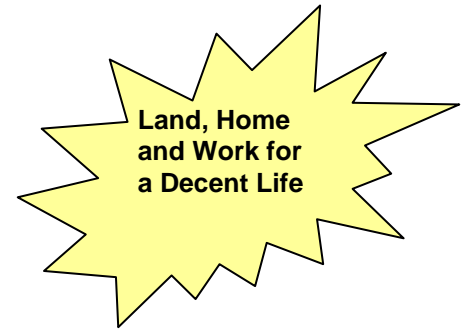




Movement of Christian Workers

REVIEW

Issue 68 July 2019



Land, Home
and Work for
a Decent Life

Fit for Purpose?

Reading the articles in this MCW Review they all could well be entitled “Fit for purpose?” or indeed, “Not fit for purpose?”. It is an expression that we hear more of almost every day in relation to a variety of services, public or private.

Being “fit for purpose” begs a number of questions, for example, what is the aim of the service; does it deliver what it was intended to do and is it being gauged, assessed or evaluated in the right way? These same questions would of course elicit different answers depending on whose view point is sought, the provider or the receiver.

It maybe that from the provider’s perspective it does achieve the job it was designed to do; it meets the criteria, the rules and philosophy we want to establish. The housing crisis, child poverty, women’s work conditions and change of pension rights could all be challenged by the “fit for purpose” measure. One example of this is the reflection of a teacher in relation to child poverty and the experiences in schools. She stated that the welfare system was not fit for purpose whilst the Resolution Foundation pointed out that the current social security system policy is aimed at cutting support to families with more than two children whilst encouraging people into work. Thus it is the starting point or the underpinning principle held as to whether it is fit for purpose or not.

A similar scenario can be seen in whether food banks are being accepted as a normal part of life and so charity is once

again being used as a replacement service for those in need. There is no doubt that it is essential for many to just about, albeit, barely survive. It is for others an indictment that the food bank is now the ultimate safety net whereas the welfare state was set up for that very purpose. Is it therefore indicative of the welfare state not being fit for purpose?

Being fit for purpose can also be asked of the Church and its Priests. The Tablet’s feature, ‘The Priestly life’ included Mgr Cyril Murtagh (June 15th 2019) whose advice to new young priests was “Rule one: respect your people. They are having a harder time than you are. Rule two: listen to them. See how it looks from their side of the fence. I think people came to me because I listened and I wouldn’t produce a nice knock-you-down answer”.

Fit for purpose responses can also be identified in the New Testament with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Priest and Levite had religious reasons why they could not cross the road to assist someone in need. It is the rules, rituals and systems which dominated their decision about the right thing to do. Again the reminder of Jesus to the Pharisees (Mark:2: 27) “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” underlines this same principle.

It is in the fabric of society and the challenges it presents to us that we too, like Oscar Romero, have to make choices about what is the response that is demanded of us.

Housing crisis in London



Following on from the excellent and in-depth article on housing in the previous MCW Review (67) I thought I would share my reflections, as a Labour Councillor in Barnet; what I see as a crisis situation that now exists in London. In Barnet the house price sales are now 15 times the median income and the median rents are highest across outer London. Young people starting out on their adulthood and working life cannot afford to live here. This means traveling long distances to work in Barnet's local schools and hospitals.

Increasingly there are three generational family homes being formed with all the social and emotional stress and strains that such living conditions place on these families. The private rented sector is the only game in town with landlords overwhelmingly being sole traders. Barnet Council has accepted the need for the licensing of private landlords and some have signed up to the scheme, but many have not. However, such a scheme is powerless when it comes to section 21 evictions. A section 21 notice is the notice which a landlord must give to their tenant to begin the process to take possession of a property let on an assured short hold tenancy without proving a reason for wishing to take possession.

Across London it is known that there are many illegal evictions happening. Housing is not an entity in itself but is affected by other issues and policies. The changing terrain due to cuts to our legal and justice system have wider effects and impacts across the whole spectrum of our lives, sadly only noticeable when they are most required. Thus, Local Authorities (LA) has fewer solicitors and there have been closure of courts. The consequence is that too often the section 21 notices are difficult to challenge within the required timescales.

Lewisham for example cannot cope with the number of tenants being evicted.

