to understand that all people are loved equally by you, that you see no difference in gender, race, colour or ability. As we understand this, open our eyes and hearts to the needs of the world around us.

Challenging God, you demand justice for those who have been wronged. We pray for those who have been hurt by discrimination, damaged from abuse and endangered through neglect on the grounds of their identity or status, that they may find the strength to overcome the challenges facing them.

Caring God, we pray for those who work to work to make things better, who do what they can to increase understanding and mutuality amongst peoples of differing backgrounds, cultures, situations and contexts.

Loving God, we pray for ourselves. Help us to be open, accepting, generous and welcoming people who show your love to everyone we meet.

Let us glorify you in everything we do, AMEN.



Race and Ethnicity

Introduction

It is often very difficult for white people to see that the colour of their skin can automatically give them access to benefits which others can find hard to obtain. Despite the multi-cultural make-up of Britain in the 21st century, 'White-British' regularly continues to be seen as the 'normal' or 'natural' ethnicity for people living in the UK. Peggy McIntosh writes, 'I have come to see, as a white person, white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing each day' (see Additional Resources).

Sir William MacPherson, in his official report on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry in February 1999, tells us that racism 'in general terms consists of conduct, words or practices which advantage or disadvantage people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin.' He goes on to say that these practices do not have to be on purpose for

them to be harmful. He also reminds us that, by law, institutional racism is the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin.' This also applies to 'discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.' (See Additional Resources)

The key to racial and ethnic equality seems to be awareness of the ways in which our attitudes and behaviour bring about division and injustice, even when we don't realise it.

In exploring issues and realities of this aspect of equality, the best way of moving forward is to acknowledge that we are not living amongst many different races and ethnicities but, rather, as part of one race, the Human Race, within which there is much wonder, culture, heritage and diversity to enjoy! Only then will all people, communities and authorities, be able to live in true harmony.

Game

Life Tree - Have the group, either together or separately, make a model or drawing of a tree. Hand out different coloured sticky notes (shaped like leaves, if possible) to each member of the group, with each colour representing a different aspect which influences our identity (e.g. parents/carers, friends, school and education, church, environment, etc.).

Ask the group to write or draw, on each of their sticky notes, names, words, sentences or pictures representing the ways in which these different aspects have influenced their identity. Remember to tell the group only to write or draw things which they are happy to share with others.



Equality - Race and Ethnicity

Just like the leaves of a tree, we are all unique, with our own identity and backgrounds, yet each of us is connected together as one, in the love of God. Encourage the group to remember this each time they look at the model trees and, indeed, real trees, when they're out and about!

Activity

Small Group Scenarios - There are three case studies to explore, covering different ways in which discrimination and misunderstanding have affected people. Split up the group, so that an equal number of people can look at each of the three stories. Encourage someone from each of the smaller groups to read the case study aloud to the rest of their smaller group before discussing the lessons which could be learned from them. Why not challenge each of the smaller groups to find creative ways of sharing their findings with the other participants (e.g. producing a drama, designing a poster, giving a speech, etc.).

A black woman, Grace, was sitting on a train. When it stopped at the next station, several people came into the carriage. There was an empty seat next to Grace and a woman went to sit there but changed her mind and stood up with her friend. Grace heard the friend ask, 'What's the matter?', to which the woman replied, 'I am not sitting next to a black person'. This happened in 2013.



A church minister, who was white, was at a regional committee meeting, discussing how to find new people from the churches in the region to serve on committees of various kinds. The minister was asked by the chair if he knew people who might be interested in serving in this way, as he was minister of a fairly large multicultural church. The minister replied, 'The white people are too elderly and the black folk, who are younger, would not be interested as they are at work and have their families to look after.' This happened in 2012.



