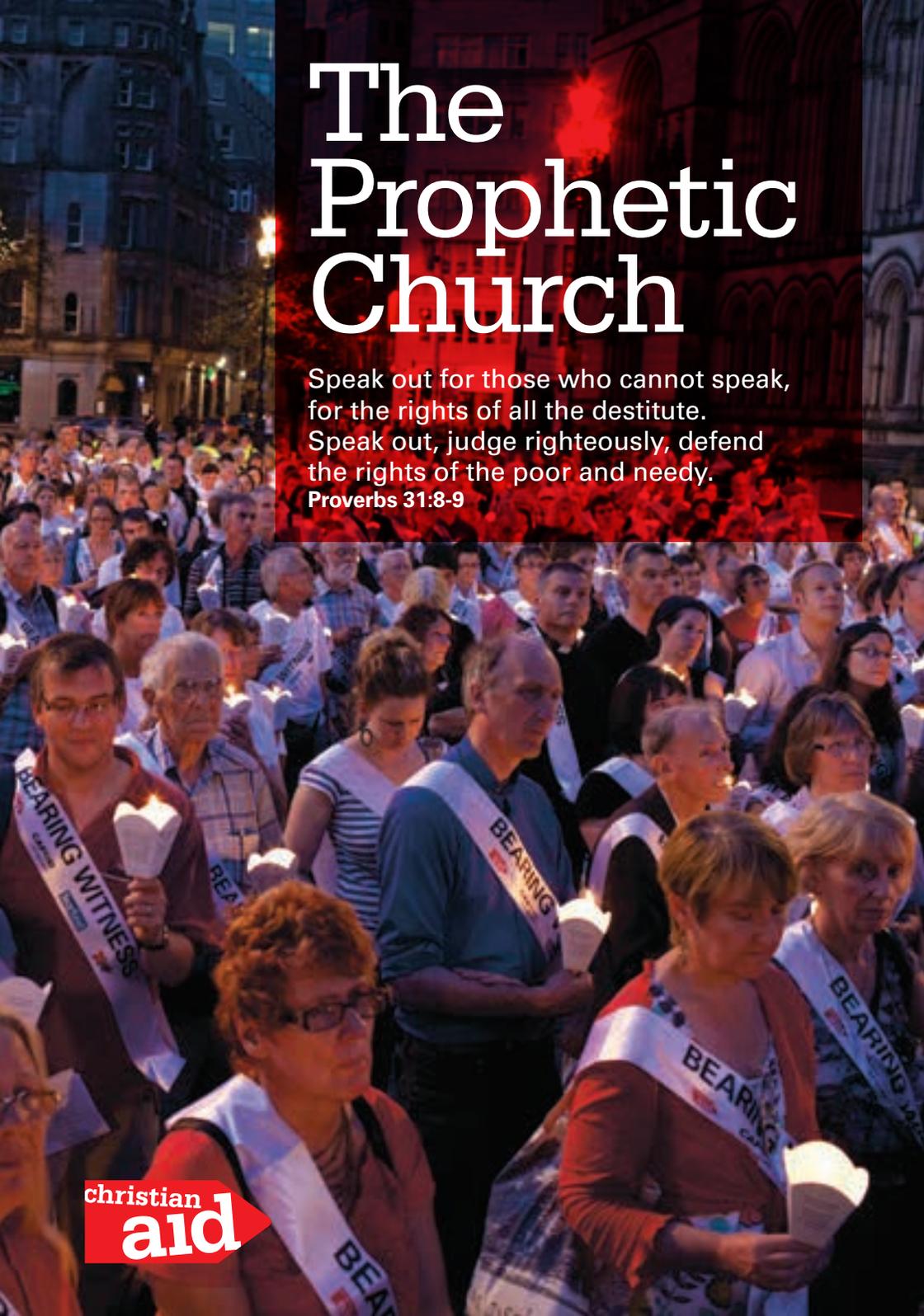


# The Prophetic Church

Speak out for those who cannot speak,  
for the rights of all the destitute.  
Speak out, judge righteously, defend  
the rights of the poor and needy.  
Proverbs 31:8-9



christian  
aid

Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

**Jeremiah 9:24**

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Front cover photograph: On the eve of the Conservative party conference in 2011, Christian Aid, CAFOD and Tearfund led an inspiring day of campaigning and worship on the issues of climate change and global poverty.

**Photo: Christian Aid/Matt Gonzalez-Noda**

### **Acknowledgement**

We are extremely grateful to Rev Nigel Tween, Dr Marijke Hoek, Rev Simon Jones, Sarah Croft and Alasdair Roxburgh for generously giving their written contributions to this publication. Their passions for both a prophetic church and a just world have made this booklet possible.

## Foreword

There is no denying that in the formative years of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements we spent little time developing a biblical foundation for social justice. This omission was partly the result of a narrow eschatology and an evangelistic approach that was not unduly concerned with ‘a world that would fade away’.

I am grateful to Christian Aid for helping me think more deeply about the complex issues relating to poverty and international development. A visit to Uganda with a Christian Aid team made a lasting impression on me as I was confronted by the need of the poor for justice rather than charity. This realisation challenged both my theological thinking and my engagement with a broken world.

Many of us have an appreciation of the theology of social justice, but not a theology of advocacy and campaigning, particularly in terms of tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice. The biblical prophets repeatedly affirmed God’s hatred of oppression and his anger at the abuse of power and its resultant impact on the poor and marginalised. We too, cannot remain silent or indifferent.

*The Prophetic Church* is a significant contribution to the growing body of work that provides a biblical basis for active engagement with those in positions of power and authority. It deserves to be widely read. I hope it will inform and motivate a new generation who will not simply say the Lord’s Prayer, but will rise up to campaign, lobby, pray and work together for ‘his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven’.

‘The world can and must be changed so that poverty is ended: this is our core belief. Everything we do is about ending poverty and injustice: swiftly, effectively, and sustainably.’ – Christian Aid’s purpose statement

What a prophetic vision! Not just a good idea – a God idea.

**Rev Nigel C Tween**

Principal, Regents Theological College,  
and Director of Training, Elim Pentecostal  
Church

**For I the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing.  
Isaiah 61:8**



Young people responded to issues of poverty and inequality at a Poverty Over Youth Event in Durham Cathedral.

Photo: Christian Aid/Charles Martin

## A Biblical Theology for a Campaigning Church

The psalmists wax lyrical about God's character. He is compassionate, kind, loyal, attentive, righteous, holy, faithful, good... They eloquently elaborate on all they know and experience. It fuels their praise, wonder and love for him. God is also just. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and defends the fatherless, widow and refugee. Prominently, his concern for the poor is woven through many psalms and marks the message of the prophets. It is clear from the texts that the poor are totally dependent on him (for example, Isaiah 11:4; Jeremiah 20:13; Psalm 70:5; 146:7-9).

The prophets did not speak in a vacuum. The powerful have made unjust laws and oppressive decrees that deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed. They make widows their prey and rob the fatherless. The picture they paint shows that poverty is not merely an economic issue, but also a social reality, integrally linked with a sense of powerlessness. We see this reflected in the concept of 'the poor', which encompasses a wide variety of conditions. The meaning of the Hebrew words that describe the poor include those who are hungry, begging, physically



Former Christian Aid staff member Jean Harrison served as an ecumenical accompanier in the West Bank, providing a protective presence for school children, monitoring human rights, and campaigning.  
Photo: Christian Aid/Charlotte Marshall

and spiritually low, wrongfully impoverished, oppressed, homeless or humiliated.

Besides natural disasters, there's a matrix of manmade causes for poverty. The court system favours the powerful, loans carry excessive interest, wages are unjustly low, the powerful grab land from small farmers, people flee their homeland, and more. So the effects of wrongful behaviour of the powerful, such as oppression and dispossession, are implicit in the term poor in the Bible. The humble classes are disproportional victims of injustice, resulting in gross inequality and desolation.

