



Fostering a culture of encounter



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I recently took part in a series of talks called 'The common good: An idea whose time has come?' You might ask why the question mark in the title – after all, who could find anything objectionable in pursuing 'the common good'? The problem is the term is often misunderstood and seen as lightweight. In practice, is it the imposition of some utopian ideal? As an idea, pursuing the common good has a biblical basis and lies at the heart of Christian mission and the social obligation it includes. Its inherent challenge demands of us a radical reorientation if we are to take seriously our call 'to make disciples of all nations'.

The common good

So how does the common good work? It is often understood as the set of conditions in which every person in a community can flourish. But if this sounds a bit like a utopian ideal, where one group of 'enlightened' people seeks to impose an ideological solution on the rest, it is in fact the opposite. Rather, the common good is the creation of a shared life with people acting together, pursuing a shared purpose across their differences, which enables all to flourish. The common good cannot by definition be imposed. In Corinthians Paul suggests it involves everyone participating fully and taking responsibility according to their vocation and ability (1 Corinthians 12). This is messier, more imperfect, and more beautifully human than any utopian ideal could be.

Common good is created when people work together, coming from different views and

experiences, and balancing their different interests. Simply put, 'it is in my interests that you thrive!' This sense of mutual obligation is at odds with the prevalent way of doing things, where different groups struggle to see their sectional interest prevail. A common good approach has the potential to transcend partisan concerns because its goal is a common life and a social peace, not merely tolerance.

A biblical basis

There's much in Scripture to encourage us to seek the common good.² Paul's use of the human body as a metaphor for a properly functioning community in 1 Corinthians 12 conveys the essence of the common good. Each limb and organ has their particular function, Paul argues, with none able to claim superiority over the others, so it is clear that 'God has so composed the body ... that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another' (vv. 24–25, ESV).³

The Old Testament contains many images of societies where common good principles are operating, where people are living well together – building houses, planting vineyards and eating their fruit and so on.⁴ Jeremiah is especially helpful to understand the common good, reminding us that our own flourishing is interconnected with the thriving of others. Astonishingly, he tells the captive community in Babylon to 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile', to seek the flourishing even of those whose interests are hostile

to their own, 'for in its welfare you will find your welfare' (29.7).

Estrangement

The idea of 'seeking the welfare of the city' has relevance for us today. The political upheavals around Brexit and the election of Trump are exposing long-standing fractures: 'them and us' and the language of division dominate our news media. But the causes have been building for years, so how have these estrangements developed?

The Remain and Clinton campaigns were predicated on economics, the same liberal economic model that has been dominant for years across successive governments. What they offered was meaningless for communities that had been left behind. More of the same was the last thing they wanted. They wanted something more meaningful.

For too long, a 'progressive' agenda has held people with traditional views in contempt, pushing them to the margins of public conversation. When people from proud, inherited cultures experience humiliation and powerlessness they will eventually respond. So when a rare opportunity to be heard came up, they took it, even if they knew the campaigns were deeply flawed.

They were tired of being offered choices between being a few pounds worse or better off. What was benefitting the global establishment never reached their door: they had no sense of a shared life. They were tired of a culture of individualism degrading their communities and traditions. They lost patience as social norms changed without their consent. They felt exiled in their own country.

The pollsters and media did not see it coming. A certain brand of liberalism has, over many years, achieved such blanket coverage that for those in the middle of it, it is almost impossible to conceive that anyone might see the world in a different way. It failed to see that large numbers of people had effectively been silenced, inhibited to raise concerns about the rapid pace of immigration, economic mismanagement and culture change. No wonder a rough, sensationalist, reality TV vernacular broke through the political permafrost. Outlandish and brutish ideas yes, but it was the tone that resonated. The anger confirmed that what they have been living through was finally being recognised.

Facing the truth

If we are to make any headway towards Paul's vision of a healthy community, we may need to ask some tough questions about the impact of events on human dignity. Professor Hochschild has researched what she calls a 'deep story' that captures how people who have been overlooked felt as globalisation took hold. A deep story is how life feels, what feels true: *'You're waiting in a queue, like in a pilgrimage, and you're facing up a hill, at the top of which is your aspiration. And you've been waiting there for a long time. Your feet are tired. You*

have a tremendous sense of deserving. You've done everything right: you've followed the rules and worked hard. But the queue is not moving. And then you begin to see some people cutting in ahead of you. Who are they? Well, they're people from other countries who now have access to jobs that traditionally were reserved for your neighbours and relatives. Not only

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that, but you can see ahead of you women who now have access to jobs that used to be typically for men. Even the rights of the hunted fox gets attention before you. And then, you see Cameron, Blair, Obama, Clinton, in this deep story, beckoning to the queue jumpers – in fact, they're sponsoring them. Something is rigged here. And so the very idea of government came to seem like an instrument of your own marginalisation. Then, in this deep story, someone who is ahead of you in the queue, turns around and says: "You bigots, you backward rednecks."⁵

Some of Hochschild's colleagues warned her 'not to empathise too much' or it might change her, as if listening to another perspective could infect her orthodoxy. Their contemptuous attitude betrays exactly why we are where we are now.

So now that the fragmented, unequal and divided reality is laid bare we need to work out what we can do to build back the broken body.

Examination of conscience

Before judging politicians or anybody else, we should examine our own conscience. The Beatitudes teach that the poor in spirit are blessed. The churches do their best to honour this. But it has to be said that there are tendencies in the churches, just as in society at large, which are more interested in campaigning about 'justice', or growing their own numbers, or in overseas poverty, than in building relationships with people in communities who have been left behind, right on their doorstep.