An Asian boy, Aqil, whose parents were from Pakistan, had attended a multi-cultural, multi-faith school in central London until he reached about 9 years old. He performed well in his studies and had many friends, both inside as well as outside school. His parents, however, decided to move to an outer suburb, a long way from the city centre, believing that their son's opportunities would be greater in such a community. When Aqil arrived at his new school, he was greeted with hostility from the other children, some of whom called him a 'smelly terrorist'. This abuse included anti-Islamic comments, even though his family were Christians. When he tried to speak to a teacher about his ordeal, she simply said that it was early days yet and he must try harder to fit in. Faced with the increasing pressure, getting up to go to school became harder for Aqil and his work began to fall behind. This happened in 2014.



Questions for Discussion

- Why does racial and ethnic inequality continue when there's so much talk about tackling prejudice and discrimination?
- What could your church do to help tackle such injustice?

Biblical Reflection

Read John 13:34 and James 2:14-17.

To 'love your neighbour as yourself' is arguably the most famous of Christ's commands and is certainly the most important one when it comes to how humans ought to interact with each other. It comes as no surprise, then, that its primary mention in the Gospel according to John is one of the most quoted and repeated verses of scripture. How can one talk of Jesus and not mention his demand that we love one another?

Mentioning it isn't enough though. As James reminds us, it's all very well to speak kindly to people and follow the rules, especially when it comes to equal opportunities, making sure that there are enough people from minority ethnic groups represented, for example. These formalities and niceties will never be enough, however, to combat the injustice of inequality which many continue to face, particularly in relation to the colour of their skin or background of their heritage.

If we are truly to eradicate prejudice, use privilege well and distribute power evenly, in other words, bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, then we must truly practice as we preach. We must be genuinely sure that all that we are thinking, saying and doing is really making a difference in terms of equality, rather than just making us feel better.

Taking it Further

Why not consider:

- making posters to display in your meeting space about the importance of tackling prejudice?
- hosting an inter-cultural celebration to increase awareness and understanding amongst differing groups of people?



Additional Resources

Dramatising Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God-Talk

- A fascinating collection of chapters and articles about the ways in which Black and Minority Ethnic groups and individuals view God, religion, spirituality and faith. Written by Anthony G. Reddie and Published by Routledge, London in 2014.

Just Now Stories: Exploring Social Justice in the Literacy Hour - A ring-binder collection, jam-packed with stories, tales, accounts and activities designed to explore a range of social justice issues with children and young people. Written by Julia Ipgrave and published by the RE Today Series in 2006.

Parliament UK - Contacting your MP is an important democratic means of voicing your opinions. You can find your MP's contact details at <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/contacting-your-mp/> or at <https://www.writetothem.com/> as well as follow their record of speaking and voting in Parliament at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report - The official findings and recommendations of the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the response of public services and authorities to the crime. Visit https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf to read the report.

Strangers No More: Transformation through Racial Justice' - An interesting and engaging exploration of the crucial role which racial justice plays in securing and maintaining all forms of equality. Includes the particularly insightful article, 'Being White' by Marjorie Lewis, Naboth Muchopa and Sandra Ackroyd. Published by the Methodist Church Racial Justice Office in 2001.

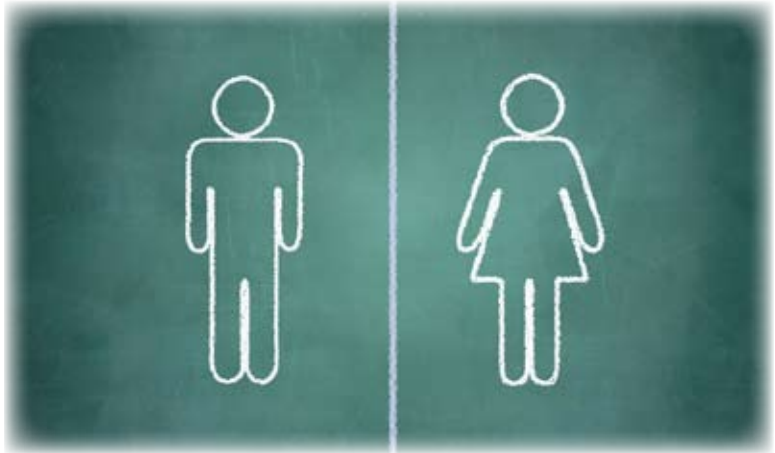
Gender

Introduction

Gender forms part of our identity from earliest childhood. We learn about it through our parents, school, social relations, the toys we play with, etc. In fact, everywhere we look, society tells us what it means to be male or female and which of the two we fit into.

