

**The Methodist Church in Ireland
Council on Social Responsibility**

**Poverty and Deprivation –
The Nature of Northern Ireland Society**

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1. Introduction

1.1 In his first major public appearance, Jesus read from the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... to release the oppressed ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4: 16ff). Tellingly Jesus continued "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing".

John Wesley in a sermon took up this theme: "A poor wretch cries to me for an alm: I look, and see him covered with dirt and rags. But through these I see one that has an immortal spirit made to know, and love, and dwell with God to eternity. I honour him for his Creator's sake." (From John Wesley's sermon "On Pleasing All Men.")

1.2 It is the duty of the Council, as laid down in the Manual of Laws, to "consider the witness of the Church in connection with such matters as Industrial Conditions, Public Health, Social Concerns, Christian Citizenship, International Relations and other relevant matters". In considering any aspect of our witness, Methodists need to understand the nature of the society in which we live. Effective witness can only occur when it is prompted by God and relevant to the context of the immediate community.

1.3 In 1991 the Council brought a paper to the Conference "*Poverty and Deprivation – The nature of Northern Ireland Society*". 20 years have passed since that paper was adopted by Conference and in many ways N Ireland society has changed dramatically, not least with the Peace Process of the early 1990s, the Belfast and St Andrew's Agreements and latterly the creation of a devolved administration to which in recent months Policing and Justice have been devolved. It is thus a pertinent time to re-visit the area of poverty and deprivation. One might have hoped that with the passage of time some of the issues highlighted in the 1991 Report would have been resolved or at least ameliorated. It seems, however, that for the greater part, as will be illustrated below, poverty and deprivation have become even more entrenched in our society. How true the words "the poor are always with us". In presenting this paper to Conference Council does so with the firm conviction that the Bible holds out a radically different picture of society. Further, if we are to be true followers of Jesus we must strive to create that better society.

In paying tribute to the authors of the 1991 Report this paper will follow the methodology there used and so this paper has a three-fold purpose:-

- to raise awareness about the extent of poverty and deprivation in our midst;
- to challenge our attitudes of complacency and indifference; and,
- to offer some constructive recommendations for action.

2 The Nature of N Ireland Society

Introduction

This section attempts to summarise the main features of N Ireland society, using material; published Government, academic and other research institutions. The material below is intended to be illustrative rather than definitive or comprehensive but it will give a road indication of the needs of the community.

2.1 Demography

It is estimated that in 2009 there were approximately 1789 million people living in N Ireland with 21.4% being children (i.e. under the age of 16 years) and 16.9% being of state pension age. During 2009 just over 25000 babies were born in N Ireland and just under 15000 people died. The fastest growing areas within the province were Antrim, Craigavon, Dungannon, Lisburn, Newry and Mourne local government district areas.

The population in 2009 represents an increase in population of approx 11.3% since 1991 (population 1.6 million), compared to an increase of 2.1% in the population of Scotland over the same period. One can see that there has been and continues to be a disproportionate population increase in N Ireland.

2.2 Health and Social Services

With a significant percentage of the N Ireland population under the age of 16 one might reasonably expect a fairly healthy population. The following statistics however illustrate some disturbing trends:

- At September 2003 NI highest number of people waiting for admission to hospital per 1000 population in the United Kingdom – 32/1000 in NI compared to 22/1000 in England.
- NI had 5.4 places per 1000 n residential homes (compared to 8.9/1000 in England (2001)
- 3.4 children per 1000 were on the Child Protection Register in NI (2.3/1000 in England).
- The death rate for those under 75 years of age n NI was 4% above the UK average.
- While 66.4 live births per 1000 women were recorded in NI (as opposed to 56.6/1000 in Scotland) the infant death rte was 5.1/100 in NI and 4.1/1000 in Scotland.
- NI has a higher mortality rate for circulatory diseases than the UK (9% higher); for respiratory diseases (28% higher) and from injuries/poisonings (23& higher).
- NI has the highest female incidence rate for colorectal cancer (19% above the UK average) and the highest male incidence rate for colorectal cancer (14% above the UK average).

- NI has the worst self-reported “poor general health” in the UK at 16% (compare 2% in the Republic of Ireland).
- Approximately 25% of people in NI consider they have a long-standing illness (compare 12% in RoI).
- Approximately 3500 people claiming DLA in NI cited alcohol abuse as their main disabling condition.
- Benzodiazepines (prescription anti-depressants) are the second most common substance of referral for people with addictions in NI.
- Nearly a fifth of young people aged 11 – 16 years of age surveyed by the Eastern Drug and Alcohol Coordination Team had taken drugs before in their lives.
- 72% of males and 57% of females aged 18-29 years of age are estimated to binge drink at least once per week.