God's justice is reflected in legislation that shields the

vulnerable. There are gleaning rights at the time of harvest; lending principles; the Sabbath observance specifically includes servants; excessive interest is banned; unpayable debts will be cancelled; there will be a regular redistribution of wealth. And these principles mutate with time. In the eighth century, changes in society had a direct effect on the increase in poverty – the development from an agrarian to a commercial society affected those who did not have property (land). Whereas the Exodus and Levitical principles deal with an agrarian society, the legislation is contextualised for the developing urban situation when the gap between rich and poor increases. Throughout time, the principles and legislation shows God's concern for equal and renewed opportunities. Each family would have resources to produce its own livelihood (Deuteronomy 15:1-8; 23:19ff; Leviticus 19:9-13; Leviticus 25; Exodus 22:25-27; Jeremiah 22:13).

Jubilee is one such radical divine policy. Having distributed the land equally, the people are called every 50 years to Jubilee: cancellation of debts, returning to their homelands, and even the land itself is given a deserving rest. It is

a brilliant piece of legislation that lifts the poor, gives everyone a new start, re-integrates the dislocated in the community and allows the land itself time to recoup. It gives each family a stake in society again and thus creates new futures (Leviticus 25). It is a vital measure to create economic, social and environmental justice. Jesus later cites the proclamation of this year of the Lord's favour in his manifesto (Luke 4:18-19). In our time, the Jubilee principle torched the successful Jubilee 2000 campaign, an international coalition movement in over 40 countries that called for the cancellation of debts in the developing world, the positive effects of which still reverberate in many nations and communities today.

However, legislation is one thing; upholding it is quite another. The prophets need to exercise a clear advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable and hold the rulers to account. They 'speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy' (Proverbs 31:8-9, NIV). In fact, all believers are to learn to do right; seek justice; defend the oppressed; take up the cause of

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the fatherless; and plead the case of the widow. It is what worship is made of (Isaiah 1:17).

The prophets have to address a form of religion that is unconcerned about the vulnerable members of society. While there are plenty of religious meetings, underneath there is a profound apathy towards the poor, whereas the worship God has in mind has a clear effect on the poor. Besides offering housing, food, clothing, release from oppression, justice and shelter, his people are to *spend themselves* on behalf of the vulnerable. Using the Hebrew word for soul, Isaiah addresses the core; God is after a lifestyle for righteousness' sake. He wants his people to live sacrificially for the sake of others in order to satisfy the needs of the oppressed (Isaiah 58:10; Amos 5:21-24).

Both the legislative measures and the prophetic messages reveal the heart of God who is concerned with the alleviation of material poverty as well as the deep spiritual needs. Poverty is a concern of the wider community. The Lord requires people to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with him (Micah 6:8). The regulations laid down in the word

of God concerning the poor carry a great cost for the rich as well as a great blessing as a result. They will be called restorers; they will lay foundations; they will make the community liveable again (Isaiah 58:12, The Message).

In most ancient cultures, the power of the gods would have been channelled through the elites, whereas Israel's God takes a stand with the orphans, widows, and aliens. The term that describes justice (*mishpat*) appears 200 times in the Old Testament. 'The justice of society is how we treat the vulnerable,' wrote Tim Keller in *Generous Justice*.<sup>1</sup> Closely linked to *mishpat* is another term that describes divine character: *tsedaqah* (righteousness). It is an implicit relational term, a life of right relationships, as Chris Wright put it concisely in *The Mission of God*. This dynamic Hebrew twin theme – righteousness and justice – is at the heart of ethical teaching. Wright suggests the nearest English expression would be social justice. It implies that there are things to *do*.<sup>2</sup>

In the Bible, we see amazing examples of God's people tenaciously standing up for just causes, vigorously defending

human dignity, sacrificially fending off threats to the vulnerable, and leading them into a better inheritance. 'Biblical justice' would be an apt description. Let's look at two of these – Moses and Esther.

### **Moses**

'I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out... and I am concerned about their suffering' (Exodus 3:7, NIV).

God had heard Israel's groaning and cries in slavery. He had also heard Moses consistently stating his case of deliverance for his people. The subsequent release from Egypt is of fundamental significance to Old Testament theology. The Exodus theme becomes the paradigm of deliverance, reflected in language that permeates the prophets, the psalms and the narratives. The account, which is told time and again to the next generation, reminds the Israelites of the kind of god they are praying to – the faithful one.

Our advocacy is first of all directed to God. It is also directed to those in authority. There is a time to mourn, to groan. There is also a time to speak. There is a season for every activity under heaven, as Ecclesiastes so poignantly

formulates (3:1-8). And God heard from heaven. His glorious and powerful arm helped Moses (Isaiah 63:11-14). In his book *God the Spirit*, theologian Michael Welker eloquently described how the descent of God's Spirit results in the joining together of people who find themselves in distress, and thus, 'a process of emergence sets in... that constitutes a new beginning, new relations, a new reality'. The people experience the restoration of an internal order, a new sense of community and capacity for action.<sup>3</sup>

In 2011, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to three women for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building. In response, one of the three laureates, the Liberian Leymah Gbowee said: 'This is the recognition that we hear you, we see you, we acknowledge you.' Gbowee, who had lived with her four children in a refugee camp, gathered women weekly to pray as a crucial part of the peace movement. Her audacious, unrelenting work and the extraordinary peacemaking campaign of the Liberian women is documented in the film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*.<sup>4,5</sup> Gbowee's sequence 'being heard, seen, and acknowledged' echoes dynamics

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of the Exodus narrative: 'I have seen the misery of my people, heard them crying out...and I am concerned about their suffering'. God continues to bring relief and deliverance.

The apostle Paul echoes the Exodus account in his portrayal of salvation when he contrasts slavery and fear with being led by the Spirit and the character of the new life of freedom. Having been led out, God's children now experience his adoptive parenthood – they belong to his family, share in Christ's vocation and have access to its heritage. As co-heirs with him, they are to attentively listen to the cries of the world and act as part of the worldwide search for redemption (Romans 8:14-23).

The world is filled with cries. While we listen to the lamentations around us, we also listen to God, as we prophetically discern how our personal and communal lives are shaped in response. This way, we develop our calling in relation to a suffering world, trusting that he will creatively link the groans in the world to the gifts in the church. Attentively taking notice of heaven and earth, we discern our vocation. 'Vocation,' wrote the peace-builder John Paul Lederach, 'is that which

stirs inside, calling out to be heard, calling out to be followed. Vocation is not what I do. It finds its roots in who I am and a sense of purpose I have on earth.'<sup>6</sup> We all have this prophetic calling.

### Esther

In the account of Esther, it is Mordecai who is the attentive listener. And it is he who makes Esther aware of her prophetic role in God's redemptive purpose. The depiction of Mordecai sitting at the king's gate indicates his position of closeness to the king. Mordecai is an image of the Spirit. The interplay between him and Esther is a beautiful picture of inspired advocacy for God's purpose. Every day Mordecai walks back and forth near the courtyard to find out how Esther is doing and what is happening to her. In turn, she follows his instructions.

When the vigilant Mordecai becomes aware of the threat to a nation, he makes Esther understand the need for timely intervention, her responsibility and strategic position to exercise such crucial advocacy. And so, Queen Esther prayerfully prepares and presents herself before the king, fully aware of the potential cost to her own life as she aims to avert

the critical threat to the Jewish people. In this case, advocacy takes place in a small, relational forum.

In both stories, there's a clear sense of being called, or rather, being sent. 'So, now go...' marks the start of Moses' tenacious advocacy for the enslaved people.

Mordecai's words 'For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise from another place... And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?' thrust Esther into her passionate plea for the endangered people. Like the prophets, Moses and Esther speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, advocating for the rights of all who are destitute, defending the rights of the poor and needy. The biblical characters and teachings inspire us to be his prophetic church in our time.

### **Prophetic advocacy is integral to knowing God**

The Psalmist's prayer for the king reminds us of key characteristics of just rulers:

'Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.

May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.

May the mountains bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness.

May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor' (Psalm 72:1-4, NIV).

However, history is filled with unjust rulers and the subsequent suffering they cause. The prophet Amos reflects on the gross inequalities in society, the heavy taxation of the poor as well as the unjust judicial system. Considering that Israel's court sessions were held at the city gate, Amos clearly lays out the structural injustice: 'They hate the one who reproves in the gate... I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who... take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate... Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate' (Amos 5:10-15).

