

Action for the Common Good

Inspired by liberation theology, Chris Howson talks about getting involved in activism to build the common good, which Jesus called the reign of God.

When I had finished my training to be a priest, I went off to work in Bradford, a city that I know very well, as I had worked there as a social worker for many years. I think one of my interests in joining the church was the desire that the church would be far more involved with the common good. I have to say that it is not always the case, in fact you could easily argue from the perspective of a lot of the young people I work with that the church actually resists the common good and is part of the common bad. It's quite embarrassing to be from the Church of England and try to talk about the common good, because sometimes we've not been there.

But at the grass roots level, when you're working in the inner city or at the parish level, the great news is I still believe that the Church of England and many of the other churches and the other faiths and people of no faiths are still working tirelessly for the common good. I have not been to any Church of England parish church which hasn't been saying, 'What more can we do to build up the common life in our areas? What more can be done?'

In Bradford we wanted to work with people who hated the church. There's a lot of them about, so there's a lot of people to work with. I was genuinely interested in setting up a church for people who didn't like the church and they thought the church was homophobic and racist and institutional and part of the hierarchy, because I kind of agreed with them, so I wanted to hang out with them. We got involved with environmental issues, peace issues, human rights issues. Our church was evolving at the time that the war had broken out in Iraq and Afghanistan and young people were, quite rightly, very angry about that and they wanted to see the church being involved in those issues.

On the whole it wasn't. I mean, just before the war, churches were quite active, and I like to think there were lots of church people among the two million-strong protest against the war in 2003. But after the war had started, I noticed the drying up of resistance to what for many of us in the peace movement was clearly a war that was wrong, and that was going to cause more harm than good. But the churches often weren't there. We wanted to be part of a church that was doing something about that, so we were the

church that was organising peace activities, we were the church that was prepared to go to the American bases or the British bases and lie down and get ourselves arrested – putting our bodies in the way of war, putting our bodies where we thought our faith would take us.

Then, in Bradford, there were lots of issues that were particular to our city. How did the church respond to those in terms of the common good? For us it was resisting the far right. Bradford had a particular issue with how we dealt with the far right. We wanted to be a church that worked alongside the UAF [Unite against Fascism] and groups that were trying to resist the power of the far right to infiltrate our cities and our towns. And it was a dangerous place to be, but we felt it was really important that the churches were making a stand for the common good with people who were normally outside the church's life and didn't want to work with her.

Another area that we found ourselves working tirelessly on was inter-faith issues. Bradford was a mess for many years, because a lot of the churches thought it was their God-given right to convert the Muslims who arrived. And, of course, it didn't work. We ended up with great tensions between the different communities. So our church got heavily involved in that field and young folk saw a church that didn't lambaste and attack its Muslim, Sikh and Hindu neighbours, but actually got to know them as friends and as colleagues. Our church often had as many people of different faiths as people who would identify themselves as Christians at their gathering on a Sunday, and we were very proud of that.

In Bradford for us it meant challenging corporate power; having a go at the multinationals when they were abusing people. I made a terrible mistake after my years in Bradford being a trouble maker: I wrote a book about the experiences. It was a mistake because, if you want to do radical stuff, it's best to do it really quietly and writing a book got me into load of trouble, because it exposed the stuff that we wanted to do. We wanted to be an accepting, inclusive church. Bradford diocese was quite a conservative diocese and they really didn't like it when they realised that liberation theology in modern-day Bradford meant welcoming gay Christians and accepting them as they are and support-

ing them. When you criticise a church, they take it as disloyalty. It's not disloyalty; I'm very loyal to the church. I want it to be a place of vigorous intellectual thought. I want it to be a place of inclusion and love and mercy, and where we're prepared to listen to the views of people from outside. I'm very loyal in that sense.

So, eventually, it was time to leave Bradford and I miss my community there, because we had a very radical community of people who didn't just come to gather and think every Sunday, but they lived together and set up community arts projects and environmental projects and we took over allotments and grew stuff for the community and gave it away to homeless people and asylum seekers. I miss that community very much and I'm trying to work out how to be a liberation theologian in a new context, back in the North East.

One of the great joys is the Durham Miners' Gala. I went there a few weeks ago and it gave this incredible sense of hope and joy to be around loads of non-Christians who were doing good stuff for the common good. At the end of the day, after all the speeches, you follow the brass bands and eventually they take you back up to Durham Cathedral. Durham Cathedral is a wonderful place, which hides its radicalism. If you go into the south transept there's a big miners' banner and on one side it's got: 'They Being Dead Yet Speaketh', but on the other side, the bit that's hidden away, there's this incredible quote: 'To live as if each tomorrow can be better than today'.

