

Anglican-Lutheran Society  
Annual Meeting 2026

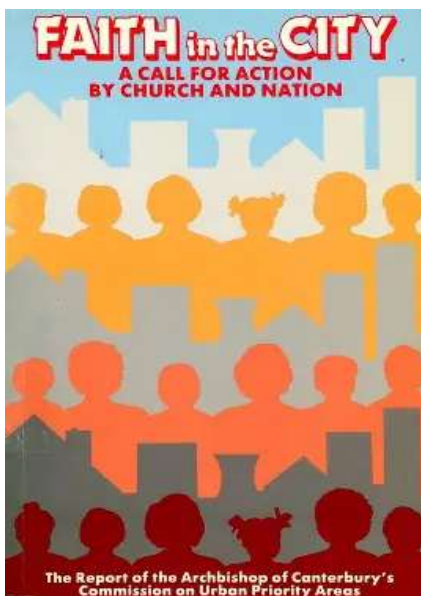
**‘The Church Engaging with Society’**

A presentation by Bishop Rob Wickham  
Chief Executive Officer of the  
Church Urban Fund



*Bishop Paul introducing Bishop Rob*

Do you remember the ‘Faith in the City’ Report, subtitled ‘A Call for Action by Church and Nation’ in 1985? What was it like to be around when a report hit the national headlines which made the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, feel quite threatened? At the time she was putting articles into periodicals saying “There is no such thing as Society”! That was one of the mantras used at the time.



‘Faith in the City’ was a report which was quite daring. It wasn’t written by a load of academics sitting in some back office somewhere. There was a three year research project that went into the writing of the report, and lots of people were commissioners who were sent out to do a deep sense of listening. It came about because Robert Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was asking ‘Why are people rioting in Brixton and lots of other places? What is it that’s really going on?’

The number of people in the UK living in poverty during the Thatcher era rose from about 13% of the population to about 25% of the population. It practically doubled in a matter of a few years. The great sadness is that since those reforms that Thatcher brought in, the economic reforms, the levels of poverty have remained just the same. We’ll come into some statistics later on but the sad thing is that across the country one in five people are living in poverty. The area of the country with the highest level of poverty is, amazingly, London – though there are pockets of London (we’re in one here) that has extreme wealth associated with it. So we have to look at the data and see what the data is showing – and it actually shows different things about different parts of the country.

The Church Urban Fund was one of the products of the ‘Faith in the City’ report. It came out with about 50 recommendations, the majority of which were pointed towards the Church, and how the Church needs to behave differently, particularly in the way it is supported in some of our lowest income communities. There was a language for it: “Urban Priority Areas”. But now we’ve lost it; no-one uses that language these days. We talk about low income communities but that sense of priority has been lost from our language.

This report gave us a framework with which to grapple with some of these extremes we have in this country. It gave us framework in terms of the Church Urban Fund where in the course of about seven or eight years about £60million was raised, not from the Church Commissioners but from parishes like yours, churches like yours where people dug very deep because they had a sense of justice in their hearts. And they decided that this was a cause worth really investing in. Money came from churches and from dioceses, from commerce and from business, from government and all sorts of places where people thought they wanted to make a tangible difference because of what the figures and the stories were telling them about issues to do with poverty. It was an extraordinary moment and, from the Church Urban Fund perspective, that £60million was quite quickly spent, and none of it was invested. All of it was to be handed out and given away to start up all sorts of projects. It was a time, 40 years ago, when all sorts of careers started; youth workers and community development workers who are now all retiring. It's an extraordinary thing for me to go to groups like this one right across the country where I'm hearing stories from people who say, 'Do you know, Rob, I got my first pay cheque from the Church Urban Fund.' It was because this money was directed to grass-roots projects, start-ups enabling the churches to make a significant difference in the communities in which they were rooted. That remains at the heart of the Church Urban Fund.

The other big gift of the 'Faith in the City' report was that it recognised all kinds of issues to do with racial justice which were so clear in the 1980s but it's taken the Church of England 30 years to put in place the Racial Justice Unit to give a focus on that really important topic.

