



# The violence of poverty and the path of discipleship in an 'age of austerity'

CHRIS SHANNAHAN

Chris Shannahan is an Associate Professor in Political Theology at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University, where he is also the Director of Teaching and Learning.

## Introduction

Fallout from a decade of traumatising austerity, the Covid pandemic and the ongoing 'cost of living crisis' has converged in a perfect storm. In 2022, ten years after George Osborne's Welfare Reform Act kick-started austerity, 14.5 million people in the UK are living in poverty, of whom 4.3 million are children. Such debilitating poverty represents an urgent spiritual crisis for anyone who believes that we are all created in the image of God. Almost 80 years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer pinpointed the challenge before Christians in the face of systemic injustice. Should the Church in the UK continue to use its enduring social capital to 'bandage the wounds of broken' or be bold enough to ram a 'spoke into the wheel of injustice'?<sup>1</sup>

## The nature of poverty

Rising to speak after receiving the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, Martin Luther King Jr compared poverty to 'a monstrous octopus [that] ... projects its nagging tentacles into lands and villages all over the world.'<sup>2</sup> King reminds us of the complexity of poverty, but academics, activists, preachers and politicians still think in one-dimensional terms. As we discovered during our 2018–21 Life on the Breadline project, we need to get

better at making connections if we want to get to grips with the poverty octopus. The artist Beth Waters invites us to see poverty as a jigsaw of food poverty, low pay, personal debt, poor housing and fuel poverty.

We need to think about the three dimensions of poverty. First, it is important to recognise that poverty is the result of systemic injustice, not individual weakness. Since Norman Tebbit told the 1981 Conservative Party Conference that his unemployed father, 'didn't blame the government. He got on his bike and looked for work 'til he found it', successive UK governments have uncoupled poverty from its structural causes. Thirty years after Tebbit spoke, George Osborne, the architect of austerity, deployed a similarly individualistic moral discourse. Some people were 'strivers' working hard to provide for their families, whereas others were 'skivers' happily living on benefits.<sup>3</sup> Such language echoes far older narratives, such as the distinction between the 'able-bodied' and 'idle' poor in Elizabethan England and the Victorian Church's categorisation of people in poverty as 'deserving' or 'undeserving'. Whilst most national Church leaders spoke to us about of the systemic causes of poverty, a leader from Northern England suggested that in

## NOTES

1. E Bethge (ed.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 315–16.

2. Website [www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/Martin Luther King Jr, 'The Quest for Peace and Justice'](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/Martin%20Luther%20King%20Jr,%20The%20Quest%20for%20Peace%20and%20Justice). Nobel Lecture, 11 December 1964, accessed 127 November 2022.

3. P Wintour, 2 April 2013, 'Welfare Reforms: We will make work pay, says George Osborne'. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/02/george-osborne-work-welfare-tax>, accessed 13 July 2021.

4. G Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 175.

5. Shannahan, C. 2018. 'The Violence of Poverty: Theology and Activism in an Age of Austerity', *Political Theology* 20.3, pp. 243–61, DOI: 10.1080/1462317X.2018.1543820.

6. J Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', *Journal of Peace Research* 27.3 (1990), pp. 291–305.

7. C Grover, 'Violent proletarianisation: Social murder, the reserve army of labour and social security "austerity" in Britain', *Critical Social Policy* 39.3 (1990).

8. Life on the Breadline was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project team consisted of Chris Shannahan,

some local congregations this flawed discourse still holds sway - 'it is the individual's fault if they are poor' (Survey 2020). If the Church is to fulfil its calling to 'transform structures of injustice', as we read in the widely adopted Marks of Mission, its needs to shake itself free of the temptation to blame people in poverty for being poor. Half a century ago, Gutiérrez, the pioneer of liberation theology, argued that poverty is a form of systemic sin, which 'is evident in oppressive structures'.<sup>4</sup> Until it grasps this the Church will not be able to adequately embody God's Preferential Option for the Poor.

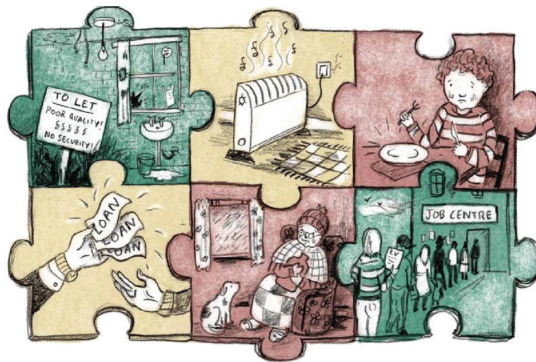


Fig. 1 The jigsaw of poverty by Beth Waters

Second, recognising that poverty is an insidious form of violence embedded in cultural practices, policy narratives and economic systems will enrich our understanding of the damage it wreaks.<sup>5</sup> The peace studies scholar Galtung speaks of a triad of direct, cultural and structural violence.<sup>6</sup> Our Life on the Breadline case study of faith-based responses to the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire exemplifies the multidimensional trauma endured by people in poverty during the Age of Austerity. The blaze, which killed 72 people, was a clear expression of poverty's direct violence, what Grover has called 'social murder'.<sup>7</sup> It was the result of hidden structural violence, and a narrative of cultural violence, which presented the people of North Kensington as somehow less valuable than their wealthy neighbours.

