

Justice & Peace Assembly 2016

What does it mean to be A Poor Church for the Poor?

The event was billed as a day of inspiring talks, challenging debate and lively 'marketplace' activity and it certainly lived up to that! What was primarily a day of awareness-raising and promoting action was grounded in the Year of Mercy with a particular focus on the Corporal Works of Mercy. Once again we were called, as Christians, to respond to the sad and difficult challenges faced by many of the most vulnerable people in the UK today.



For many who attended, the day was a 'motivating and enjoyable', with high quality speakers delivering strong and challenging messages to another very good turnout of committed people. The Assembly was held at DABCEC in Crawley on the 16 January and with approximately 150 attendees. It opened and closed with a time of worship led by Fr Kevin Dring, Priest Adviser to the Diocesan J&P Commission. Included in this was a beautiful CAFOD meditation on the Year of Mercy at the beginning, and with the 'Year of Mercy' prayer at the end.

The scene for the day was perfectly set by Bishop Richard who provided an overview on the Year of Mercy and highlighted once more that poverty levels in our diocese should be of concern to us all. This was his first J&P Assembly and he received a very warm welcome from the floor. Quoting Pope Francis he said 'the Year of Mercy enables us to re-engage with the message of mercy, and that mercy should be a lifestyle for the Christian'.

Bishop Richard also gave us an update on the diocesan approach to the refugee crisis, giving details of the tremendous response received. He said the diocese is well placed to respond to the call for help from local authorities.

The three themes of Mission, Formation and Prayer are what we are all about as a diocese. Bishop Richard said our Assembly was a day of formation and as a result of it we will be better equipped to be Christ's disciples. He asked us to celebrate the achievement of us coming together and to celebrate the great work that is ongoing in our parishes and communities. He said we will leave the event better formed by Christ himself to be his disciples, better equipped

to take up the cross, especially the cross of others and continuing to fulfil the mission the Lord has given to us.

John Battle, the former Labour MP and government minister (1997-2001), was our next speaker. John was the first worker for Church Action on Poverty before becoming the MP for Leeds West in 1987. In opposition John continually pressed for a minimum wage. In 2001 he became the Prime Minister's envoy on inter-religious matters. Following retirement from front line politics in 2010, John has remained actively involved in many local community projects, including the SVP.



He is also chair of the Diocese of Leeds Justice & Peace Commission and co-chairs Leeds Citizens. At national level he is a patron of both the National Justice & Peace Network and the SVP of England and Wales

John's talk inspired so many on the day, he began by calling the event a fantastic gathering and he was so enthused he's devoting his next column in the 'Catholic Universe' to it! He echoed

Bishop Richard's point about poverty existing in our diocese and said it would be wrong to view it as a regional challenge. His sister lives in East Sussex and volunteers at a local foodbank. Society in general, John pointed out, has become increasingly judgmental about the poor. Influenced by the media, we seem more likely to pour contempt on the poor rather than respond in a compassionate manner. John described how words such as benefit and welfare have become pejorative and we have somehow transformed something good in to bad. The challenge therefore, with inequality ever widening, is that there is now less sympathy for people in poverty than ever before.

Quoting the SVP book, *The Mind and the Heart of a Vincentian*, John listed a wide variety of forms that poverty now takes in our society, such as being unloved or isolated, and that we shouldn't limit our understanding of it to any government definition. He went on to challenge media myths about poverty in the UK today explaining that welfare is not easy to access, the poor are not scroungers, only a tiny element of welfare goes on either fraudulent claims or single mums and finally that most people living in poverty today are in work.

Drawing on Pope Francis's call for an 'ecological conversion' where care for the poor and care for the earth go hand in hand, he said 'it's time for us all to

change the way we live'. Pope Francis has moved the debate firmly from helping people to a deep immersion and a change in ourselves.

John gave an historical background to looking at the responsibility of the state, individuals and the Church for the poor. He said we had lost the sense of our post-war national social security system. This system was based on full employment, far lower life expectancy and the cost of rent being no more than one third of income.

Summing up John urged us to take the stories of people in our diocese and help those people spell them out. We must become more united and live simpler lives whilst constantly tackling unjust political structures, laws and budgets. We need to combine a compassionate response with a challenge to injustice.

The final speaker of the morning was Alison Gelder, Director of Housing Justice. She joined the newly formed Housing Justice in October 2003 and was appointed Director in August 2006. Housing Justice helps churches offer practical support to homeless people and also act as a voice for homeless people in the sector, to both national and local government and also to 'lift up' the voice of homeless people to all people.