2.3 Family Breakdown

Family breakdown is evident in increasing divorce rate, but is also predicated by higher rates of births outside marriage and higher rates of teenage pregnancies given the much higher frequency with which unmarried and particularly very young parents separate. Family breakdown is the usual route into lone parenthood with all the disadvantages this tends to imply.

- Five times as many children are born outside marriage as was the case 30 years ago. Rates of children born outside marriage is especially high among young people ages 16-24 with only one in five babies born in NI to young people who are married.
- The decoupling of marriage and childbearing is not merely a shift in worldviews but a serious undermining of the family. Married couple relationships are significantly more stable than cohabiting relationships, which are between 2 and 2.5 times more likely to end than the married couples equivalent in terms of income and education and this is the case across the social spectrum. Fewer than 10 per cent of married couples split up before their child's fifth birthday compared to one in three unmarried couples. 116 children born to unmarried parents are therefore far more likely to experience family breakdown as they grow up, and also when they form relationships as adults.

2.3.1 Teenage pregnancy rates

- Northern Ireland has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe,¹¹⁷ and almost all births (96 per cent) to teenagers are to unmarried mothers.¹¹⁸ These rates are disproportionately skewed towards those in greatest disadvantage:

- Rates of teenage motherhood among girls aged 13 – 16 are around three times the national average in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland
- Teenage pregnancy rates for female care leavers are seven times the average
- People from lower socioeconomic groups in Northern Ireland are twice as likely as those from a professional/managerial background to have had underage sexual intercourse¹

2.3.2 Lone Parent Families

- There are around three times as many lone parent households in Northern Ireland today as there were at the beginning of the 1980s
- Today around one in five households with children in Northern Ireland is a single parent family¹²⁴
- The result of family breakdown is usually the absence (indefinitely or for significant periods) of one parent from the family home, or the disruption of the original family household. Despite it becoming so regular this does not mean that children are unaffected. Indeed, children not raised in two-parent families tend to be at an inherent disadvantage:
- Lone parent families are significantly more likely to live in poverty as two parent families in Northern Ireland¹²⁵
- Children growing up in lone parent families in Northern Ireland are more than three times as likely to live in households with nobody in work¹²⁶
- Fathers are absent from nearly 25,000 economically vulnerable households receiving Income Support in Northern Ireland¹²⁷

2.3.3 Family dysfunction

- Very chaotic households are often associated with higher levels of domestic abuse, behavioural problems and engagement in offending and substance misuse. Family breakdown is nearly always a precursor to family dysfunction, and children growing up in lone parent or broken families have been estimated to be three to six times more likely to suffer serious abuse than children growing up with both biological parents.

2.3.4 Domestic Abuse

- Domestic violence is particularly difficult to address in social policy, not only because of its acutely private nature but also because unreported incidences lead to a 'dark figure' – unknown incidences of domestic violence – in the statistics, which makes estimating its scale problematic. The recorded crime figures and levels of incidence therefore, may represent only a fraction of those individuals affected:

- About 25,000 domestic violence ‘incidents’ (police were alerted) were recorded in Northern Ireland in 2009/10

2.3.5 Children in Care

- In the worst and most tragic cases of dysfunction, children are often taken into statutory care: Nearly 2,500 children in Northern Ireland were taken into care in 2008, an increase of 3 per cent from 2007.¹³⁴ Most children in care leave at 18 years of age; many are in an intensely vulnerable emotional, psychological and financial state:
- Of all care leavers in 2007/8, 43% had been in care for over one year, while a significant 34% of all leavers had left a placement after just two weeks (or less).¹³⁵ This demonstrates how unstable foster arrangements can be, with children frequently being moved from place to place
- Many children repeat their parents’ patterns of economic dependency and family breakdown – the teenage pregnancy rates for female care leavers is seven times the average for Northern Ireland

2.4 Immigration and Migrant Communities

In the year to June 2009 23500 people are estimated to have come to live in N Ireland and 21400 people left N Ireland to live elsewhere. Migration therefore added 2100 net residents to the N Ireland population. The 2009 figure is lower than the previous annual figures (5700 in 2007-08;10000 in 200607 and 10000 in 2005-06). And early indications are that the downward trend will continue in the immediate future.

Approximately 50% of migrants cited work-related reasons for coming to N Ireland; 27% came for family reasons with approx 12% citing education as the reason to coming to N Ireland.