Third, poverty is multidimensional. Most Christian social action and theological analysis zeroes in on food poverty and, more specifically on foodbanks. Such work is essential but can lose sight of the bigger picture. Poor housing, fuel poverty, insecure employment, low pay, zero hours contracts, health inequalities, soaring rents and personal debt combine with, and compound, the impact of food poverty. Our research reminded us that we experience multidimensional poverty in different ways and to different degrees because, in spite of what we have been told, we are not 'all in this together'. Austerity has hit children and young

people, single parents, people with disabilities and Black and Brown Britons far harder than other sections of society. As the Church seeks to respond to the cost of living crisis, it needs to focus its strategy, its preaching and its social action on structural inequality and the multidimensional nature of poverty as well as responding to immediate expressions of hardship.

## Life on the breadline: research for social change

There is no such thing as neutral research. Whether academics recognise it or not, our work either affirms the status quo or plays a small part in the struggle for social justice. Life on the Breadline has attempted to model theology as a force for liberative social change.<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing the project is still the only empirically based analysis by academic theologians to analyse the multidimensional impact of the 'Age of Austerity' that followed the 2008 global financial crash on Christian responses to poverty in the UK. The reports for Church leaders and policymakers, Lent course, animated videos and Anti-Poverty Charter on the project website all arise from three years' in-depth qualitative research. Our work offers new research-led insights for the Church, as it reflects on the implications that biblical teaching about poverty has for our understanding of mission, discipleship and the relationship between faith and politics.

## Christian responses to austerity-age poverty

The Church has been in the vanguard of pastoral responses to rising poverty during the Age of Austerity, the Covid pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis. National Church leaders spoke articulately to us about their denomination's commitment to the common good, God's Preferential Option for the Poor and 'feeding the hungry' – a Matthew 25 model of Christian social action. Some, usually from larger denominations, spoke of the Church's role as an advocate, speaking truth to power. Some referred to the Church's involvement in collaborative campaigns challenging structural injustice. However, others identified a fear of moving beyond welfare-based social action into civil society politics and appearing to meddle in politics. Our case studies revealed a spectrum of Christian approaches to poverty.

### 1. Caring

'Caring' responses are the most common Christian approach to poverty. They are rooted in an understanding of the Church as a servant community and a commitment to building an inclusive vision of the common good. Placing



a strong emphasis on individual need, ‘caring’ approaches to poverty are rooted in an ethic of servanthood (Mark 9.35). They foreground Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbour (John 13.33–34) and the Matthew 25 challenge to feed the hungry and clothe the naked (Matthew 25.45). This approach was the most widely cited by the Church leaders whom we interviewed. Its value to individuals is immense, as we saw during our B30 foodbank case study. However, this welfare-based model of Christian social action rarely seeks to bring about the systemic economic change needed to transform structural injustice.

## 2. Campaigning

The ‘campaigning’ approach is shaped by a more radical theological tradition that foregrounds social justice, rather than welfare. This perspective tends to focus on macro-economic and political challenges and the structural implications of God’s Preferential Option for the Poor. Whilst this approach to poverty has often been marginalised by the institutional Church, it has run like a thread through Christian history – from the early Franciscans and the Levellers to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Victorian Christian Socialists and Latin American Liberation Theologians. Church Action on Poverty exemplifies this approach. Between 2016 and 2019 Church Action led End Hunger UK, which involved 40 Christian NGOs. By 2020, the campaign had helped to secure more government funding for holiday hunger projects and a U-turn in relation to cuts to Universal Credit.<sup>9</sup> Revd Dr Richard Fraser, the national Church and Society lead for the Church of Scotland, reflects the perspective of many of the national Church leaders with whom we spoke: ‘Our campaigning is ... driven by our reading of the Gospel and a recognition that Jesus had a particular bias to the poor and to the people who were inhabiting the margins of society’ (Interview 2020). The ‘campaigning’ approach to poverty has major implications for the Church’s social action, staffing strategies, use of its buildings, presence in socially excluded communities and the use of its financial resources.

## 3. Advocacy

Speaking truth to power is rooted in the ministry of Hebrew Prophets (e.g. Amos 2.6–7; 5.11–12; Isaiah 10.1–4). In recent decades, Church leaders have exemplified this tradition of ‘advocacy’. A generation ago the Bishops of the Church of England offered a prophetic critique of the social policies of Margaret Thatcher’s government in their iconic *Faith in the City* report. In a similar vein an ecumenical group of Church leaders signed an open letter

in 2014 urging the coalition government led by David Cameron to reverse its austerity agenda which, they argued, hit those who were already left out or left behind hardest.<sup>10</sup> The church leaders whom we interviewed were ambivalent about ‘advocacy’. A minority from smaller or more conservative traditions expressed a nervousness at challenging the Government, whereas those from larger denominations felt this was a vital means of holding Government to account. The Anglican Archbishop of Wales, for example, suggested: ‘The Church has a duty to speak up on behalf of people who are unjustly treated’ (Interview 2020), whilst Pastor Adegoke, Senior Pastor of the Church of the

**poverty is an insidious form of violence embedded in cultural practices**

Cherubim and Seraphim believed: ‘Smaller churches have no voice. It is difficult for us to demand protests or march on Downing Street’ (Interview 2020). A regional leader from the Church of Scotland leader, however, suggested that change through ‘advocacy’ is possible: ‘UK churches together have a membership large enough to exert pressure on government’ (Survey 2020). Is the Church ready to harness the collective force of its social capital to speak truth to power?