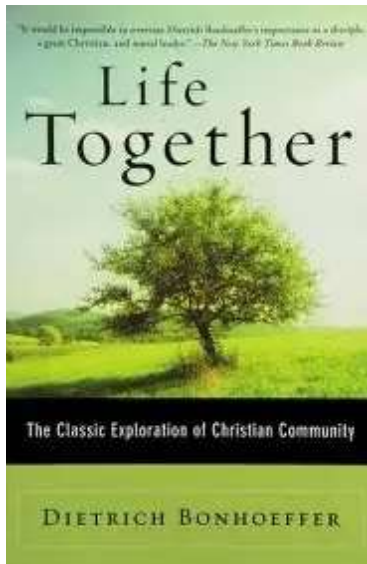
So the 'Church in the City' report was a seminal moment of huge excitement. There was a framework there for the establishing of asset-based community development, as we shall come on to see. So in terms of today, and the ways in which we are able to grapple with the issues that are around us, let's think about a number of the frameworks we can use.

Well, my favourite framework is one here from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 'Life Together' is a wonderful book and the chapter on ministry I find deeply, deeply challenging. He says that if you are going to start something, or go into a new place, or start a new ministry what's the first thing you should do? People will immediately ask, 'What are your plans?' It happened to me when I became the CEO of the Church Urban Fund people asked me, 'What are you going to do? What direction are you going to take the charity in?' My line is always, 'I don't know!' because I take the advice of Bonhoeffer really seriously. He says that when you want to support the people around you the first thing you do is hold your tongue. It's the ministry of holding your tongue. People expect answers; they want to know what you're going to bring to the table. But I think Bonhoeffer's got it right. If we're thinking about ministry, and I'm conscious that this won't be true for all churches represented here, but some of us take the term 'parish' really seriously and, as you know, the word 'parish' comes from an ancient Greek derivation which is called 'outside the house'.

So parish churches exist to serve not the gathered congregation, but to serve outside the house. So if at the heart of our ecclesiology we're to serve outside the house we need to look and to listen to what's taking place outside the house. This is so easily what we by-pass when, for instance, we're creating mission action plans. We just listen inside the house! So Bonhoeffer reminds us that there's a ministry of holding your tongue, to look, to listen. He

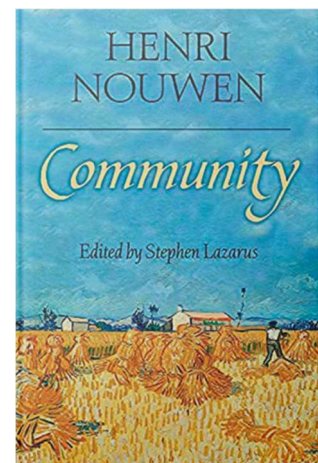
talks about meekness, listening and helplessness, saying ‘What on earth can I do, O Lord?’ And only then can you start to proclaim and to speak with authority, when you literally smell of a sheep, as Pope Francis reminds us, and where you have the place where you are serving deeply under your fingernails. That’s what gives you the traction to be able to speak.

When Bonhoeffer speaks about listening, we live in a culture of social media which is quick fire, and all sorts of people say all sorts of stuff – we’re being disciplined by algorithms, to use a chilling phrase. But this is what Bonhoeffer says about listening, and I find this quite terrifying:



*The first service one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to his word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God’s love for us that he not only gives us his word but also lends us his ear. So it is his work we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, think they must always contribute something when they’re in the company of others as if it’s the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen; they won’t find it among Christians because these Christians are talking when they should be listening. But he who will no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either. He’ll do nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical contention arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long will presently be talking beside the point and will not be speaking to other, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks his time is too valuable to keep silence will eventually have no time for God or his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.’*

I find that quite terrifying! But we have a framework there which Bonhoeffer gives us, and the next framework I would like to give you is Henri Nouwen, and extraordinary theologian who reminds us of the importance of learning from the poorest in society. Let the poor be your teachers, let your brokenness be your greatest strength – these are some of the key themes he speaks about. And I like this book particularly, ‘Community’, which is a kind of compendium which takes you through his thought processes about community and how it’s changed over time. This is towards the end, and it’s a bit of a reflection over a whole lifetime’s ministry of being a theologian, of being a reflector and of working particularly with those with learning difficulties. And this is what he says:



*Always go to the places of poverty. That's a discipline. Go where the poor are. The word poor doesn't always mean economically poor, it doesn't necessarily mean people who sit on the streets, but go to the places where people are poor and where you are poor, because that's where you will be blessed. And that's where others are blessed.*

'Blessed are the poor,' says Jesus, so if you want a blessing go there. Jesus didn't say, 'Blessed are those who care for the poor,' he said blessed are the poor. So you might be the poor, or your husband or your partner might be the poor for that moment. What I's saying is, don't be afraid to go to places where people are hurting. Spiritually, every time you go to places of woundedness or poverty you'll find light, you'll find hope, you'll find joy, you'll find peace, and you'll find all the things you ever want. Don't veer away from the places of hurt but go right there.

Seeing this work as engagement with society and particularly with poverty actually means rolling your sleeves up and getting your hands dirty. It's not to be kept at arm's length, as both these two frameworks we've been thinking about remind us.

## The Five Anglican Marks of Mission



Respond to human need by loving service.



Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.



Seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind, and to pursue peace and reconciliation.



Teach, nurture, and baptize new believers.



Strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Our Five Marks of Mission across the Anglican Communion are very helpful because they recognise that the work we are doing particularly in the way of social work and social action and justice work is right at the heart of the Gospel. It's not an add-on, it's not an optional extra, it's a significant part of what we are called to do. I find this quite compelling, and there is a sense of proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, teaching, nurturing new believers which I hope we are all called to do on a regular basis. And all of our churches, I would imagine, are doing the third mark of mission, responding to need by loving service, because it's just what we do. We run food banks, we run night shelters, we give debt advice, we give legal advice, and we do all sorts of projects and programmes that are related to the places where we are called to serve. It's what we do. But the fourth one, I think, is the hardest. It's about challenging and transforming unjust structures of society, to challenge violence and work towards reconciliation. Why can't we, in terms of all that goes on in responding to need by loving service, which has been estimated by the national

Churches as being equivalent (across all the Churches across all the denominations in this country) to come to the equivalent of £55billion per year – that’s twice the amount the Government spends on social care. That is the contribution of Jesus, working through our Churches, to the broader community. It strikes me there’s a great challenge we’ve got in terms of taking that extraordinary impact and make it effect policy. It’s a challenge because we’re all engaged in keeping the show on the road, which is right and proper and lies at the heart of people’s ministries, but it strike me that we need a slightly different posture in order to demonstrate where our true impact is, and to undo some of the unjust structures of society. We can’t just leave this to about 26 Bishops who sit in the House of Lords. It’s incumbent on all of us to think of what ways there are for transforming the unjust structures of society.

Another framework that’s helpful is the words in the Church of England’s Ordinal for the making of Deacons. These are the words that are used, and I would argue that they don’t just apply to Deacons but to all the Baptised:

*They are to serve the community in which they are set, bringing to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people.*

*They are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.*

There it is, right at the heart of the ordination promises. And when we have a Confirmation Service there is quite often a commission which is effectively sending people out to do this stuff. So there’ a calling upon us, we’ve got these frameworks from theologians, and we have an ecclesiological framework here in terms of all who are called to share the work of mission and ministry.



That raises the question, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ We’re called to serve the other in a time when the political climate suggests that we just want to counsel the other and then gently push them away. We see that rhetoric in our political world at the moment. So, who is my neighbour? Well, just two or three Bible stories that you’ll be aware of starting with the story of Cain and Abel. I take great comfort in the story of Cain and Abel because we see the first family in the scriptures and they’re deeply dysfunctional, and that makes me feel so much better about my own. The murder of Abel by Cain as God is walking through the garden and he asks Cain what’s been going on and Cain’s first response is fascinating: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ How do you respond yourself to that question? If the answer is, ‘No! I’m not my sibling’s keeper!’ we might just as well go home! But if the answer is ‘Yes!’ it leads not just to resurrection for ourselves but also for the other. But if the answer is ‘May be!’ I wonder where your red lines are. Because this question is personal, right at the beginning of the scriptures.

