

# TRANSFORMING LIVES TOGETHER

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## Theological reflection about child poverty and feeding the poor

(Filling the Gap, why we do what we do)

When considering the initiative, **'Filling the Gap'** we will urge churches to consider the theological reasons why this type of ministry is important. In order to help you to study relevant scriptures and to pray about how you might respond we offer you the following:

Firstly; who are the poor in our society?

There are all kinds of poverty; poverty of identity which includes poor mental health and lack of well-being, a poverty of relationships which results in loneliness and isolation and a poverty of resources such as low income, food poverty, poor education etc. Poverty is a relative issue. Occasionally, we are challenged by people who claim, 'there is no such thing as poverty in this country'. Sadly, we end up explaining the difference between relative and absolute poverty as a defence of what we do. We need to begin to think more about Jesus and the way he would have us live our lives in relationship, one with another to explain why we do what we do.

There are two important implications for a Christian understanding of poverty. Firstly, human beings are not ultimately in competition with one another. Christianity calls us to recognise our fellow human beings as more than rivals for material wealth and resources. Rather, we are to recognise one another as gifts from God, and the material world as a means by which we can grow in communion (Genesis 2:18).

Jesus tells us that when we offer hospitality to those who lack food and shelter we are welcoming him. (Matt 25:35-40). He places both children and the poor at the heart of the Kingdom of God. He explains that children are people of importance to God (Matt 18:1-6). In fact, Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor and that we can only enter into it when we become like children.

Jesus was never afraid to be controversial and when he cited these examples, he was being 'counter cultural'. The poor were viewed as a nuisance and children were chattels and servants and occasionally a commodity to be used and abused.

We need to ask the honest question about whether or not our society is any different. The poor, the homeless, the unemployed are often seen as a sector of our society which we can ignore or who are simply a nuisance on our streets and a drain on our economy, but Jesus reminds us that they are our responsibility and when we serve them with dignity and generosity we are serving him.

Children are occasionally referred to as 'the church of tomorrow' but we need to see them as 'the church of today'. We must stop looking forward to a halcyon future, which we crave but actually look at what we have right now. Treating our children well and respecting their place in our communities can only help them to grow into strong, able citizens. St Paul, writing to the church in Thessalonica reminds us that we must live in the present, always being ready

for the day the Lord comes again. (1 Thess 5:1-9) This is a reminder that we have to live in the moment, always striving to do the work of Jesus in every situation.

A few weeks ago, we were privileged to have the Right Reverend Libby Lane, Bishop of Stockport, as our guest at a 'Celebrate the Heroes' event. We were urging churches who are currently providing fun and food in the school holidays to bring their volunteers and celebrate them and all that they do.

Bishop Libby reminded us of the Feeding of the 5000. It's the only miracle, other than the Resurrection, which has been recorded in all four gospels, which may give us some insight into the tremendous impact this occasion had on those who were present. When the disciples called on Jesus to send the people home, as they were tired and hungry, he responded, "You feed them". The idea of using a picnic brought by one young boy to feed the massive crowd seemed impossible but they had their instruction, "You feed them". They followed Jesus' instruction and did as they were told. They then witnessed the miracle!

Bishop Libby affirmed our volunteers by explaining that they were following Jesus' instruction too. We aren't waiting until we have enough, we aren't waiting until State provision catches up or the Local Authority provides free school meals in the holidays. We are urging churches to do what they can, with what they have, NOW. Moreover, many are following that call.

What does it mean to recognise my neighbour as a gift from God? It is through our neighbour that we hear God's calling to be in relationship and not to be so self-absorbed and it is through our neighbour that we learn the art of generosity, and doing life together. The New Testament says when we do that, we find God to be both in the neighbour who we assist (Matthew 25:40) and in the bond of love this generates (1 John 4:12). Secondly, we are called to develop relationships of mutual generosity. In doing so, our human relationships reflect the life of God, in whose communion there is both equality and difference.

Our prayer is that all communities who confess Christ are called to love their neighbour and serve the poor with a generosity which is borne out of a desire to bring God's Kingdom to everyone.