The word 'gender' refers to the socially constructed roles and attributes of, as well as relations between, men and women. The word 'sex' refers to the biological characteristics which define

humans as female or male, these being, mainly, anatomy, hormones and chromosomes. So, while your sex is determined by science (unless you have an intersex condition which prevents this), your gender identity is built up throughout your lifetime. Some people may grow up to exhibit very 'masculine' or 'feminine' characteristics and roles. Others might sit somewhere between these two extremes.



It is well known that girls and women often find themselves restricted when it comes to their rights and open access to opportunities. Men and boys, however, are often limited too, as society continues to perpetuate the old stereotypes of macho culture, expecting that men should be strong and engaged in physical work, while women should be emotional and remain in domestic roles. Consequently, people feel that they have to act in a certain way, or like certain things, or hide certain parts of themselves and who they are, just because they're a boy or a girl. People become excluded from certain activities or areas of life just because of their gender.

Geneses 1:27 states boldly that God 'created them. Male and Female He created them.' We are ALL, whoever we are, the people of God, called to his service. Everything must be done, then, to ensure that both our sex and gender status can be used as a blessing, not a barrier.

Game

Who's Better? - Split the group into teams. Give each team an identical list of activities (e.g. singing, playing sports, video gaming, painting, dancing, etc.). Challenge the groups to organise the activities into those which they think boys are better at and those which they think girls are better at. Afterwards, have the groups compare their results. Why have the groups ordered the activities as they have? What is it about an activity, in their view, that makes it better for boys or girls? Can activities really be for boys or girls only?

Activity

Creative Campaigning - Have the group watch Adi's story at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDqu0GS4hVU>. If you don't have the ability to show the video, you can find a summary of Adi's story at http://learn.christianaid.org.uk/Images/CAW_RES_019_tcm16-81931.pdf (towards the end of the document).

Adi started her journey in a very vulnerable position. As if feeding her children whilst facing poverty were not enough in itself, she also had to deal with the fact that women, in general are not looked upon with great favour in her society. Yet, when she was given the means to make a difference in her own life, the community came to realise that, through her power, her ingenuity, her service, everyone could truly gain from the contribution of this person to the growth and development of the village. No longer could they dismiss or ignore her, for she had used the tools she had been given to tackle the challenges which faced her.

Adi's is a powerful story which, even today, reflects the experience of many women across the planet. It is important for such stories to be shared, particularly in countries like the UK, so that people who might not be aware that such injustice still happens in this day and age might be better informed of the reality and do something about it!

Split your group into smaller groups and encourage each of the smaller groups to think of creative ways to share Adi's story with those around them. Perhaps they might rewrite the story to appeal specifically to young people, or create a drama, or a poster, or a song, for example.

Try to find appropriate ways of sharing the various messages and media employed by the children and young people in order to influence others in the struggle for Gender Equality. Remember to obtain appropriate permissions and ensure that children, young people and parents know how you intend to share their work before you do so.

Biblical Reflection

Read Mark 7:24-30

In this account, an unknown, unrelated woman approaches Jesus for help. Even worse, in terms of social etiquette during that period, the woman was a Gentile (non-Jewish person) approaching a Jewish man. At first, Jesus rebuffs her. What has this Gentile woman to do with him? But she persists and eventually Jesus gives way to her reasoning that 'even the dogs deserve the crumbs from the Master's table. Some say that Jesus did this to test her faith and response. Others suggest, more controversially, that Jesus genuinely changed His mind because of what she said. Whatever the case, it seems clear that, in this encounter, Jesus' outlook extended beyond the traditional male-oriented practices of the time, succumbing to the reasoning and request of a woman, despite societal pressures.

This encounter, when read in line with other actions and teachings of Christ, many of which are covered in this resource, also indicates a transformation in the community of God's Kingdom. It is a real turning point, in which Gentiles are now considered as equals alongside Jews, with discrimination no longer acceptable.