The school census (2000) showed that 4800 primary school children (3% of PS pupils) have a language other than English as their first language. The corresponding number of post-primary school pupils is 2400 pupils (1.6% of post-primary school pupils). Overall migration trends vary across Northern Ireland. Flows around areas such as Botanic (Belfast), Jordanstown (Newtownabbey) and Strand (Derry) are driven by students. Health service registrations also show that in some parts of particularly Belfast and Dungannon Local Government Districts, annual immigration flows last year exceeded 1 in 20 of the resident population. the percentage of residents with an A8 (mostly Eastern European) background ranges from 8% in Dungannon Local Government District to less than 0.5% of the population in Larne Local Government District; and the Labour Force Survey estimates that there are 80,000 persons who were born outside the UK and Ireland living in Northern Ireland in 2010.

2.5 Education

In 2009/10 there were 329,000 children in schools across Northern Ireland. In total, 148,000 children attended 219 post-primary schools and 164,000 children attended 866 primary schools. A further 5,000 children attended special or hospital schools and 13,000 children attended nursery or pre-school. In 2008/09, 71% of pupils in year 12

achieved 5 or more GCSEs (Grades A*-C) and 98% of pupils in year 14 achieved 2 or more A levels (Grades A-E).

These figures compare very favourably with the remainder of the UK, however 2.9% of pupils in year 12 left school with no GCSEs (albeit down from 55 in 2004/05) and while 73% of pupils entered further or higher education 3.1% of pupils remained unemployed.

The issue of poverty of aspiration especially among protestant boys is very worrying and seems to resist any intervention procedures. Again the issue of transfer at 11+ remains a vexed issue and de-regulated tests are at best a pro tem response.

2.6 Housing

In 2009 the total housing stock in N Ireland was 740000 (up from 647500 in 2001) and represents a major consequential benefit of the construction boom in the early to mid years fo the last decade. Of this number 62% are owner occupied with 43400 (5.9%) vacant.

It is worrying that 15% of the total housing stock was built pre 1919 and perhaps related 17500(2.4%) are deemed unfit for human habitation most of which (41%) were either owner occupied or in the private rented sector.

Perhaps most worrying is that fact that approximately 16% of the housing stock is in the private rented sector and this sector is most vulnerable to changes in rent consequential upon interest rate variations.

2.7 Employment and unemployment

The number of persons in employment in the period September - November 2010 was estimated at 768,000. This estimate decreased by 12,000 over the quarter. The employment rate for those aged 16-64 was estimated at 65.3%, down 1.1 percentage points over the quarter. NI's employment rate remained well below the UK average (70.4%) and was the lowest of the twelve UK regions.

2.7.1 Unemployment

The unemployment rate for the period September - November 2010 was estimated at 7.8%, up 0.9 percentage points over the quarter and up 1.1 percentage points over the year. The number of unemployed persons was estimated at 65,000 (and it worth highlighting that the corresponding figure at the start of 2008 was 25000), up 7,000 over the quarter and 10,000 over the year. The latest male unemployment rate (9.9%) was almost double the female rate (5.3%). Unadjusted figures show that 49.8% of the unemployed have been unemployed for 1 year or more – up 12.5 percentage points over the year. They also estimate the unemployment rate for 18-24 year olds at 21.0% – up 5.0 percentage points over the year.

2.7.2 Economically inactive

The N Ireland inactivity rate for those aged 16-64 stands at 29%. This is significantly higher than the UK average rate (23.4%) and is the highest in the twelve UK regions.

Unadjusted figures estimate that 27% of the economically inactive, aged 16-64, in NI are sick/disabled, 26% are students, 25% are looking after the family/home, 13% are retired and 9% are 'other' reason.

Unadjusted figures also show that while 91% of the inactive do not want work, the remaining 9% (52,000) want employment but do not satisfy the full ILO job search criteria (by actively seeking work and being available to start a job).

2.7.3 Changes in the Structure of Manufacturing Jobs (NI)

Over the period 2000-2010, Manufacturing jobs in NI decreased by 26,720, with 19 of the 23 manufacturing divisions recording a decrease. The largest decrease occurred in the Manufacture of wearing apparel, which recorded 7,930 fewer jobs.

There were 5,640 fewer jobs in the Manufacture of computer, electronic and optical products, 5,560 fewer in the Manufacture of textiles, 1,790 fewer in the Manufacture of other transport equipment and 1,710 fewer in the Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers.