Newham has 27,000 people on its housing waiting list with 7,500 families living in Temporary Accommodation (TA). As Jo Dearlove noted in the previous MCW review many LAs are forced to re-house great distances away from the family's local support networks.

Permitted developments, usually former office blocks or large industrial factory units can now be sold and converted from commercial to residential units and not subject to the same space standards imposed via the usual planning regulations. These are going up all over London and increasingly being described as 'rabbit huts', often used for TA or even long term LA lets. In every one of the 32 London boroughs affordability is the biggest challenge.

The Mayor of London has a definition of 50% of market rents as affordable with 30% for social rents. Barnet Council has adopted 65% which means £110 per week more than social rent for a 2 bed-roomed property. I raise this injustice at every housing meeting as yet to no avail. The government has introduced Housing and Council Tax Benefit caps at 80%. In our council surgeries we have to deal with the consequences of the inability of families to pay. Council Tax arrears collections have been outsourced. Frequently families end up with County Court Judgments and the credit worthiness consequences that this brings.



From my perspective the fundamental problem is that the purchase of property is a good money earner for many people of our generation as the capital assets increase in value and delivers a revenue income at the same time. This in turn is exacerbated by the sale of council homes and the lack of replacements. Why would any progressive council want to build council homes if the new tenant can simply demand the right to buy?

Paul Edwards

An extract from David McLoughlin's address at the St Oscar Romero's Memorial Service



As with Isaiah in his time so in every age we need men and women who open up for us the prophetic imagination of a Moses at the burning bush, or Hosea and Amos in a time of national crisis, or of Jesus in his time. Always the

prophet speaks out in times of lament, of crisis, or accommodation, or forgetfulness when the original vision has grown dim and is now packaged into controllable parcels: When the access to the divine message has become re-interpreted, controlled by elites, spiritual, political or academic. The prophet is rarely obvious from their early life. But they are called to see anew, to keep the prophetic imagination of exodus and covenant alive. The years in exile allowed Isaiah and others to gather the traditions and memories of the people, to re-imagine what that new Promised Land was meant to be. They gather these memories into the texts we call the Pentateuch or the Hebrew bible. The time of brutal exile and loss had stripped away inessentials. There is the possibility of a return with renewed vision and a renewed purpose.

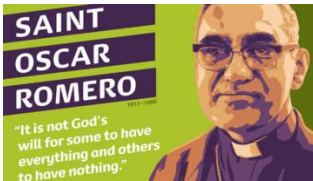
When Jesus started his ministry he faced a land where the rule of Rome underpinned and undermined the outwardly Hebraic traditions. But the Temple was compromised, the aristocracy was colluding with imperial authorities and the only reform movements were so pure that the people of the soil, the mass of peasant workers, could not follow their laws and dictates; e.g. the 300 plus priestly rules adopted by the radical Pharisees. There was a lot of law, orthodoxy, right thinking, but the prophetic imagination had been lost. Jesus' very first public teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth proclaims his renewal of that prophetic imagination in his time. Luke has this already heralded by his mother to be and her old cousin Elizabeth when their two voices rise in a harmony of the prophetic imagination of their people. *"My soul glorifies the Lord my spirit rejoices...he puts down the mighty from*

their thrones and raises up the lowly. The hungry he fills with good things the rich he sends empty away...." Mary's Magnificat, which Oscar Romero prayed every day of his priestly life, renews the prophetic vision of her people and her son will flesh it out.

Oscar Romero is an unlikely prophet. His virtuous, cautious, studious formation in the seminary and university in Rome, with its in-depth study of a deductive theology, starting from abstract principles but with an inevitable and inexorable inner logic, lacked all passion or relevance. He and thousands of young seminarians learnt all the answers to questions no-one was asking. Alongside this he imbibed a spirituality that was either the discipline and effort of mental prayer focused on heaven or else a gently affective and emotive focus on the lives of the saints and the motherly care of Mary, mother of Jesus, mother of the Church and of course Mother of the priest. Lacking was the powerful prophetic Mary of the Magnificat, prophesying the bringing down of the powerful and the raising up of the destitute and powerless – a true daughter of Is-ra-el the people of the God. The strange free God capable of reversing things, capable of initiating the new. The true life of a faithful servant of the church was neatly summarised as the good or the virtuous way; always the moderate, the middle way, between extremes; enthusiasm of any sort is to be avoided. This was the vision commended to Oscar for him to conform to in his training. This was the underlying meaning of the original interpretation of his motto *Sentire cum Ecclesia*. To think rightly, always, as the Church thinks. Hardly the cry of a prophet!

