

Dignity, agency and power

Cardijn Seminar

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Introduction

Church Action on Poverty is an independent, ecumenical organisation, established almost 40 years ago, to work with churches, people in poverty and other partners to tackle poverty in the United Kingdom.

I have been Director for more than 20 years, and will reflect on our experiences of trying to develop a variety of practical organising, empowerment and advocacy programmes over this time.

Church Action on Poverty's vision is that the UK can and must be transformed into a country where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty. Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, agency, of power over their own lives. We believe that our vision - an end to poverty in the UK - can become a reality.

Our goal over the next 5-10 years is to contribute to building a social movement based on organising with people and communities struggling against poverty, to create the social and political space to reclaim dignity, agency and power.

Before I describe our approach to achieving this, I would like to start by prefacing my remarks with a few words about the current context.

Our context: The denial of dignity, agency and power

The task of organising is indeed difficult in the current context:

There is little prospect of policy change at UK level, with a right wing Government with an 80 seat majority in Parliament, a continuing focus on delivering Brexit, aside from having to deal with the long term social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

Beyond this, in the UK there are strong and deep seated public attitudes which stigmatise and blame individuals for their own poverty. Professor Ruth Lister describes this in terms of the 'othering' of people living in poverty. Over many decades, these attitudes have not only been embedded in the welfare system, but have also been internalised by many people living in poverty themselves.

In the words of Wayne Green, who spoke at a National Poverty Hearing we held as far ago as 1996:

"What is poverty? Poverty is a battle of invisibility, a lack of resources, exclusion, powerlessness... being blamed for society's problems"

To be clear also, the Churches are not been immune from these attitudes, from treating poverty as a problem to be addressed through individual behaviour change, or in more theological language 'saving' people from their self-inflicted poverty.

This is the context in which poverty – and even many attempts to tackle it – rob people of their dignity, agency or power over their lives.

In spite of this, Church Action on Poverty affirms the belief in the transformational possibilities of people coming together to reclaim their dignity, agency and power.

In doing so, I also want to reflect, on the question of what it would mean for the church to focus on building dignity, agency and power, or to be truly committed to being, in Pope Francis' words "a true church of or for the poor?"

We need to talk more about race, class and poverty

Coming to my second main initial comment, we need to do much more to recognise that we are not all in the same boat – and that poverty intersects with other social inequalities. If we didn't already know this, the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have brought this home with greater sharpness this year.

Black people are disproportionately affected by poverty, by low pay, by poor housing, by health inequalities – these are aspects of structural racism which impinge directly on peoples lives. We have not done enough in the anti-poverty movement, in the churches – and within Church Action on Poverty ourselves, to acknowledge this fact, and to ensure that the views, voices and experiences of black and brown people are visible, or heard in and through our work.

What does this mean in terms of what we do

[Screen share]

None of these are abstract ideas. Too often, poverty is discussed in the abstract. For Church Action on Poverty, this has never been our way. For us, making change happen must always start at streetlevel, at local level, by working with small groups of people to enable them to reclaim their own dignity, agency and power.

Our vision for building a social movement is rooted in this approach – finding ways to enable groups of people to come together in ways which are transformative.

I now want to share some examples of how we do this in different ways and at different levels, which I will describe for the purpose of this talk as

Self-organising

Municipal organising

National organising

Congregational organising

Community level self-organising

The most small scale level at which we promote organising is through Self Reliant groups

Self Reliant groups

Taking inspiration from the ways in which some of the poorest people in India manage to survive and thrive, almost 10 years ago the Church of Scotland decided to see how working in groups could change communities for the better.

Following a visit to see the Self Reliant Groups movement in India, in 2011, a group of women came together as its first self-reliant group (SRG) and looked at how they could

generate their own capital. Through small savings, they started a lunch club, raised money and eventually started their own laundry business.

Today there are almost 100 SRGs supported by CAP and four partner organisations in Scotland, England, Wales and the Netherlands each with its own achievements and stories.

Each group, typically of 6-8 women, meet and save together on a regular basis, and use their own skills of creativity, craft-making, cookery etc to produce and generate small amounts of money – effectively creating their own micro-businesses.