The second story, which you'll be so familiar with, is when the rich lawyer asks Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus gives the picture of the Good Samaritan. It's a remarkable story because it's not just a one-off, it's a continuing relationship, and it's a relational response. So who is my neighbour? It's the one I can serve and care for, and particularly when it breaks down barriers as it does in the story of the Good Samaritan. It's a deeply politically problematic story, and yet Jesus breaks down those political barriers in order to be able to care.

The next Bible story, which I believe is critical for us, comes at a moment in the resurrection appearances of Jesus. The disciples have gone back fishing, business as usual, and Jesus appears on the shore and tells them to fish somewhere else and they haul in a great catch. And Jesus says to Peter, 'Come here!!' Now I don't know if it's happened to you but at different times in my career the boss has said to me, 'Come here!' and you know you're going to be ripped apart. So you can imagine Peter who didn't want his feet washed, who, when Jesus was arrested, got out a knife and stabbed someone, who denied Jesus – it's about time he had a ripping apart, isn't it! But



Jesus, in his extraordinary generosity, takes him to one side and asks him a very simple confessing question, 'Do you love me?' And Peter responds, 'Yes, Lord, I love you!' Now let's remember that Peter isn't just an individual, he's the one on whom the Church rests. So Jesus, having effectively given him forgiveness, says to him 'Feed my lambs!' Now I'm no farmer (though I do sometimes carry a stick that might give that impression!) but let's think for a moment about who the lambs are. The lambs are the most vulnerable in the field, the lambs are the ones who have least to give economically, and their value is in them growing to become sheep. So they're a drain on the farmer's money because they need feeding and because they're vulnerable they need extra protection, and so Jesus is saying to Peter in this moment, 'Look out for the most marginalised! Look out for the most vulnerable! Look out for the ones who can't feed themselves! Look out and feed!' I believe this is a resurrection command, a command upon the Church, that this is a primary part of our mission and ministry, 'Feed my lambs!' in the spirit of forgiveness and the love of the resurrection.

Then we go on to 'How do we serve our neighbour?' I love this story of the wedding at Cana because it's a wonderful example of asset based community development. I didn't have that language when I was a Vicar but I know realise that what I was doing was asset based community development. What I love about this story is that a miracle takes place but nothing new is introduced into the room, but old stuff is re-imagined. It's assets that are already there – stone water jars and a moment of confession as Mary tells the servants 'Do whatever he tells you!' And suddenly the water is transformed.

My parents attend a church down in Somerset and the south-west of England. There was an old man there who used to carry the cross leading the processions in the church. And I noticed over the years that as he got more frail the cross became less and less upright! As he leaned forward so did the cross! And the old man never smiled. The last time I went to see my parents and we went to the local parish church there was no procession, but there was a musical band that was new and fabulous, and the person who was playing the fiddle was this old man, and he was beaming and he was brilliant! And I thought what a lovely piece of asset based community development! I said to the Vicar afterwards, 'That's the wedding at Cana coming alive here!' Because an old stone water jar which people just walked past and never noticed had suddenly brought such an amazing addition to the worshipping life of that church! That old man had been reimagined. I wonder how many people in our communities need reimagining. That for me, in a nutshell, is asset based community development. It's recognising my neighbour; it's also recognising the church and the church hall; it's also recognising the shops that we've got and the library if we're fortunate enough to have one; it's also recognising where the doctor's surgery is; it's asking 'What is the stuff that God has given me to play with beyond the house?' And that's about asset based community development, thinking beyond ourselves and how do we get people into church, important though that is, but it's helping us to shape community as God intends it to be. For me, that's the highest form of ministry, recognising the special place of those who are most marginalised and on the extremes.

That's why I like the story of St Lawrence the Deacon (225-258AD). He was a protégé of Pope Sixtus (I can't remember which one!). Valerian was the Emperor and he hated the Christians and gave an Edict that all bishops, priests and deacons should be put to death. So these church leaders knew their time was up! Pope Sixtus was the first to be murdered for his faith and then there was a kind of running order and Lawrence knew that his time was up. So what did he do? There were a few treasures the Church had but he didn't try to hide them away but gave them away to the widows, to those who were on the margins, saying 'You need this more than I!' Then, when he was called by Emperor Valerian to bring him the treasures of the Church before he was murdered he went with the widows and with those who are most marginalised and said to the Emperor, 'Here are the treasures of the Church!' And extraordinary story of what asset based community development could look like, especially when it's geared towards the most marginalised in our society.