Advocating for just governance is not optional. It is actually *integral to knowing God*, as the prophet Jeremiah reminds us. The good king Josiah is succeeded by his

Advocating for just governance is not optional. It is actually integral to knowing God, as the prophet Jeremiah reminds us.

son Jehoiakim whose reign is wicked and oppressive: 'Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labour.' Not only is Jeremiah sent by God to announce a severe punishment, he also contrasts the evil son with the righteous father, who had 'defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. "Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the Lord' (Jeremiah 22:1-16, NIV).

Earlier Jeremiah had so eloquently stipulated the understanding of knowing God: 'Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the Lord' (Jeremiah 9:23-24, NIV).

The best of such divine kindness, justice and righteousness is found in Jesus' life. With him, the Messianic age has begun, and this involves a clear restructuring of relations. There is hope that justice

will come to the nations, as Isaiah foretold:

'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight;

I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations...

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.' (Isaiah 42:1-4, NIV)

### Good news to the poor

Mary's beautiful song clearly shows she knows God. In her Magnificat, she glorifies the Lord who has been mindful of her humble state and has done great things for her. Not only does she experientially know God this way, she also knows that he scatters the proud. 'He brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty' (Luke 1:52-53, NIV).

Luke extensively reflects on Jesus' ministry and the life of the early church in relation to the plight of the excluded, poor, women



Christian Aid partners delivered food to those affected by the conflict in Mali.

Photo: Christian Aid/Tom Pilston

and children – more than any of the other Gospels. In Jesus' first public reading, he announces the thrust of his ministry: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19, NIV).

This reading at the start of Jesus' public ministry is a concise manifesto, the thread of which extends from Isaiah's ministry to his work. In several texts, Isaiah portrays the power and authority of the Spirit-bearer who establishes justice, mercy and the knowledge of God – three core elements of God's law (Isaiah 11:1-10; 42:1-8; 61:1-11).

Poverty was a significant economic aspect of first century life. It affected and shaped the church's life and formed an important context for its stewardship. Food shortages were a common problem for all urban populations. Paul's reference to hunger concerns a standard feature of poverty. In combination with the term nakedness, it paints a vivid picture of intense deprivation (Romans 8:35; 2 Corinthians 11:27).

The word *ptochos* is most widely used in the New Testament to describe the poor. It denotes the same wide range of meanings as implied in the Old Testament words. The cultural background may help to understand this wider meaning of poverty. The Roman Empire was particularly concerned with maintaining power, developing trade and collecting taxes. There was a clear distinction between the prevailing social, religious and political order on the one hand, and the poor on the other. This meant the poor would have a life without honour or full participation in the communal life.

Furthermore, discrimination against non-citizens was rife, while citizens were favoured. This was a permanent feature of the judicial

Jesus proclaims good news that concerns both the spiritual and socio-economic dimension.

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system. The parable of the widow and the unjust judge portrays a court system that neither fears God, nor aims for justice or cares about vulnerable citizens (Luke 18).

Sympathy for the poor was unknown in Roman society. However, those who were not accepted within the prevailing social, religious and political order were a focal point of Jesus' ministry. Throughout his teaching, the practical aspects that relate to the Sabbath and Jubilee principles are addressed, including the cancellation of debts, sharing of material possessions and becoming an inclusive community (Luke 7:41-42; 12:33).

Jesus proclaims good news that concerns *both* the spiritual and socio-economic dimension. When John queries whether Jesus is the Messiah he had been waiting for, Jesus' response indicates that preaching good news to the poor is an integral part of the Messianic Kingdom. His teaching regarding the poor clarifies that the good news is meant to have both practical implications for this life, in terms of provision and inclusion in the community, and provide an eschatological hope for those who look to God for their release

or defence (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23).

Even Jesus' acts of healing are not displays of raw power, but compassionate acts for those who were excluded from society (leprosy); those who suffered oppression from judgemental attitudes (the idea that sickness is related to sin, for example); or those who were refused help due to legal rules (such as healing on the Sabbath). His compassion defines the power; it was the source, the means and the end.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus' didactic words that accompany the healings are central to the narrative and crucial in understanding the full implication of the healing beyond the physical to the social, moral, religious and political impact of the healing miracles. For Jesus the Messiah both heals and restores the outcast to the human community. These are not merely acts of mercy, but central to his authoritative interpretation and application of the Mosaic Law. He fulfils the Law and states his case on behalf of the afflicted; the true Sabbath rest finds its expression in doing good; the healings renew communal life and confront its harshness; healing restores a healthy economic life.

God's restorative reign renews all facets (Matthew 8:1-4; 12:9-14). As NT Wright puts it: 'Jesus' healing miracles must be seen clearly as bestowing the gift of shalom, wholeness, to those who lacked it, bringing out not only physical health, but renewed membership in the people of YHWH.'<sup>8</sup>

Following in his footsteps, 'the people of the Way' (as the early Christians were called) pray for the sick, redistribute possessions and teach biblical values in dealing with the poor and rich within their own community. In the New Testament, we see regularly allusions to, or direct quotations of, Old Testament texts. This is logical, since all the Mosaic Laws of social justice are grounded in God's character. He is building a community of justice. It is no surprise then that we see the term wealth frequently used in paradox with its counterpart poverty. In society at the time, the rich would have had the ability to take something from someone poor or expect preferential treatment. James warns the rich harshly because they had hoarded wealth and refused to pay their workers. The church is not merely doing works of mercy, but is also addressing structural social ills (Luke 16:19-31; James 2:2-4;

2:14-19; 5:2-6; Acts 2:45; Galatians 2:10; Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 11:17-22).

So we also need to address the social ills in our contemporary global village. In his multifaceted life as theologian, politician, prime minister, journalist and founder of the Free University in Amsterdam, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) expressed: 'When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling, and peace has become sin; you must, at the price of dearest peace, lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy, with all the fire of your faith.'

The report *Who Pays the Price? Hunger: The Hidden Cost of Tax Injustice* highlights the costs of corporate tax dodging as it robs poor countries of billions they could invest in feeding their people.<sup>9</sup> Food provision is intrinsically linked to justice issues.

The Enough Food For Everyone IF campaign gave a clear message to governments while simultaneously supporting local community activists such as Halima Ali, a smallholder farmer in Tanzania, who lost the capability to feed her family when a UK biofuels

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Great grace was upon them all, for there was not a needy person among them.

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company purchased her land without fair compensation or provision of social services.<sup>10</sup> These are two examples of a prophetic church – fuelled by ‘all the fire of our faith’.

### **The Spirit’s liberating and restorative presence**

The imperative of Christian social ethics is derived directly from God’s reign in which the Spirit-filled community already participates, establishing righteousness, justice, and mercy. With the outpouring of the Spirit, believers receive ‘a new heart’ and ‘a new spirit’, giving a new sensitivity to the various interdependent relationships. They no longer have a heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Jeremiah 31:33).

*Shalom* assumes just, peaceful, harmonious and enjoyable relationships with each other, ourselves, our environment and with God. ‘Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meaning. Sin is the root cause of disturbed relationships. Hence, there is also a poverty in the non-poor,’ wrote Bryant Myers in *Walking with the*

*Poor*. So while we need to regulate behaviour and call rulers to account, we also need to monitor our own heart.

Earlier, we saw Isaiah addressing apathy in the people of God in relation to the poor (Isaiah 58). The word apathy (derived from the Greek *a + pathos*) literally means without suffering. On the other hand, sympathy means to suffer with (*sym + pathos*). Paul describes the sound functioning of the body of Christ in terms of the ability for sympathy: ‘If one part suffers, every part suffers with it’ (1 Corinthians 12:26, NIV).

As the early church demonstrates, sympathy is an active lifestyle in which prayer and provision go hand-in-hand. Great grace was upon them all. They shared with those in need (Acts 4:32-35). Rather than placing a full stop between verses 33-34, the Greek word *gar* indicates a causal relationship between the two sentences: ‘Great grace was upon them all, for there was not a needy person among them’. The formation of the community of Christ-followers who live according to new values proves to be a powerful display of the Spirit’s liberating and restorative presence.<sup>11</sup>

Empathy contributes to social transformation as it fuels our actions. The Christian community suffers with the rest of the world in the groaning of this age, such as war, famine, oppression, terror, illness, natural catastrophes, and anguish. We are not exempt from pain. And beyond that, we also ache over the world's aching. Job sighs: 'Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor?' (30:25, NIV). The followers of Christ agonise when they see injustice, starvation, indignity, slavery, exclusion, illness, tears and death. Their prayerful and compassionate response invites God's kingdom to come.<sup>12</sup> Those who ache for justice are blessed. Read the Beatitudes. They participate in God's heartfelt restoration plan (Matthew 5:3-10).

