

OXFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD

Addressing Poverty and Inequality

Much is already being done to respond to the injustices of poverty and inequality; God is already at work through more than a thousand churches, chaplaincies, and schools in this diocese, and through each of us as individual disciples. But it is clear people continue to struggle in a myriad of ways and opportunities are not equally available to all – there is still much the church can and should do.

The Addressing Poverty and Inequality (API) report was commissioned by the API working group, a multi-agency team from churches and charities with practical expertise in alleviating poverty and inequality across the diocesan areas. The working group was formed to support the API common vision focus area, so we might be a more Christ-like church for the sake of God's world. The report will be published immediately Diocesan Synod: the text is subject to final drafting and editing changes.

The theological imperative to respond to poverty and inequality can be connected to Jesus's words in John 10:10: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' There are many aspects that contribute to a full life, but when people face unjust situations and extreme poverty, we are **all** unable to fully access this fullness of life.

Responding to alleviate poverty and inequality not only honours human lives, but also ensures the church lives out its beliefs with integrity. If we claim to offer a Gospel of Good News, we must *be* good news to the poor, to prisoners, and to the oppressed (Isaiah 61:1). Enabling more parishioners in the work of social action and justice provides opportunities for discipleship and faith growth ("Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." - James 2:17). It is crucial we respond in this way if we are to see meaningful evangelism and church growth.

The API report is the first phase of the working group, where information about what is happening now, on the ground has been gathered: to profile emerging and systemic issues around poverty and inequality, and identify how best to bring diocesan influence to bear. Through the 149 online survey responses and 30 in-depth conversations with church leaders, combined with the earlier *For Richer, For Poorer* report, it provides guidance on developing parishes' understanding of their communities, and expresses the need to support them in knowing how to engage and being able to act to address poverty and inequality in their local area.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had huge, often extremely challenging implications on our communities and a huge number of churches have stepped in to meet a range of arising and exacerbated needs over the last 18 months.

The response has been varied and widespread, from providing a space for private prayer, pastoral support, and a range of practical support (e.g. collecting prescriptions, food shops etc). Local churches have been in a good position to respond due to their pre-existing community engagement and connections.

The pandemic has increased the collaborative working of churches through partnerships and networks. This increasingly decentred approach has proved worthwhile but frames the changing nature of the role of the parish church.

The report focuses more on social action than on social justice. This illustrates how it is often easier to mitigate and enact charity, than to address root causes and advocate for change. But, providing a

food parcel to a hungry person – as important as that is – isn't sufficient alone. Real justice requires us to also understand and eliminate the root causes of poverty and inequality issues, so for example addressing why hungry people are struggling to afford food in the first place.

With a strong commitment to addressing poverty and inequality across the diocese, the next steps are to encourage and equip more social initiatives, and to extend the work of social justice in parishes. Sharing stories of best practice and creating practical resources will assist lay and ordained church leaders in responding to the immediate needs in their communities, and facilitate partnerships with local people and organisations to prevent the root causes.

Diocesan action aims to equip parishes in the following four areas...

1. Inform – better understand our communities and the challenges we're facing
2. Connect – to be able to find out who is doing what and connect with them
3. Enable – to know how to handle various practical challenges
4. Promote – to get involved in advocacy and campaigning

Citizens UK - with whom the diocese has a strategic partnership - is one way to advocate and address root causes of poverty and inequality through a community organising methodology. It provides a clear framework for local churches to join with other institutions and use replicable tools to call for meaningful systemic change. Their emphasis on raising and developing leaders offers incumbents a way to delegate responsibilities and empower parishioners, in turn facilitating discipleship and growing capacity. Community organising invites those experiencing poverty and inequality first-hand to be part of and lead this work to bring about social justice together.

We long for a world where there is less and less need to mitigate and provide charity because fairer systems protect people from poverty and inequality. But in the interim we must respond to the needs of our communities and call for systematic change, so that everyone may have life in all its fullness. This report scopes out where we are at currently and what needs to be done to move firmly in the direction of this vision.

Discussion in groups

The diocese has an opportunity to shape through campaigning and advocacy, including through the Citizens UK alliances that have formed and are forming. When Synod meets, part of the time will be spent in discussion groups. How would you like us to use our voice? **In the areas you represent what are the top three systematic injustices people are experiencing and are most passionate about campaigning on?** Groups will be asked to agree on up to three injustice issues and email them to hannah.ling@oxford.anglican.org

Motion

That this Synod:

- (a) celebrates the extensive work of churches across the Diocese of Oxford in tackling poverty and inequality in our local communities,
- (b) affirms the additional actions during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and
- (c) encourages all church communities to put addressing the causes and consequences of poverty at the centre of their mission.

The Ven Stephen Pullin, Archdeacon of Berkshire

Hannah Ling, Social Justice Adviser