The social impact of SRGs for people who are very economically disadvantaged, mostly women, and from very diverse ethnic backgrounds are very powerful in terms of creating a strong social solidarity amongst their members, in which their own skills, ideas and creativity is affirmed, and through which they can become producers rather than just recipients, and collectively have control of small might seem amounts of money – maybe £200 or £300 - that they themselves have generated.

The links between SRG groups are also important, with regular local peer gatherings, and national gatherings (when possible), so that each small group feels strongly connected to other groups as part of a wider SRG movement.

Your Local Pantry

Since 2017 we have been also working on a second approach to community-level organising, by growing a network of Local food pantries – social supermarkets - across the UK.

Each Pantry is hosted by a local community organisation – some are in high street shops, but increasing numbers are hosted by local churches, community centres, schools, even public Libraries

This work has expanded rapidly as a response to the Covid 19 pandemic. In the next 2-3 months we will welcome our 50th Pantry into the network, and look forward to our 10,000th member household.

What sets Local Pantries apart from the foodbanks which many churches have opened in recent years are that they are

- **Member-run:** Pantries are run along co-operative lines, by and for their members, many of the volunteers who run the Pantry are members too. Members pay a small weekly fee, so have a genuine stake in their Local Pantry
- **Open to all:** Membership is open to anyone local neighbourhood, with no requirement to be referred by a professional or other person.
- **Quality:** Local Pantries are deliberately created with the look and feel of a little local shop, and with a strong emphasis on good quality food, including fresh fruit and vegetables, frozen and chilled food, including meat and dairy products, alongside the usual supplies of tins and packets that you would find in a foodbank.

We recently carried out a survey of the social impact of being a Pantry member. We gave this the title 'Dignity, choice hope.' This demonstrated that the impact of being a Pantry member extends far beyond simply access to food.

Every Pantry member is able to save at least £15 on their weekly food shop, which equates to an annual saving of up to £780 a year (EUR 900). Beyond this



In the midst of the dark times, the Your Local Pantry network, offers a beacon of hope, demonstrating that local communities can be at the forefront of developing practical and sustainable long-term responses to the current crisis.

Municipal organizing

I now want to turn to two examples of organising that enable groups of people struggling against poverty to engage directly with and exercise some agency and power in relation to Government and other public and private institutions that exercise significant power over their lives at level of the municipality – or town or city level.

These are Poverty Truth Commissions and Participatory Budgeting

Poverty Truth Commissions

The Poverty Truth Commission is a unique way of developing new insights and initiatives to tackle poverty, developed in Glasgow ten years ago, and now being replicated in more than a dozen towns and cities across the UK. The key principle behind a Poverty Truth Commission is that decisions about poverty must involve people who directly face poverty: Nothing About Us Without Us is For Us.

The Commission process is one of deep listening, relationship building, and shared reflection over a 12-18 month period between people with a direct experience of poverty and civic and business leaders within a town or city.

Two years ago, I co-facilitated the Salford Poverty Truth Commission in Greater Manchester, which was sponsored by the Bishop of Salford and the Salford's City

Mayor, and which brought together 15 civic and business leaders with 15 people from across Salford who each had their own personal experience of and ‘truth’ about poverty to share.

In preparing for the launch, the ‘grassroots’ Commissioners jointly produced a graphic map of the key issues and problems they experienced living in poverty in the City. Slap bang in the middle of the map was an image of Salford Civic Centre (or city hall).

Debbie Brown, who represented Salford City Council on the Commission, recalled her reaction to seeing this at the launch: "The thing that stopped me in my tracks was a picture of Salford Civic Centre – the City Council was identified as cause of poverty. I was devastated! I hadn't expected to see that at all!"

As the Commissioners shared their stories over the coming months, what transpired was that several of the grassroots Commissioners had traumatic experiences of bailiffs arriving at their front door, sent by Salford Council with the power to seize and sell their property to repay their Council Tax debts. One Commissioner told how a Council Tax debt of less than £100 had grown to over £1,000 once court charges and bailiffs fees had been added, putting her deeper into debt.

As Debbie said, "We heard some real heartbreaking stories of hiding behind sofas and being afraid of what was going to happen: that was not the city I recognised and certainly not the Council I know".