We saw earlier that Isaiah reflects on the character of the Spirit in relation to justice. Jesus' mission statement links the Spirit anointing with good news for the poor. As far as the Spirit's leading is concerned, Paul uses the phrase 'walk after the Spirit' (Romans 8:4, King James Version). This metaphor of daily conduct is characteristically Jewish, as is the concern that the Law must penetrate to the level of the heart. Having ourselves been

led out of slavery into freedom, our discipleship is shaped by his reign of grace (Romans 5:20). He forms the basis for our hope. Walking according to the Spirit determines our engagement with, and our advocacy on behalf of, the poor.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, put it well in his reflection on Romans 8. 'Freedom for a fuller humanity; fuller humanity is Christ-shaped; Christ-shaped means self-emptying and self-emptying means being filled with energy of gift and being fully alive. So this freedom becomes a passion, not for gratification or comfort or security, it becomes a passion for God and for God's world. If the Spirit has become desire in me, the Spirit has also become desire, hunger for God's justice, God's righteousness. Our Lord speaks of a hunger and thirst for righteousness.'<sup>13</sup>

That humanity brought alive by the Holy Spirit, Williams continued, is: 'a humanity that does not break down into powerful and powerless, rich and poor; it is a humanity in which everybody's poverty and need is affirmed and recognized; everybody's need of one another is recognised... that humanity comes to birth in the daily renewal of our

## The Spirit leads us as co-workers in God's creative plan to transform all things.

prayer as we say "Abba Father", as we live in hope, yearning hope, longing hope, for the transfiguration of all things.'

The Spirit leads us as co-workers in God's creative plan to transform all things. In our vocation, we are being shaped into the image of Jesus, the firstborn (Romans 8:29). This expresses itself in the way we lovingly give ourselves, seek the wellbeing of the wider society, and speak up on behalf of the most vulnerable. In a world of human trafficking, exploitative loan schemes, extreme poverty due to caste distinctions, destitute asylum seekers, corruption, tax avoidance, and more, there is a dire need for (com)passionate advocates for biblical justice – rooted in the word, inspired by the Spirit and modelled on Christ. 'Opposing social injustice and going against the dominant consciousness of our society is not simply 'politically correct' (or incorrect) nor just "trendy"; but a matter of obeying the Spirit.'<sup>14</sup>

### Ground tone of hope

God's promises provide a base for our hope. The messages of the prophets include an eschatological hope for a future day of justice. There will be a new heaven and earth in which there will be no

more weeping (Isaiah 65:17-19). This future hope is an important lens to guide the people of God and offer ultimate hope for the poor. 'He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide... Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree and no one will make them afraid' (Micah 4:3-4, NIV).

Hope in Christ's return and the future fulfilment of the reign of God gave the early church, empowered by the Spirit, a powerful impulse to preach the gospel, express its social concern, heal the sick, share in giving to the needy and overcome religious prejudices, harshness and exclusions by forming an inclusive community of men, women, slave, free, rich, poor, Jew, Gentile, alien and family.

Our hope sets the ground tone for all we say and do. The prophets of old were social commentators in their time. Their advocacy was not merely characterised by what they were against, but by what they were *for*. Clear and compelling alternatives in every sphere of life can be formulated on the basis of God's word. In our time, we need godly advocates in healthcare, education, banking, economy,

judiciary, and more. People who know God's word and see how it intersects with God's world. People who can critique the structural injustices and how it affects the most vulnerable, and who come with constructive alternatives that would renew the core.

In *Economics of Good and Evil*, the Czech author Tomas Sedlacek traces the roots of economics in the Old and New Testaments and drills down further into the spirit, law and soul of economics. He reminds us that in the course of history, biblical values, principles and concepts have meaningfully shaped economics, which, in turn, always had an ethical content. The Hebrew teaching on love for God's Law that contains building blocks for a Sabbath economy in which land, animals and people thrive and the weak are provided for, and the principles further expounded by Jesus and the early church are both vital components for a moral and healthy economy. The huge historic influence of Hebrew and Christian thought on the shape of economics that strengthens the social fabric can adapt and sharpen our focus now.

The church's investment in a pursuit of economics with a soul, which has

its home in faith and virtue and is concerned with the wellbeing God intends for the world, is critical for us all and particularly crucial for the most vulnerable. It requires a radical continuity between biblical teaching, Christian lifestyle and Spirit-inspired influence in shaping a more just and wiser world. We need clear and compelling alternatives expressed in focused campaigns and eloquent advocacy. While we anticipate the new creation, we thus reflect signposts that point to this eventual future. We can commend this Christian message to the wider world, appealing to its conscience, inspiring its response and providing the dynamics for change. Good news indeed.

'All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do,' wrote the apostle Paul (Galatians 2:10, NIV). His eagerness was clearly expressed in his teaching. It also explains the importance of the collection for the poor in his dealings with the church (1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 9:5-9).

Paul's perspective on the Church's vocation is placed in the light of the future hope. New creation has begun in the presence of the Spirit.

The theological point to be made here is that our practical service of the poor now, and our ongoing service and worship of God in the age to come are both from the same stable: a heart responding fully to God.

The promised glorious new day shapes our present life (Romans 8:23; 13:11-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31). So, the hope of the promised new creation forms the context of our 'remembering the poor'. Let's briefly explore the context of the nature of the life to come.

Isaiah's new creation imagery speaks of an *absence* of suffering (Isaiah 65:17-19). No wonder, as there will be such a prominent *presence* of God. 'Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth"... Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"' (Revelation 21:1-5, NIV).

When Jesus says to the disciples: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,' the Greek verb is placed in a tense that refers to an ongoing state of being, resulting from some past action (John 20:21). So God is continuing his work through us in our union with Christ and empowered by

the Spirit. Jesus characterises our worship and service of the King in taking care of the poor (Matthew 25; Revelation 22:3; 7:15).

'The theological point to be made here is that our practical service of the poor now, and our ongoing service and worship of God in the age to come are both from the same stable: a heart responding fully to God,' wrote Justin Thacker in *Micah's Challenge*.<sup>15</sup> 'Given this, the challenge before us is that we join with the angels in heaven and participate in heavenly worship not so much by singing songs, but by feeding the hungry and poor, speaking out on their behalf, challenging injustice, and critically monitoring our lifestyle. In a strange paradox, then, heaven on earth is experienced most where we least expect it: amongst those in need, for is that not where we would find Jesus?'

### Dr Marijke Hoek

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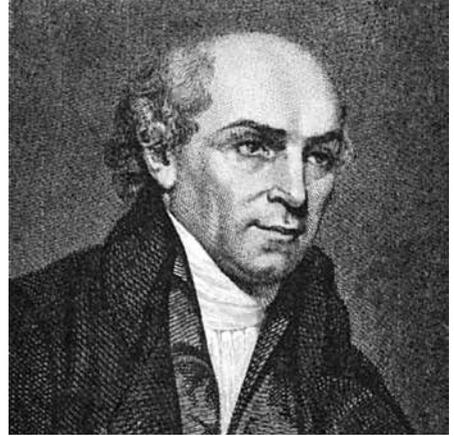
In India, a tribal chief holds up title deeds at a gathering celebrating victory in his community's struggle to win rights to land.  
Christian Aid/Sarah Filbey

## William Carey: A Community Builder Who Campaigned for a Better World for All

We know William Carey as the cobbler who founded a missionary movement.<sup>16</sup> He was a barely educated artisan who became caught up in God's vision of changing the world by taking the gospel to millions of people beyond the UK who had not heard about Jesus.

In his snappily titled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, the founding document of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), Carey outlined his case for teams of people motivated by the call of God to put their talents at their master's disposal and so become the means by which people will hear the good news. And the document contains hints of just how revolutionary Carey's approach was.

For a start, he proposed that it is our responsibility to do something to get the mission of God done. In the strongly Calvinist milieu in which Carey moved, this bordered on heresy. His elders and betters reminded him that it was God's job, and God's alone, to get the mission done; he called to faith whoever he had chosen to be saved. For Carey to suggest that



we had an 'obligation to use means for the conversion of the heathens' was revolutionary indeed. And those who eventually became his partners in founding the BMS in 1792 took some persuading that he was right.