In the construction sector for the period Jan 2008 to March 2010 the number of people involved in this sector fell from 46140 to 34030 – a reduction of 27%

The total cost of Social Security administration in N Ireland in 2009/10 was £228M. Behind the raw statistics of unemployment there is the clear and very disturbing link between worklessness and entrenched poverty, ill health and family breakdown.

Among young people youth unemployment has increased from 11.6% in 2008 to 17.4% in 2010 and while this presents a major frustration for some, for others the outcome is demoralisation – figures indicate that at least 12000 young people who are not at work or study do not want a job –demonstrating a low level of aspiration which in turn leads to an increasing likelihood of anti-social behaviour.

Again the link between worklessness and ill health is disturbing. There is a positive association between mortality and unemployment for all age groups, and a strong association between deprived areas , poor health, poverty and worklessness. This relationship is even stronger for unemployment and mental health. Depression can be understood as both a cause and consequence of long-term worklessness.

It is also important not to miss one of the long term consequences of unemployment and that is economic dependency among those of pensionable age. Some 57000 (20.7%) pensioners (out of a total of 275000 pensioners) in N Ireland live in relative poverty.

Finally in this section, for those who are i work the average gross salary in 2009 was £424.60 per week compared to a UK average of £4999.00 per week.

2.8 Insolvencies and Bankruptcies

The Insolvency Service dealt with an increase in the number of cases administered during 2008/09; the total number dealt with being 1310 as against 1036 in 2007/08. This increase was due to the number of bankruptcy orders having gone up from 906 in

2007/08 to 1155 in 2008/09 and the number of compulsory winding up orders increasing from 130 in 2007/08 to 155 in 2008/09.

The general trend in insolvencies was again upward when compared to previous years. In 2008/09 the greatest number of bankruptcies continued to occur in the consumer bankruptcy sector; 282 fell into this category. Consumer bankruptcies are defined to include persons who are in employment, those with no occupation or who are unemployed, individuals whose occupation is unknown, and directors and promoters of companies whose bankruptcy has arisen through personal indebtedness. The next largest groups of bankruptcies were in the Construction (220) and Other Services (180) sectors.

In regard to companies the largest groups of winding up orders were in the Construction sector (32), the Other Services sector (24), the Retailing sector (23) and the Finances and Business Services sector (21).

Again worthy of note during the year was the continuing high number of consumer bankruptcies resulting from credit card debt and personal loans taken out.

2.9 Crime and Justice

In 2009/10 there were 109,139 crimes recorded by the PSNI in Northern Ireland or 61 crimes per 1,000 population. Just over a quarter of these crimes were detected by the police through charging or cautioning those responsible. December 2009, January 2010 and February 2010 saw the lowest monthly crime levels since the revised Home Office Counting Rules were introduced in April 1998. There were 7,824 offences recorded in January 2010, 8,055 offences in February 2010 and 8,084 in December 2009. Prior to this the lowest monthly level of crime had been in December 2007 when 8,355 offences were recorded.

It is also important to recognise and welcome devolution of policing and Justice to N Ireland – it is of course essential that all necessary funding for this arm of government is made available especially against a growing threat from dissident paramilitaries.

2.10 Economic Downturn

As a consequence of the very significant downturn in the global economy the economic landscape in N Ireland has changed dramatically in the past few years. As a result of the UK Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) of October 2009 N Ireland faces unprecedented pressure on public services with reduction in real terms of 8% in current expenditure and 40% in capital expenditure by the end of the CSR period. Given the N Ireland economy's reliance on the public sector these reductions will have a significant impact on economic activity and employment in both public and private sectors. The commitment by the UK Government to re-balance the local economy towards the private sector represents both opportunity and threat. Clearly a buoyant private sector is both necessary and desirable and will yield enormous social benefits as well as clear economic benefits. However, while changing the corporation tax rate to harmonise that in RoI is almost certainly an essential element in stimulating the private sector this will represent in real terms some £200M per annum and there seems to be clear evidence that EU regulations are such that the UK block grant to N Ireland cannot be consequentially increased – even if there was the political will at Westminster so to do.

The consequence of removing an additional £200M from an already squeezed bock grant is almost bound to have significant ramifications in areas highlighted above thus making a worrying situation even more worrying – especially given that the Minister of Finance in his Foreword to the Draft Budget 2011-15 stated “this Draft Budget continues to prioritise the economy”. The creation of a Social Investment Fund and a Social Protection Fund is to be welcomed but allocating some £20M per annum to each Fund is modest indeed by any standard.