### **The Church Urban Fund**

Let me tell you a little bit about the Church Urban Fund. We have a thing called the 'Look Up Tool ([cuf.org.uk/lookup-tool](http://cuf.org.uk/lookup-tool)) and I want you all to sign up for it because it's the actual deprivation data for every single parish across the Church of England. If you want to see what asset based community development looks like where you live that's where you'll find it. Many churches use it when they want to raise money so as to include the information in their fund raising applications. When I was Bishop of Edmonton I used it a lot. Every time I went to do a confirmation I would look at the tool for that parish. It's an informed way – data is our friend – of gathering information about where we live and not just relying on the gathered congregation because often people drive in from a long distance because they have a particular association there. They're the wrong people to be asking about what that particular church should be doing. The asset based approach is to go outside the house, do the listening as Bonhoeffer reminds us, and one way we do this is to listen to the data.

What the data reveals is appalling. What I'm going to show you demonstrate the extremes we have in this country. St Peter's, Blackpool, is the most deprived parish in the Church of England. 58% of children there are growing up in poverty. Actually, there are 4.5million children in this country who are growing up in poverty. Recent negotiations with the UK Government over Child Benefit will only remove 500,000 children from poverty, so we are just scratching the surface

In Middlesbrough in the North-East of England 73% of pensioners live in poverty. Now that's extraordinary when you think that the most protected demographic we have in this country are pensioners, which makes that figure deeply shocking. Working age poverty is 58% in Middlesbrough



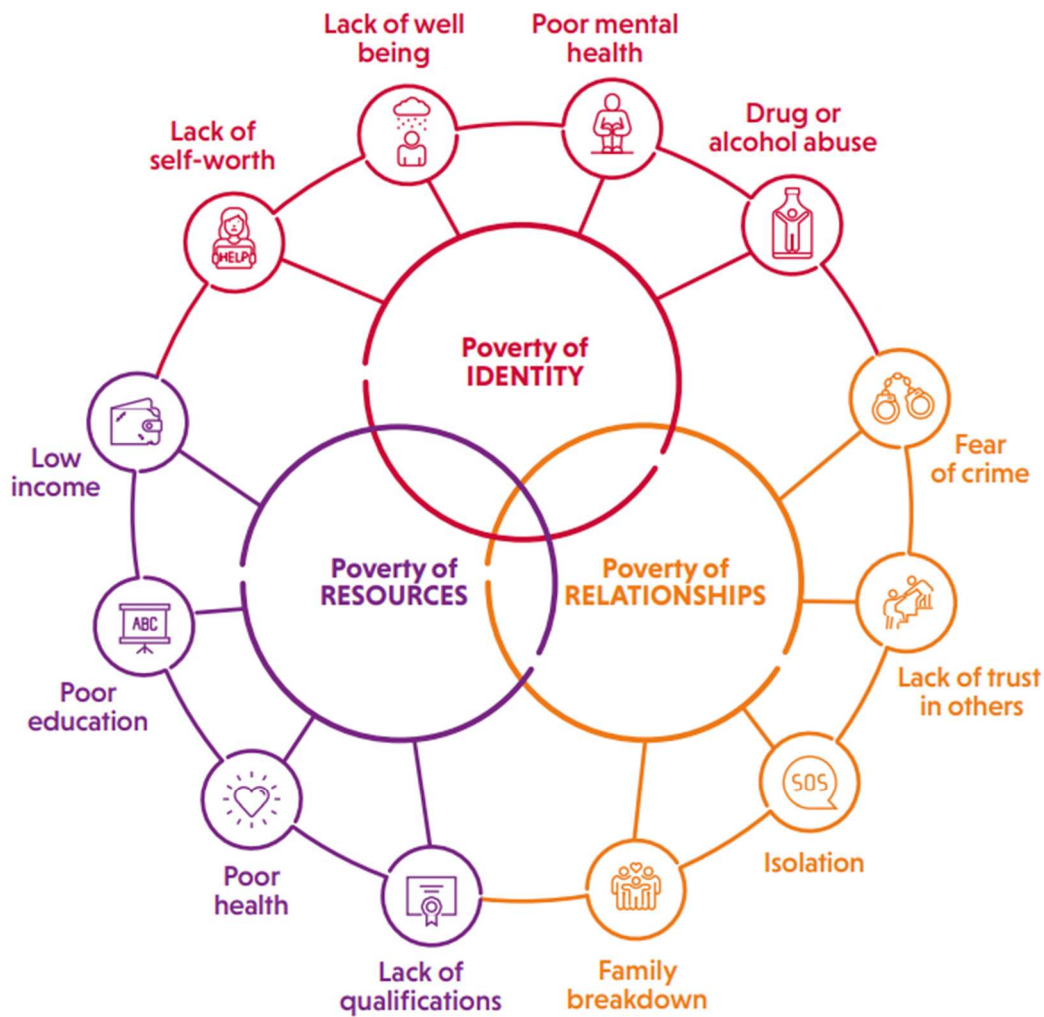
But the next statistic I find deeply shocking. If you compare life expectancy between London and Blackpool in the North-West of England the life expectancy for a boy is 25 years less in Blackpool than for a boy in London, and 23 years difference for a girl. In Parliament the Assisted Suicide Bill is under discussion – and I call it Assisted Suicide deliberately because we already have assisted dying in this country, and it's called poverty. So what happens if the Government continues to raise the age of pension entitlement? Imagine it goes up to 70 years of age. You have virtually got the State saying, 'Men in Blackpool – you are never going to retire!' because the