Christ came that we 'might have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10). It is imperative, then, according to the requirements of the Gospel, that we follow His lead and seek to overcome the boundaries we so often build around sex and gender.





Questions for Discussion

- Why does inequality on the grounds of gender continue to exist today?
- In the UK, we have laws to protect people against discrimination on the grounds of gender. In some other countries, this is not the case. What should the UK do about this?

Taking it Further

Why not consider:

- Hosting an event or worship service to allow the group to share their views on Gender Equality with others?
- Inviting an external speaker, such as your regional Christian Aid Intern, to talk about Gender Equality issues around the globe?

Additional Resources

Fawcett Society – A leading UK charity supporting the struggle for equal rights for women. Provides a voice for women across the political spectrum. Involved in analysing information and producing resources for campaigning. Visit <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk> for more information.

The Great Initiative – Supported by Comic Relief UK, this initiative seeks to challenge gender stereotypes and open minds to the work that needs to be done in bringing about true Gender Equality. Visit <http://www.thegreatinitiative.org.uk> to find out more.

UN Women – A worldwide campaign to end violence and discrimination against women supported by the most significant body of countries on the planet. Visit <http://www.unwomen.org> to find out how you can be part of it.

Parliament UK – Contacting your MP is an important democratic means of voicing your opinions. You can find your MP's contact details at <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/contacting-your-mp/> or at <https://www.writetothem.com/> as well as follow their record of speaking and voting in Parliament at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>



Stigma Around Disability And Mental Health

Stigma Around Disability And Mental Health

Understanding Stigma around Disability and Mental Health

It is crucial, before a single word is spoken about either of the topics of this section, to say that mental health and disability are not the same thing. One of the biggest social injustices surrounding them is the very fact that they are, all too often, presented together as one and the same when, in reality, they are very different to one another. This pack aims not simply to amalgamate both topics, but to tackle the stigma which they suffer from.



People often think that mental health is something which affects others, not them. Contrary to common belief, mental health is the same as physical health. The difference is that physical health deals with the body, whereas mental health deals with the mind. Everyone has a state of mental health. The realisation of this truth can prevent the suspicion, misunderstanding and, ultimately, stigma surrounding the topic.

The very word 'disability' focuses on how conditions can limit people and prevent them from being able to do things which others are able to do. In reality, however, the concept is very much relative. An older person, for example, who has enjoyed 20/20 vision throughout their life, could become blind and feel like they can't go on, whereas a baby could be born without sight and grow up to live a very full and joyous life.

Stigma distorts the truth and, without the truth, people who are misunderstood will never be able to truly enjoy the openness and fullness of life to which all God's children are entitled.

Why Should Christians Care?

Due to the misconceptions and stigma of the times, much of what Scripture says on these issues can, at first glance, seem patronising and unhelpful. It does not take much, however, to see that God's views on the issues at hand are not as trivial and shallow as our human minds might first think.

Psalms 46 says that, if we go to God with our troubles, all will be fine, but it does not speak of God quietly solving everything. In order to get to where they're aiming for, they'll have to go through a lot of trouble, heartache, uncertainty and transitioning. God will help with food and map issues, but the rest they must help each other with. For people facing mental health difficulties, this sounds all too familiar.

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Support exists, but if neither friends, family or the community around them are prepared to walk with them on their journey, then they stand very little chance of making any progress.

In Exodus 4:10-17 Moses had problems with his speech, yet God set him one of the greatest public speaking tasks imaginable. When Moses continued to say that he couldn't do it, God gave him some help in the form of his brother, who could help him with the speech side of things, and a staff, to make signs and perform miracles with, but it was still Moses who was to do the core of work. God created Moses, just as every other person has been created from the beginning to time, with limitations, but also with talents to use in the service of God.

Scripture does, indeed, tell us to look to God in times of great despair and that, when we trust in the Lord, all will be well. What Scripture most certainly does not tell us, however, is that recovery will be easy, comfortable or quick. God has created us as we are for a reason. Let us each, then, seek the support we need and use it in service to each other and to our Lord.