Can we ask the difficult question? Have some of us been swept along and, inadvertently perhaps, focused more on the needs of the destitute or of refugees or migrants or other minority groups, or indeed our own congregations, and overlooked the interests of the struggling families in our own neighbourhoods? Let's be clear: the common good is not a zero sum game – it's not a matter of either/or: everyone is needed.

Poverty is not only about shortage of money but how people are treated and how they regard themselves. It's about powerlessness, exclusion and loss of dignity. So if our approach to justice means speaking truth to power as a way of avoiding personal relationships with, and loving, people who are excluded, then we might as well pack up and go home.

NOTES

1. T Thorlby, *A Time to Sow: Anglican Catholic Church Growth in London* (London: The Centre for Theology and Community, 2017). Available online at www.theology-centre.org.uk
2. Bible Society's recent Bible study booklet, *Calling People of Goodwill: The Bible and the Common Good*, contains more examples with reflections, questions and prayers to prompt discussion and action.
2. Paul also exhorts the community in Galatia to 'work for the good of all' (Gal 6.10, NRSV), a sentiment echoed in 1 Thessalonians 5.15 where he writes 'always seek to do good to one another and to all' (NRSV).
4. E.g. Isaiah 11, 25, 35, 49, 58, 61, 65; Micah 4; Zechariah 14).
5. AR Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).
6. See https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html
7. <http://bit.ly/2zQDuVa>
8. <http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/who-we-are/common-good-thinking.html>

Pope Francis is clear that, as Christians, we are called to a culture of encounter.⁶ Jean Vanier, in his 50 years experience since founding L'Arche, understands that to be fully human, we need to be in a relationship with the excluded, no matter how difficult that may be. Vanier's experience with profoundly disabled people has taught him that humiliation can lead to anger, and sometimes, to violence.⁷ But he talks about the 'gift of the poor', how it is often they who are free enough to show the needs, beauty and pain of the whole community. Shaming our fellow human beings even further into silence will eventually hurt us all.

we are called to a culture of encounter

Whether we like it or not, we are all members of one body. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4, 'Tell each other the truth, because we all belong to each other in the same body.' This means honouring people whose experiences are different from ours. In an era where a virulent strain of individualism is driving us apart, this Christian proposition is seriously counter-cultural.

Mission

So how should Christians respond to the divisions in our national community? As it happens, the major theme of Ephesians is the unity and reconciliation of the whole of creation through the agency of the Church – Paul's challenge brings with it the potential for the healing of the broken body of our society into convergence with mission.

This period of political turmoil is an opportunity. A new settlement is being formed, and if it isn't founded on a relationship of mutual respect with people who feel powerless, humiliated and sidelined, then our democracy will remain in crisis. Similarly, if churches and Christian organisations are not founded on relationships with people who are poor and excluded, their mission will fail: they will be overlooking the very person of Jesus.

The stirrings of an idea to form a network across the churches to promote the common good came to me in 2011. I can only describe what happened as a movement of the Spirit, pulling me onto a completely different path. I found myself drawing a cross, formed of the words 'ecumenism' and 'social justice', and the intersection seemed to be saying to me 'reconciliation'. I prayed about it and after a while others joined me and this led to what eventually became 'Together for the Common Good'.

This was the first time I felt drawn to learn about the partnership between my late father Bishop David Sheppard, Archbishop Derek Worlock and the Free Church leaders in Liverpool. While they disagreed on doctrine, they found they learned from each other, realising they had complementary

gifts. For 20 years they worked together across their differences, putting the city of Liverpool first at a time of polarisation and division. I began to see that this could be relevant now, not only for church leaders, but for all of us.

They encouraged leadership in people among communities of the left behind. They built bridges between mutually suspicious groups, listening to all sides, and interpreting between them. They forged bonds between good local institutions and businesses. They were seen as honest brokers, and their method for building common good was reconciliation. Their body language said it all. They practised what they preached and standing side by side, their joint leadership was visibly not about acting in their own self interest, but about putting communities first.

Today, building on that legacy, we in Together for the Common Good encourage people from different Christian traditions to work together, across their beliefs and political differences, to 'seek the welfare of the city' and to put common good thinking into practice.⁸

Healing the broken body

Brexit and Trump are symptoms of a deep realignment still unfolding, with more to come. Reconciliation is very important now. The broken body will be healed through fostering a culture of encounter, cherishing freedom of speech, having the capacity to talk about awful things, having the guts to change our minds, and building relationships, especially with those who have been shamed into silence. To build a common good, we must be able to hear with respect the truth as others see it. It is in our interests to listen and learn from each other because we are all members of one body, whether we like it or not.

One thing's for sure: if we're not looking for common ground, we're not going to find it. The churches and their people are well-placed to resist the forces that are driving our society apart: well-placed to build bridges intentionally across echo chambers, seek news from different sources, ask advice from those who take a different view, and subvert social media algorithms which make interaction less likely with people different from ourselves. Choosing to be tribal and contemptuous of others is incompatible with a common good approach.

Courage is required to mix with those our own crowd rejects. Can we be the honest brokers, the ones who persuade people to 'stay in the room', recognising the humanity in everyone? Building the common good always starts with meeting other people, listening to them, telling the truth and forming positive relationships. We must be open to unlikely allies, to proactively collaborating with people who are different or with whom we disagree. We can pray 'Lord, show me who you want me to work with', and then take the consequences!