Alison highlighted the 'mess we're in' when it comes to the current housing crisis and stressed it wasn't always this way. She added, 'we're going through the biggest shake-up in housing policy since the war and it is likely to spell the end of social housing as we know it'.

Myth busting, such an important feature of our assemblies, was then taken up by Alison:

- There is plenty of land available in the UK, currently housing uses up less than 2% of it. The government can afford to build new housing and that we don't all need to aspire to home ownership.

- In the UK the average cost of a house equals nine times average income whilst in the south east this figure rises to sixteen times the national average. Private rents reflect the cost of buying a house so they are even higher in the south east.
- The government's affordable housing scheme limits rents to 80% of market value and the cost of a house must not exceed £450,000. Affordable housing, in reality, should mean when a household has paid all other reasonable living costs there should still be enough money to pay the rent or mortgage.

Homelessness and its causes were then covered. Alison said many faith and church communities step in to help destitute people with no recourse to public funds. This is where we practice the Corporal Works of Mercy with night shelters, food banks, clothing donations, advocacy and mentoring and befriending services. Homelessness used to be caused predominantly by family breakdown but nowadays it is often caused by private tenancy agreements coming to an end and individuals unable to find anywhere affordable to live.

So what can we do? We can start by sharing stories and encouraging the homeless not to feel ashamed about their circumstances. Local authority and government websites have vital information and resources, as does www.homeless.uk.org We should pray and explore opportunities to offer a spare room.

Alison concluded by treating the Assembly to an exclusive first showing of 'On the Road Together', a music video to mark Homeless Sunday 2016. Homeless Sunday took place over the weekend 23/24 January. The song was recorded with a live choir at Hinde Street Methodist Church in December, 2015. The choir includes some of those who have previously been homeless or were service users of various support services.



After lunch and networking Bishop Richard introduced Aidan Cantwell and Mary Jane Burkett, our contacts for the diocesan response to the refugee response. Aidan said that Bishop Richard's pastoral letter in September suggesting prayer and practical ways to help was met with an enthusiastic response. We subsequently identified Brighton Voices in Exile to be our principle partner but Aidan stressed that we are still in the early stages of a long term response. To date the diocese has received over £50,000 in donations from schools, parishes and individuals. Donations continue to pour in and there has been no sense that the compassion and generosity so many people have shown is diminishing.

Mary Jane shared some stories from the arrival of the first three families in to the diocese through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Programme in the first week of December. She went on to say that thanks to the generosity of so many we are now able to seriously pursue a local project that will provide support for destitute asylum seekers, refugees and those with no recourse to public funds. Mary Jane hopes we will be able to share more concrete details about this project before Lent but this initiative represents an exciting missionary outreach to refugees.

Steve Nunn, from the Crawley SVP, then gave the final talk about the essential work they do in the local community. Steve said the SVP had been running in Crawley since 1983 and still has some of its founding members. He said they couldn't do the work they do without the support of the parish team and community of religious in the town. Steve shared many stories of the people they have offered immediate help and support to, in particular the lonely, elderly, housebound and sick. They also work with the homeless, refugees, offenders and ex-offenders and victims of domestic violence. He echoed what had been said previously explaining that many of the people they encounter have to prioritise meeting the costs of a roof and heat over food.

The final session involved a lively and stimulating panel discussion chaired by Alison Gelder and featuring John Battle, Mary Jane Burkett and Steve Nunn. The panel was also joined by Julian Filochowski, Chair of the Archbishop Romero Trust (one of our exhibitors) and former Director of CAFOD. The panel responded to a number of questions raised throughout the day and were ably assisted by Fr Rob Esdaile at one point, when a question was raised regarding plenary indulgences.

Many of the attendees commented that the day was a great success with 'superb' speakers and contributors. There were many resources to take away and recordings and presentations are now available on the diocesan website.

We had a record number of exhibitors on the day which also helped to create a lively buzz during the networking marketplace sessions. These included:-

- The Archbishop Romero trust
- Brighton Voices in Exile
- CAFOD
- Christian CND
- Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group
- Global Justice Now
- Housing Justice
- The Medaille Trust
- The National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN)
- Pax Christi
- The St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP)

As well as these recognisable charities, the Pastoral Team and St. Cuthman's Retreat and Meeting Centre had resources available. A stall promoting the setting up of a new network in the diocese focusing on climate change proved popular too. There was a great deal of interest and enthusiasm for our Fairtrade Stall which boasted record sales of over £600, a new record!

If you would like to learn more about this day or other Justice & Peace initiatives please contact Aidan Cantwell, our Adviser, t 01293 651154 e aidan.cantwell@dabnet.org