The Neo-Scholastic theology of the Catholic Colleges and Universities of the time, which he learnt, was in the form of theses, question and answers. However the questions had no particular social, political, or economic context. In Rome students from all over the world learnt the same questions and the same answers.

Answers to questions that no-one in their own countries and communities and certainly none of the poor, the hungry, the destitute of the world were asking. But over the years of working with people in very particular circumstances Romero began to read the gospel from their questions and things began gradually to change. He began to see differently and feel differently. He had always worked with and for the poor, out of a deep and



profound charity, out of love for them. But as a young busy dutiful priest and then administrator Bishop he had not asked the

question: Why are the poor, poor?: What is it in society that allows a minority to hold such total power over the way things are, a monopoly over wealth and wealth production? He had never considered the structural sin in his world. Indeed initially he was afraid that such questions being asked were too political and too materialist. It would take time and new experience to see the incompatibility with the incarnate presence of God's Word and Spirit within the world.

It was his unexpected appointment as Archbishop, to the capital of San Salvador, which brought him up against the extremes of wealth and poverty in a new way. And now the other meaning of his motto *Sentire cum Ecclesia* - to feel with the Church - became more insistent. In the light of Vatican II's teaching on *the Church in the Modern World*, and the South American Bishops' deliberate emphasis on a preferential option for the poor, his sense of the Church itself changed. The emphasis shifted from the right thinking community under the rightful authority of the Magisterium to feeling and thinking alongside and with the pilgrim people of God: To be with them in their journey in history and in the midst of their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, in the context of political, social, and economic forces and structures that in some sense could be called sinful.

The scriptures and his preaching ministry opened up anew. Now he learnt from the

prophets, the Mary of the *Magnificat* and the Jesus of the parables of the bias of this strange liberating God: The bias towards the oppressed, the frail, the nobodies, the widow, the stranger, the orphan, and the powerless ones. Jesus' re-working of this prophetic imagination flamed out from the pages of the Gospels anew. If the God of Exodus, the God of Jesus, was to be experienced in transcendent freedom alongside the oppressed, then where should a bishop stand but alongside them. If all are created male and female in the image and likeness of God then to wound, oppress and destroy one of the least of these little ones is to commit the greatest offence against that free creative liberating God: A far greater sin than the sins against any doctrinal orthodoxy.

Romero in the last three amazing years of his life in an increasingly focused way lived out what Pope Francis now preaches. Romero was the shepherd who smelt of his sheep and lived and prayed and felt with the church rather than an ecclesiastical bureaucrat engaged in keeping a false peace, maintaining a blasphemous status quo. Romero leaves aside the simple certainties of the theology he learnt in Rome and faces what he called "the events of the week". The realities before us, that no theology can anticipate or provide neat answers for; the scriptures, Jesus' parables of God's living presence, the Kingdom.

Theology was now not so much right thinking, the right answers to those right questions, rather theology was shared, engaged, inspired right action emerging from the reality of the people's lives. For Romero this came to be, to live in the style of Jesus. His life continues to provoke us to re-imagine this in new contexts. Like Pope Francis after him he was called a Marxist and much worse. But then his Lord was called a glutton and a drunkard! In following through the prophetic imagination, that now inspired him; he began to see the mass of his own people as radically one with the crucified Christ.

The Image of Oscar Romero is taken from the CAFOD website www.cafod.org.uk

Learning lessons from the Classroom



An apple for the teacher is a phrase that many of our older readers might remember. It may have its origins around the 1700s when poor families in Denmark and Sweden gave teachers baskets of apples (or potatoes) as their payment. Until the 1800s poor American children, who were taught by apprentices or church funded schools, also exchanged produce like apples for their children's lessons. This tradition of giving food to the teachers as payment was replaced by the introduction of mandatory education along with wages for those who took on the teaching roles. It would seem that these days 'the tables', or should we say, the desks, 'have turned'! Now it appears that it is the teachers who are providing an apple, at the very least, to many a pupil arriving at school hungry. It appears that an increasing number of children are going to school in need of food.

