



SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY SUNDAY 2023

ACTIVE AT THE MARGINS

We are delighted to be able to present you with the material for the 2023 Social Responsibility Sunday.

From our founding days, our Methodist movement was at the heart of addressing the social challenges that stood against the Kingdom of God. All too easily, churches can get inward focused, comfortable and distant from poverty, marginalisation and suffering. We have a social responsibility.

The theme this year arises out of a concern that churches could all too easily be passive in the face of the inequalities, poverty and challenges of our wider society or that we could be active with activity focused only on ourselves. Jesus was active at the margins of society – so should we!

Conference has designated Social Responsibility Sunday to be observed throughout the Methodist Church in Ireland. The suggested Sunday is 29th January. Another Sunday may be suitable in your context, but we suggest that it is used somewhere between Covenant Sunday and World Mission Sunday.

We trust that you will find the material helpful

The Council on Social Responsibility

Additional Resources

The following are useful resources that connect with Social Responsibility Sunday. This could mean playing a short video in the service or providing the ten reflections as a handout. Or use them as a basis for a follow-up home group / Bible Study discussion.

Video – ‘The Crisis: Homelessness’ Five minute video by ‘Play it by Ear’
bit.ly/3u6L5Zy

‘Living Wholeheartedly’ Podcast Interview with Rev Brian Anderson, with reflections on poverty
www.youtube.com/watch?v=cy8FKiyZLUY&t=79s&ab

Ten Reflections on Christian Social engagement in light of the War in Ukraine
<https://irishmethodist.org/news/open-up-our-homes>

There are various other posts relating to poverty on the Methodist website from the past year. Go to irishmethodist.org and search poverty

Readings

The sermon for this material is based on the Old Testament and Gospel readings from the Lectionary readings for Sunday 29th January.

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

The sermon references a few other scripture passages too, so here's some other potential readings

John 4:4-9

Luke 17:11-19

James 2:14-18

Suggested Sermon

This flows as one sermon or it could potentially be used in two parts.

Scripture quotations are from the New Living Translation

Our origins in the Methodist movement were earthed in a commitment to a society in need. We believed in a powerful God who could change lives and who would use us in the transformation of society. Our world in 2023 is very different from the 18th century, but just as we continue to believe in the same powerful God, it is no less our commitment as Methodists to take seriously the social challenges, struggles and injustices that are real for people today, whether they personally affect us or not.

The Council on Social Responsibility exists to help the church to grapple with these various issues. In 2022, we considered, spoke about or acted upon poverty, refugees, cost of living, housing, government, constitutional issues, gambling, environmental issues and more. We'll highlight some later.

We may be personally affected by some of the issues involved, but others may feel distant from us, or at least we know in our heads that issues exist for others out there somewhere.

Probably the dominant story in our news headlines this past year has been to do with Russia's invasion of Ukraine with the loss of tens of thousands of lives, many more wounded and millions displaced. Our World Development & Relief department have led us well in our thinking about responding to the needs in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.

However, there are implications here in Ireland. In a document we published last March, we highlight our position on a number of areas such as our attitude to war and the needs of all refugees. (Please read it if you haven't.) Here are two other issues that tie in with concerns that CSR, North and South, has had over recent years...

In the Republic of Ireland, **the housing crisis** goes from bad to worse. Rental prices are extreme around most of the country, but very bad in Dublin and other city areas. They are reflective of the unavailability of property. People who might otherwise have been saving for a mortgage can't save money and even if they could, the affordable properties don't exist. CSR has spoken and written and campaigned about this. And CSR has critiqued a persistent lack of urgency by governments in this regard.

However, it also leaves Ireland now struggling to fulfil its international obligations. We commend the government for welcoming those seeking refuge here from Ukraine, along with the opportunity for people from many other countries to seek asylum. There are those who have used the housing crisis as an excuse for being unwelcoming and for racism. We commend all those who are standing up against such rhetoric. We do this by our language in conversations and by our presence at community gatherings. And just last month (December) CSR participated in a rally against racism.

The Southern Executive has been more focused on housing, but similar issues apply in the North. There is also an area that the Northern Executive has taken the lead on, but that is also real in the south – Poverty.

You will have noticed the various material relating to **poverty** throughout 2022 online and in the Newsletter. The reality of poverty for so many and in various ways, was something that CSR was very concerned about before last year, and indeed it was the focus on Social Responsibility Sunday last January. However, the implications of the War in Ukraine along with the lack of Government in Northern Ireland has made it even worse.