That working class, Christian socialist tradition believed in the utopic dreams: we work to make sure that each tomorrow is better than today. And of course, for me that is what the common good is all about, that our time here on Earth is to make this



Jesus Driving the Money Changers out of the Temple, El Greco

Earth a better place. And, I have to say, on the whole we're doing quite well at that. Humanity is getting better. A lot of people are really depressed about humanity, but I was with Terry Deary, who writes *Horrible Histories*. He's from Sunderland, so he gave a little show for us at the Minster, and the kids loved him. One of the kids asked him, 'If you could choose to be alive in any period of history, which would it be?' And he said, 'Right now.' In terms of the NHS, in terms of health care provision, now is the best time to be living. We actually, as a society, have done pretty well: you go back a hundred years and our lives would be pretty miserable unless you were at the top end of that class-divided society.

So there are some good things that humanity has done and I like to think the church has sometimes been involved with that, but it's often those outside the church who have worked hardest for it.

But here's a quote from John Chrysostom in the 4th Century about the common good: 'This is the rule of most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely, the seeking of the common good . . . for nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbours.' So it's there at the heart of the Christian faith, indeed, at the heart of all faiths. I always have a chat with taxi drivers: taxi drivers know what's going on. A lovely taxi driver gave

me a lift here and I had a good chat with him about being a Muslim. He'd been here 40 years in Leicester and I told him what we were doing, talking about the common good, and he said, 'You know the first question, the important thing about Allah – Allah loves the people. It doesn't say Allah loves the Muslims, Allah loves the people.'

I'm a bit of a Marxist. I like Marx and I remember when I was a young man of 17, before I was Christian, in those happy days, going off to find Marx's grave. Anyway, stumbling around the graveyard, you come across the great bust of his head and it's got those incredible words on it: 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.' And I often think a similar thing can be said of theologians. Theologians have often interpreted the reign of God in various ways, but the point, however, is to build it.

So, how do we change and build the common good when there are people with power who can prevent us from doing so? I went to the G8 in Ireland. Lough Erne was completely fenced off, it was the most militarised place I have ever seen. Apparently, it was the biggest policing job in Irish history, which, given Irish history, is quite extraordinary. Then all they had was one or two long-haired priests turn up! They must have been really disappointed. Even the city centre had big water cannons everywhere; they were really expecting us to cause havoc. I'd gone there with the IF campaign. I hope some of you are involved with that, whether you belong to churches or not, or belong to groups like Christian Aid. But I went with the IF campaign and mostly for the Tax Justice campaign.

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For me the Tax Justice campaign is one of the most crucial bits of that argument for the common good. Taxation is a way for us all to contribute to the common good, though we might not always agree with how our tax money is spent. But ultimately, tax is about working for the common good: it's what goes into education and healthcare, street lighting and policing. I think people are inherently annoyed when they find out companies try to shirk that element of the common good. I'm just gently easing myself into Sunderland, I don't want to frighten them too much, but on Ash Wednesday I couldn't resist, after the

Ashing service in the Minster, I went down to our local Starbucks and got my pot of ash and made a big ash cross on the window of Starbucks to make a point about repentance and not paying taxes. This caused quite a stir in the local community; they're not renowned for their activism there. But it was really a crucial moment because, I think, a lot of young people who read about it in the papers or heard it on the radio, suddenly thought at least the church is saying something about the common good and the contribution that these companies should make towards it. And so I urge you, if you want to make an impact wherever you are, just to go and ash a Starbucks.

But better still, in Bradford where they're closing down half our libraries – the austerity stuff – the most fun I've ever had as an activist was when we turned a Barclays Bank into a public library. Barclays Bank had just announced that they were paying a pittance in corporation tax and so we took lots of old books and we turned it into a library. The police came, because the bank manager was thinking, 'Get the police. The police will come down with pepper sprays, push them all out.' What they didn't know was I worked really closely with the police in Bradford. I set up something called Bradford Street Angels, which gives the police somewhere to go to the loo on Saturday and Friday night and a cup of tea, so they don't get too rough with people. And so the police really loved me there. They turned up and we were occupying the bank. 'That's all right, they don't seem to be causing that much harm.' The bank manager was absolutely furious but we managed to get away with it. I urge you to get involved with austerity campaigns, highlight what the companies are doing and get them to pay their taxes. Taxes are about building up the common good.