The document also extolls the virtues of self-financing mission teams living and working together. These teams would grow their own food, set up businesses that could generate all the income they needed and, most significantly, they would be a model of Christian community for the local people. In short, at the core of Carey's approach was a commitment to building an inclusive community that was a witness to the kingdom that God was establishing

through Jesus. This is still a pretty revolutionary idea.

We see this played out in the way he organised life among his team and the way he conducted his mission in India. He arrived in the country alone and found a job managing an indigo plantation, which enabled him to learn the language quickly and observe the way the local culture worked at close hand. Once further missionaries arrived they decided to set up base in Serampore, a town in the small Danish enclave north of Kolkata. Carey and his colleagues quickly established a community that became known as the Serampore brotherhood. At the heart of this community were Carey, Joshua Marshman and John Ward. Others came and went, but this core trio modelled a life of pooling their resources, worshipping together and making decisions in the most inclusive way they could. Once Indian converts came along, they too were invited into the brotherhood with a full role in the life of the community.

This strong base underpinned all that Carey and his team would achieve during his 40-year sojourn in India (he never came home on

furlough). It was not, of course, all plain sailing. There were fierce disputes within the team, and between the team and the BMS head office in England; indeed, relations between Serampore and London were severely strained for a number of years. But it was the platform on which Carey built a movement that transformed the surrounding culture.

### **Speaking the language of the streets**

Carey argued that the first task of those arriving in a new country was to learn the language. For how else, he argued in *An Enquiry*, could the natives be included in God's purpose if the missionaries were not able to communicate it clearly to them?

In 1800 – just a couple of years after their arrival – the Serampore trio resolved to pool their resources so that they could fund trade, schools, and translating and printing books. These generated funds for employing more mission workers to spread the gospel among the population through translation, education and preaching.

For Carey, the key to getting the gospel known and owned was to translate the Bible into local

Carey is held by the experts to have been the founder of prose literature in Bengali, a beautiful and flexible form of speech.

languages. He made a rough and ready translation of the New Testament into Bengali which was revised over time into something more polished. In order to grasp the language, Carey wrote a Bengali grammar and produced a dictionary, and later wrote Sanskrit and Marathi grammars.

But Carey's approach was even more radical and drew fire from supporters in England. He believed that if people were to be persuaded by the claims of Christ, they needed to see for themselves the contrasts between the two religions. He set about translating some of the great works of Hindu culture from Sanskrit into Bengali so that ordinary people could hear and read them in a language they understood. He established schools to teach the local people to read and write.

At the same time, his colleague Ward produced a massive tome on the manners and customs of the Hindus which pointed out the beauties – but also the weaknesses – of Hindu philosophy.

The mission historian Stephen Neill pointed out: 'Carey is held by the experts to have been the founder of prose literature in

Bengali, a beautiful and flexible form of speech.'

Indian social activist Vishal Mangalwadi said: 'Carey was committed to pluralism, to the idea that the state should not support one religion over another.' One would expect this from a Baptist, schooled in the English dissenting tradition! But he added that Carey 'believed that it was the responsibility of the individual to discover the revealed truth – in both the scientific and the historical spheres as well as in the theological sphere. For example, is it true that some people are born untouchables because of their karma, or is it a lie, perpetuated by a class of people in their own self-interest?'

Later in this chapter, we will explore the theological roots of this conviction on Carey's part. Carey strongly believed that education would bring enlightenment, which would inevitably lead to people seeing the truth of God's revelation in nature, science and in Christ, and thus lead them to convert to the Christian faith.

### **Campaigning zeal**

It is probably true to say that Carey did not see himself as a

campaigner or social reformer. He had gone to India to 'convert the heathen'. But while in England he had expressed sympathies for the American colonists in their struggle against the English crown, and he had refused to buy sugar from the West Indies because it was the product of a slave trade that he considered abhorrent.

Many of the early BMS missionaries were similarly dissenting in their social and political views as well as their religious convictions. In Sierra Leone, Jacob Grigg, one of two Bristol-trained missionaries, ruffled feathers by objecting to the imposition of taxes by the British authorities without elected representation among the payers of those taxes – something that would have resonated with the Boston rebels 20 years earlier. It was too much for the BMS committee in London – Grigg was expelled from the society and the Sierra Leone mission was closed down!

It is not surprising, therefore, that as Carey became immersed in Indian culture he saw a number of injustices that he could not remain silent about. His commitment to the gospel of Jesus and to the task of making him known meant that he had to speak and act against

aspects of Indian culture that flew in the face of his understanding of God's will for people. For this reason, Carey campaigned on a number of fronts to change Indian society and to transform its culture in the light of the gospel. It was not enough for him to turn Indians into churchgoers. He sought to make disciples, and that inevitably led to lives that challenged the status quo.

This did not endear him to the BMS committee at home. Andrew Fuller was nervous about another of the workers sent to India, John Fountain, who was believed to have 'too great an edge in politics'. Fountain was pro-republican and let everyone know. These were volatile sentiments at a time when the East India Company was dealing with dissent among its ranks of sepoys. The feeling was that the presence of missionaries was not calming the situation and the East India Company wanted to prohibit them. Although no ban eventuated, this is probably the reason that Carey's team located themselves beyond the reach of the British in Serampore.

Although Carey did not see campaigning for social change as the reason for his mission,

As Carey became immersed in Indian culture he saw a number of injustices that he could not remain silent about.

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campaign he did. And his approach is seen in some of the novel techniques he adopted – not the least of which was publishing newspapers in the tradition of radical pamphlets and news-sheets from the English Revolution onwards. He had no doubt seen how Tom Paine and others had used pamphlets to agitate for change and create movements with a common cause in the 1770s. He saw the same in William Wilberforce's early activities against the slave trade. Carey's dissenting tradition was born in the struggle for justice and freedom, so it is natural that it spilled over into his theology and his way of doing mission.

Carey was an innovative campaigner. He used every tool at his disposal to communicate his message to officials in the East India Company and British government who had the power to change the law in his geographical area of operation. But he also laid the groundwork for social change through his educational initiatives. And as we shall see, he was not an armchair activist, firing off letters to people in power from the safety of his fireside. Rather he put himself in harm's way to gather information about what

was happening so he could draw it to the attention of those with the power to legislate change.

Let's look at how this all worked out in the successful campaigns he waged. It is worth noting that he picked his battles carefully, sensing that there were some that he could not yet win.

Carey used the media to inform his constituency, both in India and in England, about the issues he was facing. He introduced print technology to India, and with it the whole idea of a newspaper. He launched *The Friend of India*, a weekly paper mainly given to publicising his team's activities, which was the perfect platform to raise issues of concern. This paper eventually morphed into *The Statesman*, today one of India's leading daily newspapers.

The paper circulated in England as well, and an article around 1802 highlighted the dreadful practice of *suttee*, the burning of widows on their husband's funeral pyres. It followed Carey's first-hand exposure to the practice, which he reported on at length in a letter to Fuller at the BMS in England. He spoke of a widow burning he had witnessed – and tried to



Single, divorced or widowed Indian women are still excluded from many areas of life; Christian Aid partner the Single Women's Association helps women support each other.

Photo: Christian Aid/Sarah Filbey

prevent – at Naoserei in 1799. He reported how the rite took place with the widow lying next to her dead husband before being pinned in place by bamboo poles, doused in ghee and set alight. He spoke of the crowd then bursting into loud song, which, in his view, was intended to drown out the cries of the woman being burned alive.

The experience left an indelible mark on Carey. He gathered more information on the practice, reporting on it in the newspaper. In 1802, the governor general of India, Lord Wellesley, asked Carey to undertake an official enquiry into the practice. Within a 30 mile radius of Kolkata, he found evidence of 438 widow burnings in one year. This probably meant that tens of

thousands of women were meeting this fate across the sub-continent. And it wasn't just burnings. Local weavers would bury a dead man's widow alive next to him.

Carey's use of his paper to tell these stories alerted his supporters in the UK to the practice. Among these was Wilberforce, who lobbied the British Parliament about the plight of Indian women, armed with the information Carey supplied him. While Lord Wellesley shared the missionaries' horror at *suttee*, he was replaced by men who did not think it the governor general's place to prevent an Indian cultural practice.