Games

Winston Churchill's Dog – One of Britain's most prominent Prime Ministers is thought to have suffered from depression. It is said that he often referred to the illness as a big black dog which would follow him everywhere, hiding in the shadows, giving no clue as to when it would strike next. Split the group into pairs and decide, in each pair, who is going to play the dog and who is going to play Churchill. The person playing Churchill stands at one end of the hall both of their hands next to their eyes so they can only see forwards, not right or left. The object is for Churchill to walk from one end of the hall to other in an allotted time (perhaps 30 seconds to a minute). On the way, however, the person playing the dog must try to touch Churchill on the shoulder without Churchill seeing them approach. If Churchill sees them, then the dog can't touch Churchill for 5 seconds, but if the dog succeeds, Churchill can't move for 5 seconds. Make sure everyone has a turn playing both roles.

Sitting Soccer – Split the group in half to form two teams. All players should be seated with their legs crossed. Instead of kicking the ball, players must use their hands in a kicking motion. Throughout the game, players must move around whilst seated and cannot uncross their legs. Sports are often designed with able-bodied people in mind, but that doesn't mean that they cannot be made accessible to people with disabilities.



Stigma Around Disability And Mental Health

Activities

Widening Perspectives Drama – Use the following narration to encourage the group to act out some scenarios in order to get them thinking about some of the challenges faced by people with a physical disability when they wake up:

It's an average day and the alarm clock goes off. It is time for X to wake up and go to school. They wake up and turn off the alarm. They swing their legs out bed and stretch as they place both feet on the floor before they get up. They walk into the bathroom and have a quick shower before getting dressed. They go into the kitchen, make themselves some breakfast and eat it. After this, they brush their teeth and walk to school.



For Y, however, things are not so easy. Y has a physical disability, so needs to take each of these steps very carefully, seeking assistance where needed. The alarm goes off, they wake up and slowly reach out to turn it off. They then move their legs out the bed by hand. However, they are unable to stand up without help, so one of their parents comes into the room to help them to walk with crutches. They go into the bathroom, but because Y can't walk upstairs very easily, they have a shower and their bedroom downstairs. They use a specially adapted shower, with a seat to help them balance. They need some help to wash themselves, though, as their strength is quite low. They then need some help to dress. Y then moves to the kitchen to have breakfast, but they find it hard to hold things, so their parents have to make it for them, as well as feed them. Then they have to get all of their stuff into the car, including a wheelchair, crutches, medication and everything else they need for the day ahead. They also need help to get in and out of the car and to be driven to school. Not so easy, is it?

As the group acts out the scenarios, encourage them to think carefully about what might be involved in each of the steps. Things might not be as simple as they first appear.

'Time to Talk' Event – Time to Change, a charity working to tackle mental health stigma (see Additional Resources), encourages people to take five minutes, usually on a certain date during the year, to talk about mental health. Why not take this further and encourage the group to organise a 'Time to Talk' event for your church? Perhaps a Coffee Morning or Afternoon Tea could give attendees the opportunity to have conversations with other about these important issues?

Access Audit – Have the group take a walk, in pairs, around the building or hall where they meet, thinking about what moving, working and playing in this space would be like for someone with a physical disability.

Biblical Reflection

Read John 9: 1-12.

Of all the people in the world suffering from the effects of a disability or mental health problem, Jesus, with His never-ending power, only seems, in scripture at least, to have healed between thirty and forty. The vast majority of these either asked specifically for healing from him, or were evidently in a situation of great turmoil resulting from their condition. In terms of healing, it seems that Jesus chose to do different things for different people, according to their unique situations.

Many of those dealing with disability or mental health difficulties suffer, not only as a direct result of their condition, but as a consequence of the way they are viewed and treated by those around them.

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Today, we have people dealing with a whole range of disabilities and mental health-related issues achieving the most amazing feats imaginable, including awards in sport, results in the sciences and success in business. If they were offered 'healing' now, many of them would reject it.