CSR calls for the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly to address the many challenges faced by people in a wide variety of situations. We commend all who are using their time, finances and other resources to help the practical needs of others in society well away from our churches through this time.

[It may be appropriate to show the video on Homelessness by 'Play it by Ear' at this point.]

The prophet Micah summarised what he sensed God requiring of them. 'To do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8) To LOVE mercy!

Is mercy a concept that we believe in, in our heads alone? Is mercy something that we only adhere to because we are Christians as we try to resist the temptation for revenge and angry words? Or do we LOVE mercy?

Before we rush into hearing what Jesus is saying in what we know as the beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, let's see where he is. He was on a mountainside, teaching. Just as God had revealed the law to Moses on a mountain, now Jesus teaches but with an authority, bringing radical teaching. It felt new, fresh, challenging and compassionate, but it was a fulfilment of the law of Moses (Mt.5:17). In various ways, Jesus

would go on to say, 'You have heard that it was said... but I tell you.' He challenged his disciples to not settle for a mediocre standard of doing the right thing. Or a religious adherence that defaulted back to basic laws. He called for a new wholehearted way of living.

This past year, in regard to the Ukraine refugee crisis, we called on Methodists where possible to 'Open up our homes'! Christian discipleship, in regard to society, is not primarily about giving money to charity – its about the giving of ourselves to Christ and that usually means being willing to uncomfortably let others who are different from us meet with our own lives.

Yes, we need our safe spaces, but we have become too complacent. When families don't have a place to call home, it's the concern of the church. When children don't get proper meals, it's our concern. When people are denied justice, it's our concern. When our environment is being misused, it's our concern. When women have no support around them for their pregnancy it's our concern. When people face prejudice because of their racial identity or sexual orientation or cultural background, it's our concern. If people are trafficked around our land, it's our concern.

Jesus repeatedly went to the margins, the very uncomfortable places, in the pursuit of his ministry. He stayed at the well for a controversial encounter with the Samaritan woman. He deliberately went to the border area to meet with the ten lepers. He constantly met with the diseased, the excluded, the marginalised, the despised, the dirty, the broken – and got constant religious criticism for it – so that the Kingdom of God in all its beauty could be made known to those who otherwise felt unloved.

And it's not only that God wants to reach the sidelined with the good news – the marginalised are the people God uses in the life of his kingdom. 'God chose those despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important.' (1 Cor 1:28)

When we look at the Jesus that we say that we follow, are we willing to step out of our comfort zones to follow him into the equivalent places in our society today? Will we be **ACTIVE AT THE MARGINS?** Its not an add-on option for the church. It's our business to love and show mercy. 'Faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, its dead and useless.' (James 2:17)

God, the Holy Spirit, is already ahead of us in the places that seem well away from the church, in the lives of those who are in need. Let's step out to places that may seem less protected. Let's be active at the margins. We will find God surprising not only those at the margins, but also us, with his incredible grace.

Prayers – Confession and Intercession

God of all grace, we praise you that you entered our world and dwelled among us. You set up home in our neighbourhood. You walked the journeys that we face in life. You were pleased to come alongside us in our own experience.

Forgive us holy God, for acting like we should keep our distance from others whose circumstances seem different from ourselves. We prefer to remain comfortable rather than listen to stories that challenge us. We have judged rather than sought to understand.

We have denied your commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves. As a church, we have been passive in the face of injustice. We have turned against your way in keeping our distance from the marginalised. We have sinned.

We trust in your forgiveness, faithful and just God.

God, in Jesus Christ, you reveal yourself as one who moves to the edges – one who sits with the broken, who touches the diseased, who stops for the shamed, who dines with the despised. We praise you that you are still active at the margins of our own society today. God, Holy Spirit, may we humbly and courageously join you in your work.

As the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head, so God we remember those who are homeless. Bless all who are providing shelter. Give greater urgency to government. And lead us all as we consider how our homes are used.

As Jesus was given refuge in Egypt with Joseph and Mary, so God may this island be a place of refuge to those in need. Give compassion and wisdom to our governments in regard to those seeking asylum and refuge here. And may we play our part in that welcome and in the combatting of racist rhetoric.