But Carey continued campaigning and praying, until finally in December 1829 – 30 years after he had first witnessed the practice – the governor general Lord Cavendish-Bentinck, after a year's careful study of the issue, outlawed the practice by statute. The law declaring *suttee* to be illegal and criminal became regulation 17 of the Bengal Code and was sent to Carey to translate into Bengali on 6 December. It was a day of rejoicing in Serampore that the long campaign had yielded fruit.

The campaign indicates a second way in which Carey worked: he

Carey picked his battles carefully. Child marriage was an issue that vexed the missionaries greatly.

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enlisted the support of the authorities when he thought that they could help achieve his purpose. While the British, especially the directors of the East India Company, were hostile to Carey's presence on their territory – part of the reason why he moved to Serampore – decency, combined with pressure from Whitehall, meant that they were prepared to support the missionaries in various campaigns.

Carey picked his battles carefully. Child marriage was an issue that vexed the missionaries greatly. Often children as young as three or four were married off by families fearful for their children's future or looking to advance the family's honour by making a good match. In a census in the late nineteenth century, it was reported that there were 10,000 widows under four years of age and 50,000 aged between five and ten in the Kolkata area alone. This was a huge problem.

And it was not one that could be solved by the stroke of a legislator's pen. Carey understood this and so he did not agitate for reform in this area. Rather, he focused on education, especially the education of girls, as a way of undermining the practice by giving families options other than marrying their

daughters at a very young age. However, the act outlawing child marriage in India was not passed until 1929, almost a century after Carey's death.

Carey recognised that some practices were so deeply ingrained in the culture that only wide and far-reaching changes in social attitudes would lead to their demise. So he campaigned and worked for female education. And he did this by asking an educated woman to lead and champion this work – Hannah Marshman, Joshua's wife.

In 1800, Hannah Marshman established two boarding schools to educate the children of missionaries and other Europeans. In the first year these made enough profit to allow her to establish a school to educate local children, especially girls. This led to the establishment of the Baptist Female School Society in 1819, which pioneered the provision of elementary education for girls across the whole region. Some 8,000 children were enrolled by the 1820s.

### **Confronting the darkness**

Another practice that caught Carey's eye early on was ritual



Christian Aid partners continue Carey's educational mission today. Deccan Development Society runs bookbinding and other vocational training programmes.

Photo: Christian Aid/Eleanor Bentall

infanticide. Every winter at the Sagar Mela, where the river Hooghly meets the sea, children were thrown into the waters to be devoured by crocodiles or drown. This was seen as a holy sacrifice to the gods – 'the fruit of their bodies for the sins of their souls', as Ruth Mangalwadi put it.

In 1794, Carey had come upon the remains of a child which had been eaten by white ants after being left out to die by its parents. Again, he went to the authorities to express his concerns and was asked to produce a report on how the widespread the practice was. Ritual infanticide was duly outlawed. But Carey knew that passing legislation was one thing, changing behaviour was another. So in 1804, he took a team to the Sagar Mela festival

to observe whether the law was being obeyed and to rescue any infants thrown into the water. He was also able to preach the gospel of the son sacrificed to save the world, and not a single child was sacrificed that year.

The story illustrates the fact that Carey and his associates backed up their campaigning zeal with a willingness to take responsibility for those who were the likely victims of the practices they campaigned to have outlawed. They stood ready to take any child to their orphanage and bring it up in the Christian way.

We also see this in his response to the problem of leprosy. Lepers, along with the elderly and infirm, were often encouraged to end their lives or helped to end them by being thrown into a river or set alight. Again, Carey raised the issue in his newspaper, and again his team facilitated a practical response. Hospitals nursed those who were sick, colonies and homes were established where the abandoned could live and, if able, work to support themselves.

### **Community life**

Early records show Carey and his colleagues met together

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The faith of the missionaries offered education to everyone, regardless of gender, caste or ability to pay.

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on Saturday evenings for ‘the adjusting of differences and the pledging ourselves to one another’; and on Thursday evening for the ‘experience meeting’, where missionaries and their converts met to give testimony of divine grace in their lives and communities.

Carey was a strong and single-minded individual, expecting great things of God while he attempted great things for God. But at the heart of all he did was the creation of a community where members would be strengthened by each other and observers would see the gospel of Jesus embodied. This spilled over into his treatment of Indians. The equality of relationship among the missionaries led to them treating all Indians of any caste equally. In particular, it was seen in the team’s desire to treat women well.

Carey had no truck with the caste system within the church, even though this hampered his missionary efforts at times. In this he differed from the Danish-Halle mission and from the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, which retained the caste system even in the Lord’s Supper. Carey insisted that any

convert break with the system before being baptised. He wrote: ‘Perhaps this is one of the greatest barriers to conversion with which the devil ever bound the children of men. This is my comfort, that God can break it.’ But that breach was not just a theological nicety, it was a visible reality.

In 1802, the daughter of Krishna Pal, a Sudra, married a Brahmin in a flagrant breach of caste. This wedding was a public demonstration that the church repudiated caste distinctions – and it was used by Carey to speak about the equality of all in the church of Christ.

Ward insisted that the missionaries would dig graves for deceased members of the mission and other Europeans, thus doing a job which was forbidden even for members of the lowest castes.

The faith of the missionaries offered education to everyone, regardless of gender, caste or ability to pay. Many Hindus read their own scriptures for the first time because of the educational efforts of Carey and his team. His printing house produced relatively inexpensive editions of Hindu books. Carey argued



Carey's campaign to make life better for Indian children continues today with welfare programmes.

Photo: Christian Aid/Sarah Filbey

that educated and literate people were more likely to appreciate the higher literary merits of the Christian scriptures and the finer arguments of the Christian faith if they were able to read the cases of both sides in their own language at their own pace. Indeed, because of his efforts, Bengali, previously considered fit only 'for demons and women', became the primary literary language in India. Carey

also published the first Sanskrit dictionary and wrote popular gospel ballads. Because not everyone could afford books, he set up libraries to lend all kinds of books to anyone who wanted them.

Indian Christian politician and activist Vishal Mangalwadi argued that all this amounted to a strategy of cultural transformation. 'Carey came and initiated a process of reform in India. He saw India not as a foreign country to be exploited, but as his heavenly Father's land to be loved and served, a society where truth, not ignorance, needed to rule. Carey's movement culminated in the birth of Indian nationalism and of India's subsequent independence. Carey believed that God's image was in people, not in idols; therefore it was oppressed humanity – not idols – that ought to be served.'

Carey modelled a passionate concern for people's lives in the here and now – hence his focus on issues such as education, building businesses, and protecting women from oppressive rituals – born of his love for God. For him, serving God meant seeking the best for all people, whatever their caste, religion, economic condition or educational attainment. And as

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He was convinced that God's providence would be at work in his campaigning, making life better for India's woman, children and lower caste people.

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people came to faith in Christ, so he built churches that modelled the equality of all believers and enabled people of all kinds to participate freely as equals. He built and preached inclusive community.

### **Theological foundations**

Carey's campaigning grew out of firm convictions and fervent faith. He was a practical missionary whose desire to attempt great things for God had carried him to India. But he was also a practitioner who worked from strong theological ideas. Two in particular stand out: Calvinism and a postmillennial eschatology. These could be said to be the components of what Mike Tindall has called Carey's 'theological optimism'.

His Calvinism gave him a bedrock belief in the sovereignty and providence of God. He spoke of it frequently in letters home. Two examples will suffice: 'Dear Brethren, I am, through the mercy of God, still in the land of the living, and have been led by divine providence through an amazing labyrinth of circumstances, till I am in a very unexpected manner settled in this place, and surrounded with

most pleasant circumstances and flattering prospects.' (A letter to the BMS soon after his arrival.)

'Mr Udney came to visit us, not knowing that I was ill, and brought a bottle of bark with him. This was a great providence, as I was growing worse every day.' (A letter to a friend reporting general news.)

We see this most amazingly in his response to a devastating fire that destroyed much of the Serampore complex in 1812. It consumed many precious manuscripts,<sup>10</sup> Bible translations, Carey's translation of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, and a host of other invaluable books and supplies. Yet in his report, he gave God thanks that in his providence, the missionaries had been saved from discouragement! He saw it as evidence that God was at work and that his kingdom would continue to advance whatever happened to them. So, he set about redoing the work that had been lost to the flames – and making it better!