Like Jesus, we must do what we can, with great care and sensitivity, to support people in ways which are truly relevant to them, not simply to make everybody the same, follow the same model or take the same path.

Prayer

Equipping God, you give us different gifts for different tasks. No-one is left out. Regardless of the challenges we face, we can all achieve great things in your service.

It is not always easy, however, to understand your plans. Sometimes we don't feel able to do what you ask. Sometimes our bodies fail us. Sometimes our minds can't handle what we need them to. Yet you, with your infinite knowledge, continue to tell us how valuable we are.

Forgive us when we write ourselves or others off because of disability. Correct us when we dismiss ourselves or others because of mental health difficulties. Such discrimination is not your will, but our misconception, our fear, our mistake.

Help us as we seek to provide appropriate support and assistance where needed to allow everyone to reach their full potential.

Let us serve you in the ways you call us, not just the ways we think we can.

In your name,

AMEN.



Taking Things Further – Special Advice

With the other issues covered in this resource, the best ways of taking things forward usually involve raising awareness, changing your group or church's practices, organising events, etc., but the best way to help tackle stigma surrounding disability and mental health is to begin with yourself!

Using Inclusive language – It can be much harder than we think, but it is very important to be careful about the language we use, not just when we're talking about mental health and disability, but also in everyday conversation. Words which we might not think much of can often be offensive to others. More dangerously, they can unwittingly create and fuel stereotypes and misconceptions. This shouldn't stop us from laughing and joking with our friends, but it does mean that we need to make sure that the words we use truly reflect what we mean.

Talking Openly – No matter how much knowledge or experience you have, what wonderful language you can share or lessons you can teach, there can't be any hope of change if people don't talk about it. People may not be comfortable when you start to talk about these matters. They may even try to resist doing so. However, these crucial issues are worth our persistence. They are not going to be settled unless people have the courage to talk about them. Why not start with yourself?

Stigma Around Disability And Mental Health

Helping Those Around You – The thought of helping someone deal with the effects of disability or mental health difficulties can seem quite scary, but it's not really. If you feel that someone around you is struggling to cope, either physically or emotionally, or are somehow acting differently than they normally would, one of the most important things you can do is provide a safe, listening ear when they want to open up to you. If they don't want to talk, or more help is needed, then always talk with someone you trust, such as parents, teachers and youth group leaders. The important thing is not to ignore problems.

Supporting Leading Disability and Mental Health charities – Leading disability and mental health charities, such as those listed under 'Additional Resources', offer advice, stories, activities and materials to help in the wider fight against stigma, the struggle for better legal and social protections for vulnerable people and the ultimate goal of a society where all have access to truly equal opportunities.

Additional Resources

Time to Change – One of the leading charities dealing with mental health issues in England. Offers advice and resources suitable for use throughout the UK. The charity has the official support of the URC Youth Assembly. Visit <http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/> to take part in this vital campaign.

Mind – As well as helping to deal with mental health issues nationwide, this leading charity also offers grassroots support through its networks, including supported housing, crisis helplines, drop-in centres, employment and training schemes, counselling and befriending services. Visit <http://www.mind.org.uk/> to find out more.

Rethink – A leading provider of information and advice for people facing mental health difficulties as well as a strong voice in the campaign for better attitudes and support nationwide. Visit <https://www.rethink.org/> for more information.

Scope – A leading charity committed to a society where people dealing with the effects of disability can truly enjoy equal opportunities. Visit <http://www.scope.org.uk/> to find out how you can be part of this important work.

Mencap – One of the leading providers of person-centred support for people dealing with the effects of disability as well as arrange of services for local groups and charities. Visit <https://www.mencap.org.uk/> to learn more about this great charity's work.

Capability Scotland – One of the leading disability charities in Scotland. Also offers information and resources suitable for awareness raising activities throughout the UK. Visit <http://www.capability-scotland.org.uk/> to learn more.

Parliament UK – Contacting your MP is an important democratic means of voicing your opinions. You can find your MP's contact details at <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/contacting-your-mp/> or at <https://www.writetothem.com/> as well as follow their record of speaking and voting in Parliament at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>



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