2.11 A Divided Society

While the hallmarks of the conflict in N Ireland remain important factors in social breakdown – witness the continued existence of “Peace Walls” – nevertheless many people face social problems such as increasing family breakdown, third generation educational under-achievement, worklessness, cycles of addiction and serious personal debts. These issues are often entrenched in some of N Ireland’s poorest communities and trap some of its most vulnerable people. Social issues create a second – and much more worrying – division in N Ireland society. The Concept of multiple deprivation is helpful in quantifying these social divisions in society. The co-existence of family breakdown, education failure, addiction, indebtedness and worklessness and economic dependency occur in certain geographical areas..

Whiterock is the most deprived Ward in N Ireland whilst Knockbracken is the fifth least deprived Ward.

The following statistics illustrate a yawning gap between the two Wards.

Whiterock

- Worst employment rates in Northern Ireland: one in ten people are unemployed
- Lowest household incomes in Northern Ireland: over a quarter of households in Whiterock are in poverty according to official measures
- Low educational attainment: 80% of individuals have no or low qualifications
- Worst levels of health and disability in Northern Ireland: nearly one in three people are suffering from a long-term illness
- Widespread family breakdown: lone parent families make up over 27% of households in Whiterock and over 80% of births are to unmarried mothers

Knockbracken

- In the least deprived 4% wards in Northern Ireland for employment
- 90% of births to married mothers
- Lone parent families make up only 4% of households in Knockbracken
- Only 4% of households in poverty – less than half the national average (8.1%)
- Less than half the rate of long-term illness of Whiterock

Only five miles from each other, the areas of Whiterock and Knockbracken reveal huge levels of disparity, pointing towards the interrelatedness of pathways to poverty, and the entrenched and intergenerational cycles of family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness and ill-health.

2.12 Action

Given the scale of the issues outlined above there is no single “quick-fix” to address these issues, rather a co-ordinated and coherent approach by statutory and voluntary agencies is required. The role played by OFMDFM in addressing these issues is acknowledged, especially the creation of a Poverty and Social Inclusion Forum as well as the creation of a Central Anti-Poverty Unit. The publication of a Draft Child Poverty Strategy is also welcomed.

2010 was The European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Inclusion, however one has to question whether anything of lasting or even immediate significance has been achieved by this initiative.

The statistics referred to above indicate clearly that at a regional level very considerable poverty and deprivation exist in N Ireland. Within the region as highlighted above there are huge differences between Local Government District areas. The case for a comprehensive Cohesion, Sharing and Integration policy is overwhelming and the Council therefore acknowledged the CSI Consultation Document published in 2010. A detailed response on behalf of MCI to CSI was made by the Council. It is not necessary to rehearse here all the arguments presented in that submission, however it is appropriate, indeed necessary, to highlight some of the arguments there presented. “CSI seems to be predicated on division and a concept of “equal but separate” communities is entirely unsatisfactory at both theoretical and practical levels”. Further, “We recognise that division is deeply embedded at every level in N Ireland society and it is therefore a matter of deep regret that CSI seems to accept this situation as “normal”. Further, this alleged “normality” is nowhere challenged in CSI. MCI deeply regrets this lack of challenge”.

3. A Christian Response

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 In developing a Christian response to this situation we must begin with the doctrine of creation. In the Judeo-Christian tradition human beings are created in the image of God and have therefore in consequence a unique dignity which is expressed in a variety of ways not least in terms of human rights and reciprocal responsibilities. One Catechism helpfully explains the significance of this in the following terms: “created in the image of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls all people have the same nature and origin and a enjoy equal dignity”. From the analysis presented above it is clear that in N Ireland society people are not perceived to have equal dignity. If we are to build a truly equitable society it is essential to re-discover and afford in word and action an equal dignity to all in our society. How appropriate the words are that “we should call no one worthless for whom Christ died”.

3.1.2 Mrs Thatcher, as Prime Minister, bequeathed some significant concepts to present day society. Her comments made to Women’s Own magazine on 31 October 1987 are of

some interest: “I think we’ve been through a period when too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it’s the government’s job to cope with it. ‘I have a problem, I’ll get a grant’ ... They’re casting their problems on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society ...” Her assertion that “there is no such thing as society” had little credence when first spoken some 20 years ago. In the current context the crucial question is not about the presence or absence of “society” but rather the form of society to which we ought to aspire.

The concept of the “common good” is particularly relevant in this context. This is a necessary consequence of our understanding that the human person is both sacred and social, witness John Wesley’s words “the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion” and so that which is good for the individual is inextricably linked with that which is good for society at large. We realise our human dignity, rights and responsibilities through our relationships with others in community.