We recognise that many in our world have lost livelihoods as a result of climate change. Help us to respond well to our responsibility to care for our environment. Give wisdom and courage to governments in tackling the issues relating to care of our environment.

As the arrested Jesus was handed over between two ruling authorities, so God come into the politics of our time. In the discussions around the future constitutional direction of Ireland, give us all a willingness to listen.

We pray for our leaders - Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and the good functioning of government in the Republic. May effective government be restored quickly in Northern Ireland and bless the members of the Assembly. Bless Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and all with influence in the UK and Europe.

God of the poor, draw close to all who live in poverty. Prevent us from accumulating wealth. Help the poor as we help the poor. Resource all who are seeking to tackle poverty at various levels of our society.

Thank you God for church members exercising social responsibility through workers unions, charitable causes, Tidy Towns, community support groups and various other activism.

Guide the Council on Social Responsibility in all its thinking. Prevent us all from being complacent about the social realities around us. Help us a church to recognise our responsibility to be active at the margins of society.

Thank you that as the Holy Spirit transformed people and society as the early Methodists were compassionately courageous among the poor, so too today you are present at the margins.

Reflection

A socially aware reflection based on the Beatitudes (Matthew 5).

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit,

Those whose who are challenged or broken by oppressive life experiences from an early age

Those who have accepted food bank support for the first time,

Those who hoped to save for a mortgage but can't afford the rent

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,

Those without companionship or community to support them

Those in Ireland who mourn the loss of their hopes and dreams and community of their homeland

Those who couldn't get to say goodbye due to not being able to travel while seeking asylum

for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek,

Those who exercise humble service while in the corridors of political powerhouses

Those who do not store up their wealth but help those in need

Those whose compassion supports others despite property ownership

for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

Those who are not content when things are not right for others in society

Those who commit to lifestyle change in light of the climate emergency

Those who refuse to say that nothing can be done but give of themselves

for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful,

Those who do good to others and help behind the scenes to make our communities better places

Those who love mercy being shown to those who rarely receive it otherwise

Those who provide space when others' homes are crumbling, distant or non-existent.

for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,

Those who seriously listen to the hurting and side-lined and act with compassion

Those who refuse to let religious expectations get in the way of coming alongside the excluded

Those whose commitment is to truly love their neighbour as themselves

for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,

Those who take courage for reconciliation despite sectarian and cultural pressures.

Those who seek understanding with their traveller neighbour

Those who aren't casual about hate or prejudicial speech in their community or workplace

for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,

Those who do right when faced with selfish opportunity based on their privilege

Those who, like Jesus, get criticised for being willing to get to know the 'wrong' people

Those threatened by people in power because of their commitment to the poor and excluded

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Potential hymns

Numbers on left are from 'Singing the Faith'. 'Hymns & Psalms' also referenced.

251	Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets	
255	The kingdom of God is justice and joy	
256	When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?	
257	Would you walk by on the other side when someone called for aid?	
413	Send down the fire of your justice	
415	The church of Christ in every age	HP 804
416	There's a wideness in God's mercy	HP 230
547	Beyond these walls of worship in the stress and joy of life	
611	Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you	
658	A charge to keep I have: A God to glorify	HP 785
693	Beauty of brokenness, hope for despair	
696	For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord	HP 402
699	God of justice, Saviour to all, came to rescue the weak and the poor	
700	God weeps at love withheld, at strength misused	
702	I will speak out for those who have no voices	
707	Make me a channel of your peace	HP 776
	Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all	HP 393
	Your will for us and others, Lord, Is perfect health and wholeness	HP 398
	Lord, thy church on earth is seeking	HP 774

The Council on Social Responsibility aims to understand and analyse a range of social, political, economic and constitutional issues. It attempts to consider these issues with theological insight and to provide realistic and practical recommendations for action.

The Council operates through Southern and Northern Executives but there are areas of work which both continue to be involved in addressing together.

Northern Executive Chairperson: Rev Dr David Clements Secretary: Mrs Hazel Baird

Southern Executive Chairperson: Rev Steven Foster Secretary: Ms Sharon Morrow

We welcome engagement from the wider church on the various topics that we cover or could cover. Check out our section on the Irish Methodist website or our facebook page.

Connexional Prayer Meeting on Poverty

Tuesday 2nd February 2023, 8.00pm

Zoom details will be sent out with fuller details in January