In response to this, the Poverty Truth Commission brought together several of the grassroots Commissioners with the head of Council Tax collection in Salford, who was ultimately responsible for sending the bailiffs in. At the workshop he carefully explained the process for sending out reminder letters to those who hadn't paid their bills.

Patrick, one of the grassroots Commissioners said "Yes, I remember those. They came in brown envelopes, and go straight into the draw. I can't open them. I suffer from 'brown envelope' syndrome."

The most shocking revelation from the workshop was that the first point of human contact that anyone would have in the process was the bailiff sent to your house to seize and sell your property.

Patrick's reaction to this was the key to changing Council thinking. "Back in the day, in Ireland, if I had any problems with the council, I would go and see Mrs Mack. That's what we need to get back to. Salford needs its very own Mrs Mack."

This led directly to significant changes to Salford's debt collection process – including swapping brown envelopes for white envelopes.

As Debbie now says: "...The City Council has changed a lot already, towards a more person centred approach – we now run coffee morning drop-in sessions for any Salford resident who wants to talk through any problems with Council Tax face to face – and we have stopped using bailiffs to collect Council Tax debts from people on low incomes.

Through the Poverty Truth Commission, the collective wisdom and insights of a group of people sharing their own personal 'truths' about poverty has kicked started a process of culture change at Salford City Council, towards a much more human and people-centred approach to engaging with its citizens.

As Patrick says: "I am not naively thinking we can change the world overnight, but if anybody anywhere else needed motivation, just look at what we have achieved in Salford."

Participatory Budgeting

I also want to more briefly mention Participatory Budgeting: a process of participatory deliberation and decision-making over the allocation of 'our' public funds.



The idea was originated by the Brazilian People's Party in the city of Porto Allegre in the 1980s. Church Action on Poverty, along with Oxfam, was responsible for introducing Participatory Budgeting to the UK. For more than ten years until 2012, we hosted a Participatory Budgeting Unit, and worked in partnership with central Government, to assist and advise more than 120 local Participatory Budgeting processes, in which local people directly decided how to spend pots of public funding ranging from a few thousand pounds up to tens of thousands of pounds.



Our Peoples Budget campaign promoted the idea that all public bodies should allocate one percent of their funds using Participatory Budgeting. The Scottish Government has now adopted this policy, which will eventually mean that £100 million of funds spent by local authorities across Scotland will be allocated directly according to the wishes and votes of local people.

National level organising: Speaking Truth to Power

Church Action on Poverty has been known for giving a voice to people in poverty nationally since the late 1990s. It is more authentic for people to speak their own truth to power than for church leaders, or me as a director of a charity to speak on their behalf.

Over the years we have run high profile national campaigns on asylum, debt, Living Wages, tax avoidance but have focussed much of our work over the past 6 years on the subject of food poverty.

However, rather than focus on our campaigns, I would like to share the story of one young campaigner, who has been an inspiration to me over the past four years.

Tia Clarke, is a young activist from the town of Blackburn in the North West of England, who has just turned 18, but was 15 when she first started her engagement with us.

Tia Clarke and other members of her local child food poverty campaign group have been instrumental in the national #ENDCHILDFOODPOVERTYCAMPAIN.

They are no strangers to campaigning as their involvement is a result of their own campaign in their home town of Blackburn. This campaign was based on experiences at their school where they and their friends living in food poverty often went without meals. Their hunger led to a lack of concentration in the classroom and tempers flaring with teachers and classmates. With 40% of children growing up in food poverty in their local area, they could see where the system was failing them and set out to fix it.

In Tia's own words

"Food poverty happens all around me. When you are hungry you get in a mood. Then you are in a mood all day and you just want food. To tackle food poverty schools should get more involved, they should look at pupils' personal experiences and the Government should help as well."

"I became involved in the Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance which is part of Church Action on Poverty's Food Power programme in October 2017. Since then I have shared my own experience of food poverty both locally & nationally, and was one of a small group of young people who set up the #DarwengetsHangry Campaign.

In 2018 I became involved in the national Children's Future Food Inquiry. This has involved speaking to MP's in Westminster, appearing on Channel 4 News, as well as being featured in national newspapers."