3.1.3 It is a matter of profound regret that in modern society in general and in N Ireland society in particular family breakdown and family dysfunction are so prevalent. We take the view that the primary relationships in society ought to be the family and small social groups. If this analysis is correct then it follows necessarily that the state exists for the well-being of individuals and families and not vice-versa. It also follows that the state should always seek to empower people at local level as opposed to developing an over-arching and all-enveloping bureaucracy. In other words nothing should be done or imposed at a higher level that can be done as well, or even more effectively, at the local level.

There is of course a certain tension that arises here in consequence of the interrelationship between the individual and society at large eloquently expressed by President John F Kennedy in his 1961 Presidential inaugural address when memorably he stated: “Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country”. Perhaps another way of putting this in the present context is to re-affirm the inter-relationship between rights and responsibilities.

3.1.4 Recognising that we live in a globalized world we increasingly and necessarily are inter-dependent. This is so essentially because there is an essential bond between all people since all people are afforded equal dignity by virtue of their creation by the one God. Because of this bond we hold that those who are more influential or stronger because they have a greater share should feel responsibility for those who are weaker and be prepared to share with them all they possess. This insight is profoundly biblical in that the clear response to the question “Am I my brother’s keeper?” is a resounding “Yes!”

3.2 Creation and Community

Given the above introduction, the Bible is clear that care and concern for those who are poor is not an "optional extra" for those who would wish to take the Gospel seriously. From the biblical account of Creation, it is clear that in creative love and purpose God has provided enough for all members of his human family. Within the Deuteronomic laws we are reminded of the responsibility of the community for those who, for whatever reason, are less able to provide for themselves. Clear instruction is given to the landowner and to the gleaner as to what must be left aside for the poor (Deut 24: 19-22).

A portion of the Temple tithe was for the care of those who needed to be supported by the community.

3.3 The Prophets

Within the prophetic tradition there is a clear connection between the failure of society to care for "the poor" and the judgement of God. Sin is the failure of God's people to practice social justice so that even their elaborate worship has become vain and worthless. While he was by no means alone in his condemnation, no prophet was more outspoken than Amos who declared God's great displeasure. (Amos 5: 21-24). In the Old Testament, "the poor" are seen as those who not only are dispossessed in terms of money but also in terms of power. They are the oppressed; they are the "marginalised". Having neither money nor power they put their trust in God who is seen as the champion of the poor.

3.4 Jesus and "the poor"

If a reading of the Old Testament demonstrates our obligations towards the dispossessed in our society; a reading of the New Testament confirms that for the Christian community such obligations are unavoidable.

Central to our understanding of INCARNATION is the very powerful sense of IDENTIFICATION. When the Son of God came to proclaim His Kingdom, he came as the "Word made flesh." He came as a poor Jewish baby, born in a hovel and destined to share the simple lifestyle of a poor family in a forgotten village. But there is much more to incarnation than identification.

There is also ENGAGEMENT. As he went about "doing good", Jesus was engaged with the poor, the lost, the lonely and the outcast. He was with them in the dirt, squalor, rejection and pain of their existence. His engagement did not begin or end with his physical presence and his healing touch. In his encounters with the privileged and powerful, as well as in his teaching and preaching, Jesus was constantly challenging the institutions of church and state with regard to their lack of care and concern for those in need.

There is no evidence to suggest that Jesus rebuked anyone for their possession of wealth. He was, however, deeply concerned about what people did with power and privilege. In the PARABLES OF JUDGEMENT, the condemned are those who have failed to see and do anything to relieve the plight of the poor and dispossessed. Little is said about those who do "bad" things. This would have been quite a shock to the religious systems of the day. Clear examples of this are to be found in the parables of the "Good Samaritan", "Dives and Lazarus" and in the "Final Judgement" in Matthew chapter 25.

In reply to a teacher of the law, Jesus give a new definition to the term "neighbour". The concept becomes the basis for the new community which is to be based on love rather than law. Clearly, "neighbour" is the person in need - irrespective of any other consideration.