Before I end I wanted just to read a few things from my book where I talk about protest as mission:

Protest as mission

The church must be a visible presence within movements to build a fairer and more just society. When people oppose war, environmental degradation and economic inequalities, Christians need to be at the heart of these movements. Whenever we protest, we make visible God's desire for a better world.

As well as supporting progressive movements, we have a role in instigating protest, becoming agitators for peace. Fresh expressions of church will find this easier than traditional church, and can respond to developing situations far more quickly. In this way, new forms of church may also help the mainstream institutions find a renewed vision for the world. Mission as protest will involve:

- ❖ Being at the heart of struggles against climate change and ecological destruction.
- ❖ Resisting cutbacks in education, health, social welfare; services that are the backbone of a just society.
- ❖ Building alternative models of living that promote equality, sharing and sustainability.
- ❖ Working for peace and reconciliation and opposing all that creates conflict and war.
- ❖ Involvement in local campaigns to create just communities. Being active in international movements to end poverty.
- ❖ Taking human rights seriously.

Prophetic ministry

- ❖ Work with participatory models of church, using dialogical methods to build up the people of God.
- ❖ Reach out to other faiths, building bridges of respect and understanding.
- ❖ Better understand the inclusive nature of God so that they may challenge inequalities based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation and disability.
- ❖ Raise their voices against injustices both local and global, and work collaboratively with those who are building 'another possible world'.
- ❖ Be critical of when the church has got things wrong, and recognise why those outside the church may have got things right. Use the tools of liberation theology to better understand the Bible and God's mission to the world.

Jesus as dissident

It means rediscovering Jesus as a radical dissident who defied an empire in pursuit of truth and mercy. As Christians we believe that we learn about God's will through the activities and teachings of Jesus. Jesus is a model for discipleship, and we must strive to understand the context of his life and ministry so that we are able to relate them to our own. This will mean:

- ❖ Reading the Bible carefully with commentaries that reveal the context of his life and teaching.
- ❖ Recognising the anti-imperial story that is lived out in the Gospel narratives.
- ❖ Relating Jesus' dissident discipleship to our own times and our twenty-first-century oppressions.
- ❖ Creating new ways of living out our commitment to being peacemakers and justice seekers.
- ❖ Resisting the logic of materialism, individualism and consumerism.
- ❖ Demonstrating God's love with acts of compassion that build up the common good.

Building the common good, the kingdom

Practical liberation theology in the twenty-first century will involve finding new ways of expressing the reign of God. We need to educate faith communities about the realities of oppression, and then have the courage to act in ways that build up a society based on God's vision for earth and humanity. We need to reflect thoughtfully about our actions, constantly bringing our discipleship to God in prayer and thought. We need to use the tools of contemplation to allow the Holy Spirit to move us and guide us. We need to find ways of sustaining ourselves and our movements when we feel overwhelmed by the immensity of the task before us. Building the reign of God will involve:

- ❖ Creating communities of faith based on respect and acceptance.
- ❖ Becoming more attuned to creation, learning to grow things and desiring to protect nature.
- ❖ Noticing injustice when it occurs, and working with others to challenge it.
- ❖ Building up solidarity with marginalised communities, locally and internationally.
- ❖ Welcoming the stranger and building a culture of hospitality, especially towards those in need of sanctuary.

We cannot be over-sentimental about the task that we are committed to: To build a just church and to put all those things into practice is a tough thing. All of you in your time will have been involved in radical movements, new age movements, 1960s movements, trying to change things. But the church has commonly failed to live up to the hopes many had for it. To me that means we have to reinvigorate the church and remind it of its roots, its radical roots. The liberation theology movement which I am part of is not really saying anything new. It's trying to get us back to basics, back to that wonderful quote from John Chrysostom, that the best thing is to seek the common good and to work along with people, whether they are miners or people involved in the Occupy Movement, who say: 'We live as if each tomorrow can be better than today'.

After working for some years in Bradford, Church of England priest Chris Howson is now chaplain at the University of Sunderland. His book *A Just Church* (Continuum, London 2011) was reviewed in *Sofia* 107. This is a shortened, edited version of the talk he gave to the SOF 2013 annual conference in Leicester. The talk recording was transcribed by Oliver Essame.