average life expectancy for a man in Blackpool is 68 years.

When I was a Vicar I was in Somers Town, near Kings Cross and Camden Town, where we had the highest density of Social Housing, 76% of the housing stock, which was the highest percentage of anywhere in the country. When I was a Bishop in this Diocese of London I lived in Hampstead. The average life expectancy between Somers Town and Hampstead, just 2 miles distant from each other, was 18 years.

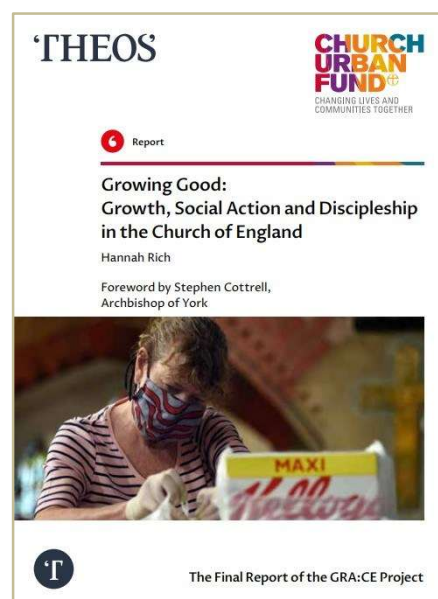
In Middlesbrough 44% of the working age population have no qualifications, and in Hull on the East Coast of England, 78% of people live alone. If you're working out a Mission Action Plan and 78% of the population live on their own that would be a very different plan to one where the figure was 20%. The figures inform what we do. Are you surprised by those statistics?

I find the slide of 'The Web of Poverty' on the next page to be helpful because poverty is so much more than simply about financial income.



Poverty is about Identity and about relationships as well as resources. A person may be very wealthy but relationally very poor. We have about 1000 places of welcome around the country and I visited one where people were tucking into the cup of tea and fancy cakes and discovered that for six people out of the twenty people there that would be the only day of the week they would speak to another human being. Shocking! Absolutely shocking! That's why things as simple as a cup of tea after a service are so important in creating what has been described as a safety net when it comes to relational poverty. This diagram reminds us that poverty is much more than financial deprivation; it's a whole network of inter-related aspects. I wonder, if you look at the web of poverty, can you see people you know, or perhaps yourself. So it's complex.

Research is important. Has anyone read this book, 'Growing Good'? It's the result of three years of research. It came out four or five years ago. It was looking at Church Growth, and we get fascinated by



growth. Everyone wants to know, 'How are you growing?' This report changed the dynamics of the language we use around Church Growth because it recognises that growth comes from good discipleship, people need to know why it is we do what we do, plus good social action. This research shows us that churches grow when we serve our neighbour and we speak about Jesus.