3.5 The Early Church and Community

For the first generation and first century Christians, the sharing of possessions with those of their number who were in need became one of the characteristics by which Christians were known. In the second chapter of Acts we read: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." (Acts 2: 44-45). All of this was in the context of joyful worship as they went daily to the temple and broke bread in one another's homes with glad and generous hearts. Initially, this approach was effective: "there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands and houses sold them ... and distribution was made to each as they had need." (Acts 4: 34-35) Of the early church writers, James was not alone in his insistence upon the relationship between personal piety and responsibility for others: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed', but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is that?" (James 2: 15-16) However we might wish to rationalise these and other passages, it is quite clear that all of this was part of a genuine attempt by the early Christians to make practical their understanding of the mind of Christ in relation to their responsibilities for one another.

Amongst the more radical of the early church fathers was Ambrose, the fourth century Bishop of Milan. It was he who wrote: "The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry man; the coat hanging unused in your closet belongs to the man who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the man who has no shoes; the money which you put away belongs to poor: you do wrong to everyone you could help but fail to help."

3.6 The Methodist Tradition

As Methodists, we have inherited a good reputation for practical social concern. Whether it is always deserved is for others to judge. We would do well, however, to remember the enormous impact our founder and the early Methodists made upon 18th Century society. Living by his own dictum, 'Wesley spent much of his time with "those who needed him most."' For him this was the prisoner, the poorest, the lowest on the social scale and the rejected. He saw poverty on every side; he yearned over the poor and spent a great deal of time and money on relieving their physical needs. But at the heart of his caring was his conviction that a new experience of God would result in a new found peace, dignity and self-worth. Society would then be changed and, as such, would begin to reflect God's Kingdom on earth. In the Methodist societies, men and women discovered a new moral and social lifestyle which resulted in many of them becoming the entrepreneurs, the early trade union leaders, the 'newly educated', and the captains of business and industry. For many this "success" moved them farther away from their "roots", leaving behind those who were not to improve on their social conditions. As a result, Methodism, like her sister churches, has, in the main, become largely middle-class and privileged and much less identified with the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society. From our understanding of the Gospel, however, this must heighten, rather than lessen, our commitment. The biblical message is abundantly clear: privilege cannot be divorced from responsibility.

While Wesley and his successors may have a record second to few, if any, for social activism, it must be recognised that even more is required of us in our day if we are to respond realistically to the plight of the poor in our own community as well as in the

wider world. While nothing must be allowed to divert us from yet further development of imaginative programmes of social care and relief, we must move aggressively to address the difficult political issues which trap an unacceptably high proportion of our neighbours in poverty.

As servants of the incarnate Christ, this must involve us in ENGAGEMENT as well as IDENTIFICATION. To be engaged realistically with the rich and powerful institutions of our time, including the churches, may well prove to be no less difficult than it was for him.

3.7 Popular fallacies

To free us to work for real change we must resist two popular fallacies. The first is to do with the so-called "*Protestant work-ethic*" which infers that those who do not take responsibility for themselves, are unproductive and therefore undeserving of our sympathy. This simplistic value-judgement has much more to do with Stoicism than Christian faith and practice. It takes no account of the fact that for a very significant percentage of the population of Northern Ireland there is little or no choice with regard to gainful employment.

The second fallacy to be resisted has to do with contemporary "*Prosperity Theology*". This suggests that affluence is confirmation of God's approval, a reward for personal piety and obedience. For devout folk who are poor and for whom there will be no opportunity to "prosper", this is as degrading as it is heretical. Reformed theology reminds us that we can neither purchase nor earn God's favour. To think otherwise is to suggest that poverty is the lot of those who have not lived up to his expectations rather than a consequence of our own selfishness and greed, and our inability to share the rich resources of a good earth. Until we do so, it will be difficult for the poor to understand what we mean when we proclaim that "man shall not live by bread alone".

4. Practical Action

4.1 Introduction

An awareness of the facts about our society, a consideration of all the implications of what the Gospel has to say in terms of community, identification and engagement must lead inevitably to a response both in terms of challenging our personal complacency as well as stimulating individual and collective action. As Christians, the first body to which we look for such a response must be the Church. As citizens, however, we may also expect an awareness of and response to the needs of our society by Government, business and industry, and the voluntary sector.

Our recommendations are primarily addressed to the Church but we feel it is also incumbent to make suggestions and recommendations for action to the other groups mentioned above, acknowledging the contributions which we must make ourselves towards their activity.

4.2 The Church

(a) A programme of education. There is a clear need for a programme of education to raise awareness about the nature of our society and its implications amongst our members. The statistics presented in section 2 above are not intended to be exhaustive

or definitive but rather ought to be seen as a starting point in describing the nature of N Ireland society. It is strongly recommended that a fuller audit be undertaken by the Church.

(b) Advocacy. There is a requirement to speak and act for and with the poor of our community. The Church should be the voice for the voiceless.