The #ENDCHILDFOODPOVERTY campaign has received national profile, and in the past nine months has twice forced Boris Johnston to U-turn and agree to provide Government funding for children who would normally receive free school meals, but who have not been able to do so because their schools were closed due to the pandemic.

One of the strengths of the campaign has been the power of the voices of people with personal experience of food poverty as children. The most high profile has been Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford – who himself went hungry as a child – and whose petition was signed by more than one million people. Alongside him Tia and other young campaigners with lived experience have been adding their voices to the campaign.

In September, Tia and others in the group met with Marcus Rashford to film a prime time BBC TV documentary, at our offices in Salford. In this, they discussed their own experiences of food poverty in Blackburn, the #DarwengetsHangry campaign and their demands of government as part of the #ENDCHILDFOODPOVERTY campaign.

"It's amazing that we finally have so many people behind us... I want to say thank you especially to Marcus for helping people understand what it's like and put our voices even more out there for all these people who are now behind us and I'm so excited for what's going to come next."

Congregational organising

Turning lastly to the idea of congregational organising.

Over recent years we have begun to explore more directly the challenge to the church of what it would mean to respond in practical and tangible ways to Pope Francis' challenge to be or become a 'Poor church of and for the poor.'

This has included producing an initial popular report setting out in clear terms the challenge to the churches, but also ways in which different denominations are already responding.

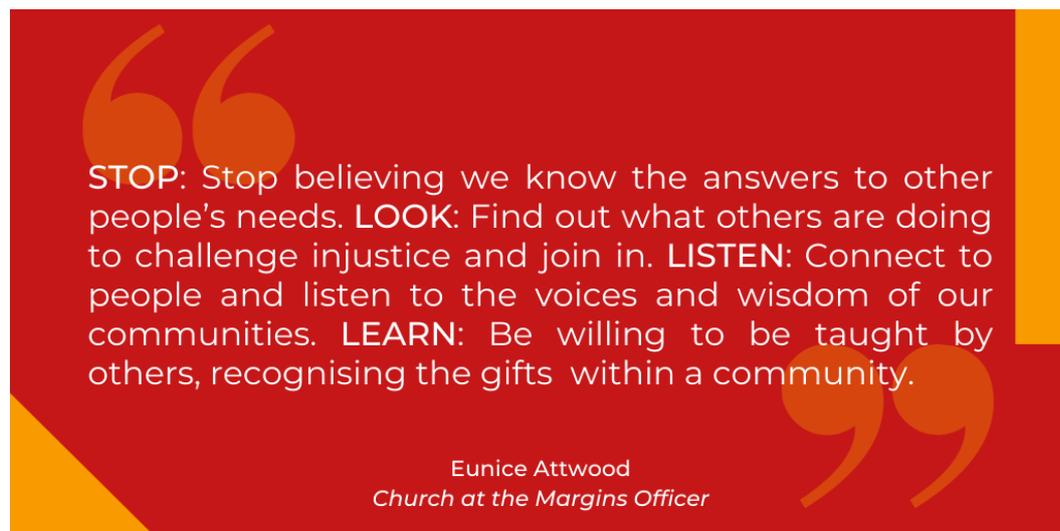
We have also started to bring together groups of people living and working in poorer neighbourhoods in Sheffield and Manchester to explore these questions for themselves.

Ultimately, however, this is a question for the churches at all levels – not just in poor neighbourhoods: As institutions that deploy hundreds of clergy and other staff and in many cases hold investments of tens or hundreds of millions of pounds.

Part of our inspiration for this work is the Church of Scotland, who more than 10 years ago made a national commitment to say that Mission and Ministry in the 10 percent poorest neighbourhoods in Scotland was THE Gospel priority. Since then they have allocated twice as much ministerial resource to Priority areas, and funded some of the most innovative anti-poverty initiatives in the country – including starting the first Self Reliant Groups and Poverty Truth Commission in the UK.

We are excited that partly as a result of our programme, last summer the Methodist Church committed to spend £8 million over the next 5 years on its on ‘church at the margins’ programme to be invested in ministry in and led by marginalised communities themselves. We are starting to explore what it will mean to be a partner with them in this work over the coming years.

I will finish with the words of Deacon Eunice Attwood, who has recently been appointed national Church at the Margins worker for the Methodist church:



Niall Cooper
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