This faith in God's providence underpinned everything Carey did. He believed that God revealed himself as much in science and farming techniques as in churches and sermons. He was confident

that by God's providence, if a Hindu read his holy writings in the new Bengali translation that Carey supplied and then read the Bible, the Hindu would recognise the veracity of the latter and begin the journey to faith in Jesus. He was convinced that God's providence would be at work in his campaigning, making life better for India's woman, children and lower caste people. But more than that, he believed that his campaigning would commend the good news of Jesus to those who saw and heard what he was doing; that they – be they UK supporters or Indian victims of the cultural practices against which he campaigned – would see in the campaign in the very words and deeds of Jesus himself.

Carey's postmillennial eschatology convinced him that because things



Carey believed that farming techniques were as much a part of God's work as sermons.

Photo: Eleanor Bentall/Christian Aid

would get better ahead of his master's return, working for social and cultural transformation was an essential part of the church's gospel calling.

As Brian Stanley put it: 'The goal of the Protestant missionary enterprise as understood by its founders was, then, an eschatological one: it was nothing less than the realisation of the biblical vision of a world transformed by being filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. The missionary movement was thus predicated on an ideology of religious replacement: Christianity was destined by sovereign divine purpose to supplant all other religious systems.'

Carey had no doubt that his Christian faith was superior to any other religious creed – not because it was *his* but because it was God's. This God, revealed in Jesus, was working to make all things new and he had begun this work on this side of the Parousia (the Second Coming). It was this that gave Carey the conviction to campaign against *suttee* and infanticide, educate girls, teach literacy and give ordinary people access to books, improve agricultural yields

His gospel was of the King who had come to redeem human beings and make all things new, a gospel that would lead to tangible social change in the here and now, as well as eternal life in a new creation in the hereafter.

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and establish reliable newspapers. Firm belief in God's providence and his coming kingdom meant that Carey was prepared to put himself in danger with both Indians and the British alike as he campaigned for changes in the culture and legal framework of the nation.

This enabled him to tirelessly work to make the lives of ordinary Indians better in the here and now. His gospel was not the good news of a lifeboat coming to rescue the drowning or a fire escape for those about to be engulfed in the flames. His gospel was of the King who had come to redeem human beings and make all things new, a gospel that would lead to tangible social change in the here and now, as well as eternal life in a new creation in the hereafter.

Because all these things would contribute to the moral and social transformation of India, precisely the things that were the hallmarks of the coming millennial kingdom of Jesus, Carey worked to see them happen. He would have agreed with Ichthus founder Roger Forster, who said: 'I'll have as much of the Kingdom now as I can get.' And Carey would have sung with gusto with the final verse of Graham Kendrick's great

postmillennial anthem *O Lord, the Clouds are Gathering*:

Yet, O Lord, your glorious cross  
shall tower  
Triumphant in this land,  
Evil confounding.  
Through the fire your suffering  
church display  
The glories of her Christ:  
Praises resounding!

### **Rev Simon Jones**

Minister of Bromley Baptist Church, lecturer at Spurgeon's College and author of seven books including *The World of the Early Church*, a social history



## The Prophetic Church Today

### Why now?

Central to Christianity is the idea that each person is created in the image of God, with inherent dignity and worth. The reality of today's world is that in the next 24 hours almost 1 billion people will go to bed hungry.<sup>17</sup> In the UK today, 1.6 million children are living in severe poverty and 2.39 million people are unemployed.<sup>18</sup> With such statistics it is hard to imagine a just world; it is all too easy to resign ourselves to the fact that things cannot be different. The reality of today is that we are far away from a world where God's children can be treated equally, with dignity and freedom from poverty.

However it is important to remember the **power** of speaking out and challenging the status quo. The problems facing us in modern society are big and complicated. However, faith gives hope that change can be achieved and history is a testament to this. In the book of Samuel, the shepherd David, dressed in a simple tunic and carrying only his staff and slingshot, is able to take on and beat the giant Goliath who is covered in armour. It was not the armies of Israelites that managed to defeat this giant, but a small



New farming methods introduced by Christian Aid partner the Methodist Church of Sierra Leone are helping people work together to grow more food and sell the surplus for the best possible price.  
Photo: Christian Aid/Heidi Bradner

boy from Bethlehem. As Shane Claiborne noted, David taking on Goliath is 'like a few campaneros in Latin America toppling a multinational corporation with a few fair trade coffee beans'.<sup>19</sup> It does not take huge volumes of people to interrupt unjust systems, but just one voice.

The enormity of the problems facing modern society should not stop people from questioning the world today. In the words of Margaret Mead, the American anthropologist: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'<sup>20</sup> Imagine today's world if William Wilberforce had never spoken out against slavery,

Desmond Tutu had not challenged apartheid or Martin Luther King had never expressed his dream for equal rights.

Thanks to individuals fighting for a more just world, huge progress has already been made in the fight against poverty. Since 1950, life expectancy in developing countries has risen on average by 20 years, child mortality has more than halved, and the number of children accessing primary education has now grown to just under 90 per cent globally.<sup>21</sup> Access to clean water has doubled and food production has grown 22 per cent faster than population.<sup>22</sup>

However the world still faces a massive challenge in tackling poverty. The financial crisis born in the West in 2007, rooted in the actions of an elite minority, has impacted and spiralled around the world, leaving no country untouched and the poorest hit hardest.

Huge bailouts for the banking system, massive cuts to government spending and soaring unemployment have crippled countries around the world.

The crisis we face is complex, with multiple causes and factors, but it

is clear who is being hurt the most – the poorest and most vulnerable. The people who did nothing to cause this crisis.

More than ever before ***the church must respond***, not only to support the crisis victims, but to help build a global economic system which is more equal, where power is fairly shared, where individuals are treated as humans and not consumers, and one where we work to transform the lives of the poorest.

The churches' reaction to the recent financial crisis has been strong. In the UK, the growing network of food banks has been driven by churches, night shelters are often supported by churches, and credit unions have been created in some areas to help support those struggling the most. Around the world churches have continued to give generously to charities such as Christian Aid to help those living in extreme poverty or affected by disasters.

Arthur Brooks, in his book *Who Really Cares*, asserted: 'People who pray every day (whether or not they go to church) are 30 percentage points more likely to give money to charity than people who never

Imagine today's world if William Wilberforce had never spoken out against slavery, Desmond Tutu had not challenged apartheid or Martin Luther King had never expressed his dream for equal rights.

pray (83 to 53 per cent). Simply belonging to a congregation – whether one attends regularly or not – makes a person 32 points more likely to give.<sup>23</sup>

This money is of vital importance, and does amazing work helping the victims of poverty. However, there is a danger of falling into a trap where poverty symptoms are alleviated, but the causes are not tackled. While the church meets the immediate needs with which it is faced, is it asking why it is having to do so?

In some quarters, something more fundamental is being asked. These questions are not new, but are vitally important. They are questions which the church must ask if it is to be truly prophetic. Why is our economy controlled by an elite minority? Why do the voices of a few hold all the power? Why do people live in poverty?

When people ask these questions, they start to challenge the fundamental causes of poverty and from there they can begin to tackle it and change it for the better.

As the Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated: *'We are not to simply*

*bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.'*<sup>24</sup>

### The mandate to act

The prophetic church has a **mandate** to speak out against the injustices in today's world, and strive towards a just world on behalf of the poor, oppressed and marginalised. The word justice alone appears 1,576 times in the Old and New Testaments in 1,379 separate verses.<sup>25</sup> In fact, there are more than 2,000 verses in the Bible that talk about the poor, wealth, poverty and social justice.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the Bible, God demonstrates a desire for a just world; it is one of the central threads holding it together.

Throughout the Gospel, there are accounts of how Jesus challenged the status quo and stood up for the broken and the voiceless. In Luke 4:18-19 (NIV), Jesus reads the following verses from Isaiah: 'The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

This is exactly what Jesus did. He spoke to and ate with those whom society overlooked and oppressed; he ate dinner with tax collectors; he cared for the poor, women, lepers and prostitutes. Jesus challenged the status quo by loving those who were excluded from society. He challenged the concept that satisfaction in life is gained through a higher status, more money and more power – but said that we should instead love our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus was brave and outspoken; he knew that doing this would lead to his own suffering and crucifixion.