(c) Connexional support and co-ordination. We should strive to encourage and support practical action in every circuit. The work of the City Missions must be applauded but the scale of poverty and deprivation is so widespread that all of our Societies and Circuits ought to be involved, as indeed some are already are. It may be worthwhile to consider how to co-ordinate the social outreach of the Church, enable a sharing of expertise and assist with advice and training to those wishing to start a project. It would also be worthwhile to share with our sister churches about these issues – we have much to learn as well as must to give! While the City Missions do meet from time to time in order to share ideas and to give mutual support, it is possible that occasional conferences for all circuits and churches engaged in such work would be useful – it is recommended that consideration be given to hosting such a Conference in the next Connexional year..

(d) Funding. The Connexion should consider the use of its resources to support social outreach projects. Local churches should be, at least, in a state of readiness to take-up opportunities and funding already available to engage in such work. This is particularly relevant in inner-city areas.

(e) Church Twinning. Churches from radically different geographic and socio-economic backgrounds and locations should consider twinning so as to share in Christian worship and witness as well as in providing each other with insights and, where possible, a pooling of expertise and talents.

4.3 Government

While acknowledging and encouraging all that is being done by Government, nevertheless we wish to make a number of general, but important, recommendations.

(a) To express our concern at the scale and depth of poverty and deprivation, not least in light of the analysis presented above.

(b) To keep a watching brief regarding the review the benefits system in N Ireland. Equally, the education provision for low ability children and nursery provision must not be neglected. The Government is encouraged to endeavour not only to ensure a more equitable allocation of resources but also to treat all those who require financial and other assistance with the utmost dignity and respect.

(c) To take up recommendations made from the Social Services Advisory Committee and similar Government sponsored agencies.

4.4 Business and Industry

(a) To increase present sponsorship of community development schemes.

(b) To share expertise and personnel with voluntary agencies.

(c) To target recruitment to disadvantaged areas.

4.5 Voluntary Sector

(a) To recognise the potential assistance of churches in supporting and enabling the work already undertaken by the Voluntary sector – not least with the contribution of premises and personnel.

(b) To co-ordinate efforts in order to avoid duplication and unnecessary wastage of resources.

(c) To increase awareness of the needs of rural areas and provincial towns which in some cases receive little in the way of voluntary sector support.

(d) To review and improve statutory/voluntary co-operation so that those who require assistance from either or both sectors receive both quantitatively and qualitatively the best care possible. .

5. A suggested approach to involving local congregations in a study of this report

It is suggested that this study take place over a period of four weeks.

Session One

Divide into small groups to study the following passages:

(a) Deut. 24:19-22

(b) Amos 5: 21-24

(c) Luke 4: vs 16 ff

(d) Acts 2: 44-45 and 4: 34-35

(e) James 2: 15-16

(f) Matthew 25

(g) John Wesley quote from para 1.1

Each group to report back to full group on what it is felt these passages are saying to us about our church in relation to . . .

(i) Our own membership

(ii) Our neighbourhood

(iii) Our wider community

Session Two

Someone from within the congregation or an invited guest should be asked to summarise and interpret Section 2 ("Nature of The Society")

Divide into small groups to discuss and report back to large group.

1. How aware are we and our congregation of these facts and figures?

2. To what extent do we feel these facts and figures are reflected in-

(a) Our own membership

(b) Our local community.

3. In the light of discussion in Session One what are the implications for our congregation and/or circuit?

Session Three

Invite a representative of a local voluntary or statutory agency to give an overview as to how they see the needs of your local community. Examples of such would be - Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Christians Against Poverty, Social Services, St. Vincent de Paul, your local Methodist Mission (if there is one near to your church), Neighbourhood Community Association, Local Council Development Officer, Salvation Army etc. It may be useful to have a representative from more than one organisation

The task in small groups or large is to identify:-

- (a) What are the most urgent needs of our community?
- (b) What response is needed?
- (c) What should the church be doing?
- (d) With whom should we seek to be in partnership?
 - other churches?
 - other voluntary/statutory agencies?

Session Four

In the light of everything which has been discussed in first three sessions draft a realistic and attainable programme of action for your local society or Circuit. Identify:-

- (1) In order of priority the three most urgent tasks to be undertaken.
- (2) Key persons to prepare an action plan.
- (3) The process whereby this plan of action can be implemented by the whole church. -

6. Bibliography

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Statistics presented in this paper for the greater part have been obtained from NISRA See www.nisra.gov.uk/ and links