The Trussell Trust recorded a record number of emergency food parcels given out over 2018, many to families with children. The conclusion could therefore be drawn that many children are living in poverty.

1.6m

Number of food parcels given out by the Trussell Trust in 2018 – a rise of 19% on the previous year

Reported in the Guardian 23/04/19

73%

Overall increase in the trust's emergency food supplies over the past five years

With the continuing consequences of austerity policies affecting councils and social services Head teachers are speaking out about their schools having to fill the gaps. The list of provision is extensive including breakfasts, food banks, clothes and sanitary products. Some teachers also refer to washing uniforms and providing clothes or shoes. Before the National Education Union's (NEU) annual conference (15th to 18th April 2019) it was posted on their website that

education professionals were reporting "a significant increase in the visibility of child poverty"... "In-work poverty, housing issues such as high rents, homelessness and insecurity as well as fears about how matters would deteriorate with Universal Credit" were cited as common factors.

60%

The proportion of the 900 teachers surveyed said child poverty in schools had worsened since 2015

Reported in the Guardian 21/05/19

Two recent reports have highlighted the growth of poverty in the UK; Kartik Raj's Human Rights Watch on the standard of living (20/05/19) and the UN rapporteur Philip Alston's final report on poverty (22/05/19).

In the media the Government rejected the findings of these report stating that they were biased and misleading as they were not representative of the whole country and that their policy of helping people into work reduces poverty. However, focusing on the experience of teachers and hearing about their encounters with the children that they are trying to teach brings to the fore the seriousness of child poverty.

In actual fact there does seem to be some acknowledgment by the government of the teachers' experience, as well as other agencies and charities in their recent reports, which have all voiced similar concerns. It has been reported that the Department of Work and Pensions is to include relevant questions into their annual Family Resources Survey so as to measure how often low-income families across the UK skip meals or go hungry because of the inability to provide enough food to feed the family. As with many government surveys the downside is the time it takes to collect and then put the data together. The survey findings are not likely to be available until 2021.

In recent months it has been identified that schools are shortening the school breaks.

This was said to be in order to give more time for teaching the curriculum. This suggests that not only do the children or young adults miss out on break times but that the teachers too have less breaks. A survey by The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) of secondary teachers and school leavers in 48 countries, which was recently noted in the media, found that those in the teaching profession in England had one of the highest workloads. This is resulting in teachers resigning in the early part of their careers. The education secretary Damian Hinds agreed that there was frustration amongst teachers and that was why he had introduced a strategy of recruitment and retention being of the utmost importance. What is not necessarily agreed by the government are Infant and Junior schools, like senior schools, highlighting the lack of finance available to them.

The impact of less funding is not being able to replace staff or preventing more staff having to leave to stay within their budgets. As always nothing happens in isolation so there are knock-on effects in relation to the amount of support which can be given to those pupils with the greatest need. In addition teachers are now being given training to identify mental ill-health amongst their pupils. So as their work load and the expectations of their responsibilities increase their work load grows.

The backdrop to this scenario is that there is less and less of a network support outside of the school gates as austerity measures being imposed leads to cuts in public spending which local councils have to implement again to meet their budgets. The report by the head teacher's union suggested that schools had become "an unofficial fourth emergency service". Another service which could be viewed in the same light is the food banks, described in a letter to the Guardian, as a life-saving service (28/03/19).

An interesting debate on the letter page of the Guardian ensued between 25th and 28th March 2019. Although voices were

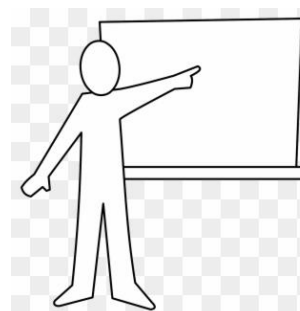
apparently at odds with each other paradoxically it seemed that they were striving for the same goals and purpose. One of the issues addressed, amongst others, was that food banks were no solution to poverty. Something akin to the old adage of sticking plasters on wooden legs was used by a group of academics.

The volunteers working at food banks defended their actions in the face of no other longer term solution being available. One letter in defence noted how the Trussell Trust campaigns for a fairer social security system and highlights the reasons for users having to go to food banks, one in particular being low income. The academics emphasise the rights of people to "living wages, income security and a fit-for-purpose welfare system ..."