## 4. Enterprise

A fourth, quite different response to poverty became evident during the project. From our experience, this ‘enterprise’ approach is more common amongst evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. The approach focuses on individual empowerment and the development of business skills, rather than structural change. During the project Robert Beckford, explored examples of this model within the Black Pentecostal community in Birmingham. He suggests, for example, that the New Jerusalem Church ‘promotes an enterprise culture within the congregation to build financial resilience amongst church members.’<sup>11</sup> A focus, therefore, is placed on individual empowerment rather than collective action to transform structural injustice. Consequently, whilst the approach can enable individuals to move out of poverty, it leaves the systems and structures that cause it still firmly in place.

Robert Beckford, Peter Scott and Stephanie Denning. More details about the project can be found on its website at <https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk/>

9. Details about End Hunger UK campaign are available at <https://www.church-poverty.org.uk/what-we-do/endhunger/> and <https://www.church-poverty.org.uk/whyendhunger/> accessed 25 July 2022.

10. See <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/27-bishops-slam-david-camersons-3164033>.

11. R Beckford, C Shannahan, S Denning & P Scott, *Life on the Breadline: Christianity, Poverty and Politics in the 21st century City: A report for Church leaders* (Coventry: Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, 2022), p. 43.

### 5. *Self-reliance*

The final approach to contemporary poverty revolves around 'self-reliance'. Other responses can fall prey to a top-down model of social action and the adoption of decontextualised external interventions, whereas the self-reliance approach is characterised by bottom-up community building. At the heart of this approach to challenging poverty is the use of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD).

ABCD identifies the assets already present in socially excluded communities. In the face of a decade of austerity, members of Hodge Hill Church in Birmingham bring together aspects of the 'caring' and the 'campaigning' approaches to poverty in their contextualised ABCD. Their 'self-reliance' approach revolves around a commitment to an incarnational ecclesiology of presence and solidarity as a way of overcoming what vicar Revd Dr Al Barrett called 'a deficit in empathy' (Interview 2020). For Barrett, ABCD provides the means to challenge the 'poverty of relationships' and the 'poverty of identity' (Interview 2020) that inhibit the building of inclusive egalitarian communities.

#### **The Church's 'kairos' moment**

A decade of austerity has ruptured the social fabric of Britain. Communities ground down by a decade of ideologically driven austerity and traumatised by growing levels of hardship during the Covid pandemic, have been brought to their knees by the current 'cost of living crisis'. This perfect storm represents a once in a generation spiritual crisis for the Church. This is a *kairos* moment – a time of judgement and opportunity. Contemporary poverty presents the Church with three big challenges.

First, we face an existential challenge. How can the Church use its worship to subvert flawed, but ingrained perceptions that poverty is the result of bad luck or individual weakness and enable congregations to explore their calling to transform structural injustice?

Second, the Church faces the challenge of re-engaging with ways in which the Bible describes God's Preferential Option for the Poor in light of a decade of austerity. This can help the Church to move beyond generic affirmations of the common good to proactively embody the liberative intent of God, as we see it in the teaching of the Hebrew Prophets and the ministry of Jesus.

Third, the Church is challenged to actively engage with civil society politics and to translate its theological commitments into sustained, strategic and practical action intended to 'transform structural injustice'.

How does the Church use its extensive social capital as it responds to contemporary poverty? Will it continue to limit itself to feeding the hungry, or be brave enough to ram a 'spoke into the wheel of injustice'?

Our work within Life on the Breadline demonstrates that if the Church is to fulfil its calling to embody God's Preferential Option for the Poor it needs to take four steps:

1. The Church needs to commit itself to collaborative and sustained action in the public sphere that is explicitly intended to 'transform structural injustice'.
2. The Church needs to move beyond its historic welfare-based model of social action to assert a clear Preferential Option for the Poor as the only basis for a genuinely egalitarian vision of the common good that enables all people to flourish.
3. The Church needs to re-imagine the nature of Christian community in order to become a fluid and inclusive Kingdom movement that is engaged with the everyday realities of austerity, rather than a well-meaning but disengaged top-down institution.
4. The Church needs to challenge the theological and political narratives that demean people living in poverty and re-commit itself to its mission of enhancing the agency of those who have been left out or left behind.

This is a *kairos* moment for the Church in breadline Britain. It is time to ram a 'spoke into the wheel of injustice'.