Has anyone heard of 'The Growing Good' resource? It is being used by over 1000 churches across the country and is a series of sessions which put this report into practice. It talks about church growth particularly in the ways we can serve our brothers and sisters, and particularly the way in which we offer discipleship in a thoughtful way. And I think it a very helpful resource in the way in which we should shape our churches.

'Places of Welcome' is a network of about 1000 churches offering meeting places once a week to meet the needs of relational poverty. 'The Together Network' is a combination of about 50 different charities working with dioceses because we've recognised charities and dioceses can have a conversation about how to be more strategic. If we act strategically we can more easily ascertain what the impact is in order to challenge the unjust structures of society. Charities and Churches of different denominations combine to show the impact we have in a particular place in order to do some challenging. It's the grassroots coming up in the way Bonhoeffer reminded us.



So there are the frameworks and some of the programmes that the Church Urban Fund undertakes at the moment. Places are all different, no two places are the same, and each demands a different kind of ministry. It's generally impossible to task something that works here and plant it there, because the two places are different. So we must be **contextual** in our mission and ministry. Also we must be **incarnational** because God pitches his tent amongst us. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt or pitched his tent among us.' This actually means that our approach is deeply scripturally rooted. I've also mentioned that we must be **asset based** and about being **relational**. These are the key principles that undergird the work that we are about.

As I end, here is another resource that I can strongly recommend – 'The Knowledge Bank' ([cuf.org.uk/knowledge-bank](http://cuf.org.uk/knowledge-bank)) – which gets regularly updated and offers a series of study guides and helpful programme guides, fundraising guides, all designed to help you shape the ministry in the places in which you are rooted. The vision statement for the Church Urban Fund is 'Ending Poverty Together', with the principle focus on the together bit. No one organisation is going to change the outlook on poverty. We need a place-based approach; we are working with the Government identifying areas of significant deprivation and are putting in £2million per year for ten years in each place. And we are encouraging clergy in

those places to step up and become part of the Neighbourhood Boards because that's a critical political way in which we can help shape the nature of the community we are serving. We are encouraging speaking out about poverty and next month (April 2026) there is a conversation with the Commission on Community Resilience and asking the question 'What kind of a Britain do you want to live in and how do we shape that as Christians?' A political conversation shaping the world as God intends it to be.

How do we articulate our impact? We're not very good at this. When I was a Vicar people used to ask me what I did, and I could list all the things we were doing but could not articulate the impact that it was having. I didn't know how to! I hadn't been given the tools to do so! But actually things like the National Churches Trust have produced a series of online tools to be able to shape what we do, and in one project they have been able to work out the value of what they do and it comes to about £1.7 million. This has revolutionised their conversation with the local authority and the local authority has asked them to plant what they are doing on three housing estates. Another church has worked out the value of what they are doing at more than £700,000 and they are a tiny church with only 50 people attending, but you can see their confidence grow when they know what their impact is. The Church Urban Fund is helping more churches to do this because it's a sure way of challenging the unjust structures of society.

So plenty of tools, plenty of framework and plenty of data, and that's how we serve the churches and society.

The screenshot shows the Church Urban Fund website. At the top left is the logo. To the right are navigation links: WHO WE ARE, KNOWLEDGE BANK, LOOK UP TOOL, PATHS TO ACTION, and a red DONATE button with a right arrow. Below the navigation are two promotional banners. The first banner features a close-up of a man with a beard and glasses, resting his chin on his hand. It has a dark grey text box on the left with the heading 'Shine & Grow' and a description: 'Tools and resources for your journey from insight to impact, where shining a light and growing good go hand in hand to transform communities for lasting change.' On the right is a vertical graphic with a purple-to-orange gradient, containing the text 'REAL ISSUES', 'Shine AND GROW' in a stylized font, and 'REAL TOOLS'. The second banner shows an aerial view of a city with a large, glowing yellow circular graphic on the left. A white text box on the right contains the text: 'Shine a new light on your parish with the Look Up Tool'.