On the Radio 4 Today Programme Torsten Bell, Director of the Resolution Foundation, speaking about low pay, inequality and poverty noted that the current social security system supported older people who are no longer earning but is choosing to reduce the support given to those out of work or with children. As this MCW review is being written the headlines identify that the two-child benefit limit means that some children are being pushed deeper into poverty and that the 'gig' economy is still booming with its consequential risk of precarious work and low wages. This once more gives weight to the MCW's long standing view that many workers are simply earning their own poverty.

The continual growth of food banks has not made an impact on the austerity policies.

Will the lessons from the classrooms



make any difference? Surely the challenge cannot just be left to volunteers in food banks, academics writing in letter pages or teachers in schools, is it not

also our challenge to make a difference?



Do women pay the price for shopping on line?

There is much concern and consternation about high street shop closures. Currently, Sir Philip Green is trying to put a package together to save his Arcadia retail empire. Part of his proposal is to ask landlords to cut their rents. Whatever the outcome of this proposed package it appears that some shop closures are inevitable. They join a long list of well known stores to have cut their number of shops across the country. Also many a household name has completely disappeared from the high street. Some traders are bucking the trend but there does appear to be a pattern of closures or 'restructuring' or considering 'their portfolio' which in essence means shops shutting down and workers losing their jobs.

The received wisdom is that not enough shoppers are going into stores to buy but rather going on-line to get their purchase. "The retail trade – excluding vehicle sales – is the largest private sector employer in the UK, accounting for 3.2m jobs, and women outnumber men by more than 500,000." This quote (Guardian April 27th 2019) highlights why shop closures have a disproportionate impact on women's employment. Women have been the ones to shoulder the burden of recent job losses in the retail sector. The same article quotes John Philpott, an employment economist, saying that the women retail workers who are made redundant can find new jobs in a relatively short time. However, "... often without the same conditions or stability" in warehouse work or the care industry.

Shopping on-line is attractive to many because, for example, the convenience of 24/7 access, being able to compare prices and avoiding crowds, queues and parking. With little time available in our busy lives the attractiveness of on-line shopping is hard to resist. Our changing shopping habits have consequences for our high

streets and local shops and for the workers, particular women, in those shops. Thus we need to be aware of the effects and understand the impact that our decisions on buying products are having on others and indeed, possibly, ourselves!

All this is ironically within a current environment of an increasing number of over-70s still in work. The Office for National Statistics shows that there has been an increase of 135% since 2009 in full or part-time work. Evidence shows that there can be health and social benefits with working longer rather than retiring. For women, those still in work aged 70+, has more than doubled in a decade.

For both men and women staying in work is linked to topping up their pension savings. Conversely, whilst this may be the choice for some Catherine Seymour, head of policy at Independent Age, notes that for others it is out of necessity. She attributes it to "nearly 2 million of pension age are now living in poverty, and every day another 225 people join that number" (Guardian 27th May 2019). Some people just cannot afford to retire! These longer working years, again for women, are within a context of those born in the 1950s having their retirement age increased from 60 to 65. The result is that nearly 4 million women now have to wait for their pension, perhaps as long as an extra 6 years. A test case is now being brought against the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) for unlawful discrimination on the grounds of age and sex by BackTo60 Campaign.

Perhaps the above might also be food for thought in trying to divide the generations of young and old with regard to who are the poorest and introducing knee-jerk policies. Instead our energies might be better served when we support policies that prevent all ages being kept out of poverty.

For more information on

Women Against State Pension Inequality see www.waspi.co.uk



BackTo60 campaign see www.backto60.com

Human Rights Watch world report 2019 see www.hrw.org

Report on visit to UK by Special Rapporteur www.ohchr.org

Date for your diary

**MCW National Conference including AGM
Saturday 16th November 2019**

Between 12 noon and 4.00 p.m.
In

**The Mercy Hub, St Mary's Cathedral,
Clayton Street West,
Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 5HH**
(The Cathedral is just opposite Newcastle Railway Station)

**“The Forgotten Workers”
Low paid workers in multiple employment**

Speaker
Dr Andrew Smith, University of Bradford

**For catering purposes please let Jo O'Brien know if you can attend by
emailing: mcworkers@aol.com**

The views expressed by contributors of the MCW Review do not necessarily represent the views of the MCW

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