One way of challenging the status quo in today's world is to **embody an alternative**, just as Jesus did by loving those excluded from society. Mahatma Gandhi's grandson Arun stated: 'We must be the change we wish to see in the world,' implying if we want a world free of injustice we first have to portray values such as equality, social justice and respect ourselves.<sup>27</sup>

However, alongside this, it is important that the prophetic church **speaks out** where injustices occur. In today's economy, the church needs to be active in challenging structures and systems that are perpetuating poverty. Desmond

Tutu emphasised the need to take action when he said: 'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.'<sup>28</sup> The prophetic church cannot be neutral where it sees injustice, but must ask questions and challenge the status quo.

This is something that can be seen repeatedly with the Old Testament prophets, who proclaimed the will of God and spoke out when the Israelites were straying from God's commandments. They were frustrated by what was happening and pointed to the fulfilment of God's kingdom on Earth.

In the book of Amos, the Israelites showed the outward signs that they were God's people by holding religious festivals, offerings and worship, but were unjust and exploited the poor (Amos, 5:10-17). Amos challenged the Israelites by declaring: 'I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river,

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The prophetic church cannot be neutral where it sees injustice, but must ask questions and challenge the status quo.

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righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (Amos 5:21-24, NIV.)

It is important to remember that the church today is not just a building where people go on a Sunday to sing hymns, but a prophetic body that should be challenging and speaking out to bring about God's kingdom on Earth.

NT Wright, a New Testament theologian, dispels a common misconception by arguing that the kingdom of God is not confined to heaven, but a model for the church today. His argument is that Christians are called to put our faith into action *in this world*. Wright stated: 'What Jesus said in John 18 is "my kingdom is not from the world". That's "*ek tou kosmoutoutou*". It's quite clear in the text that Jesus's kingdom doesn't start with this world. It isn't a worldly kingdom, but it is for this world. It's from somewhere else, but it's for this world'.<sup>29</sup> Jesus' kingdom is a just and fair kingdom, in direct contrast to the world in which we live, and that is the point Jesus is making.

William Wilberforce, who played a key part in the abolition of slavery at the end of the 18th and early

19th century, realised he should be striving for change in the here and now. Wilberforce was elected as MP for Kingston upon Hull when he was just 21. However, following his conversion to Christianity in the 1780s, he began to question whether he should remain as a politician. He sought advice from John Newton, who advised: 'God has raised you up for the good of the church and the good of the nation, maintain your friendship with Pitt, continue in Parliament, who knows that but for such a time as this God has brought you into public life and has a purpose for you.'<sup>30</sup>

Wilberforce decided to remain involved with politics, influenced by his faith to continue 'with increased diligence and conscientiousness'.<sup>31</sup> He realised that he was called to act in this world and wrote in his journal in 1788: 'My business is in the world; and I must mix in the assemblies of men, or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.'<sup>32</sup>

He went on to campaign for social reforms and the end of slavery, persevering where there was opposition. It took 18 years of introducing anti-slavery motions in



Campaigners challenging economic injustice rallied outside embassies in London.

Photo: Christian Aid/Matthew Gonzalez

Parliament, but the act abolishing the slave trade was finally passed in 1807 and the slavery abolition act was passed in 1833, just three days before Wilberforce's death. Wilberforce saw that it is important to act in the present for a more just world.<sup>33</sup>

To strive for God's kingdom and to challenge the current one is **innately political and radical** because it means to live differently and to advocate a different set of rules, to be 'countercultural'.

This does not necessarily mean being party political, but rather is

a call to be active in challenging areas of governance, economics or society where they result in injustice. As Jim Wallis stated: 'The kingdom is the vision, but concrete political priorities and policies bring us closer to it or farther away from it.'<sup>34</sup>

The challenge for the prophetic church is whether it is radical enough, whether it is being outspoken enough in bringing about transformation. NT Wright put this well when he challenged: 'The church has for so long forgotten that it's normal to be out of step, has for so long supposed that as long as it was getting people ready for a distant destination called "heaven" it really shouldn't be worrying about what went on on earth, that we have forgotten the real message of Acts, the real message of the Ascension, which is that of course the church, in the power of the Spirit, will be called to bear witness to Jesus Christ precisely at the pressure points, the places where society and governments are drifting away from the good order which God wills for his world and for all his human creatures.'<sup>35</sup>

It is important to reflect on whether or not the church is putting enough pressure on governments

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To strive for God's kingdom and to challenge the current one is innately political and radical

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and society to move towards God's desire for a just world. It is essential to ask if the church in Britain has become too adjusted to living in a world in which there is still inequality. Has the church become too comfortable operating within this economy, helping the victims, rather than challenging the heart of the systems and structures which built it?

Alongside speaking out against injustice, the prophetic church can offer an **alternative vision** for the world: the kingdom of God. Speaking out for this alternative vision can have **transformative power**.

Martin Luther King stated that when 'sufferings mounted I soon realised that there were two ways in which I could respond to my situation – either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course.'<sup>36</sup> He achieved transformation by speaking out for an alternative world and famously shared his vision for what the world could be in his powerful 'I have a dream' speech, proclaiming: 'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not

be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.' This speech is one of the most powerful in modern history, giving a vision of an alternative that hundreds of thousands of people then campaigned on with relentless energy to turn into a reality.

The prophetic church needs to share its alternative vision of God's kingdom and not forget the transformational power sharing it may have. Sharing this vision of a world where everyone loves their neighbour is powerful one, where poverty can be ended.

**What the prophetic church can do**  
Churches of all shapes and sizes across Britain are already involved in challenging the status quo, providing a vision of a more just society, meeting the need they see on their doorstep and around the world. But what role does the prophetic church play in our contemporary world? It must continue to meet the immediate needs of the communities in which it works and those it supports around the world, but it must also challenge the policies which lead to oppression and injustice on Earth, to campaign to make these changes a reality and, perhaps crucially,



Christians should raise their voices, speak up and challenge injustice.

Photo: Christian Aid/Julian Camilleri

challenge the values people hold which have created a broken world. Challenging the policies created by governments, companies and individuals is a crucial part of the church's role in changing our world.

John Howard Yoder suggested that Christians should not just seek a utopian kingdom, but should **challenge specific injustices** in this particular time: 'The Christian speaks not of how to describe, and then to seek to create, the ideal society, but of how the state can best fulfil

its responsibilities in a fallen world. The Christian witness will therefore always express itself in terms of specific criticisms, addressed to given injustices in a particular time and place, and specific suggestions for improvements to remedy the identified abuse. This does not mean if the criticisms were heard and the suggestions put into practice, the Christians would be satisfied; rather, a new and more demanding set of criticism and suggestions would follow.'<sup>37</sup>

Churches can do this by raising their voices, working collectively, sharing common values of love and justice and campaign to challenge the policies which lock people in poverty. Churches can (and do) carry out this work in many ways – through prayer, by writing to local politicians, signing petitions, forming community groups, protesting, contributing to debates, and much, much more. Whatever the approach taken, the prophetic church has determination, maintaining its voice even when progress is slow. It must have patience and remember that change takes time, but that 'we shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice'.<sup>38</sup>

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In our contemporary society the church is perhaps uniquely placed to not only campaign and change policies, but to challenge the values underpinning those unjust policies and attitudes.

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In our contemporary society the church is perhaps uniquely placed to not only campaign and change policies, but to **challenge the values** underpinning those unjust policies and attitudes. There needs to be a move away from the notion that everything should be determined by individuals acting as consumers and a move to recognising people as people, as ourselves, as citizens who should play an active role in our communities.

Desmond Tutu is an advocate of the concept of ubuntu, which moves away from Descartes' idea of 'I think, therefore I am'. Instead, ubuntu is a notion of togetherness and that one person's humanity is caught up with another's: 'We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons."<sup>39</sup> Instead of being defined by individual notions such as 'I like cycling' or 'I like reading', a person is defined by 'I am because you are'. If the world is looked at through this frame, the current economic and social structures seem unjust because self-assurance 'is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who

they are'.<sup>40</sup> The church, based on values of collective justice and community, is perhaps best placed to make this case, and in doing so might not only challenge people's minds but also their hearts.

It is also important to recognise the church as a global body, not just campaigning in the UK but around the world. In *Seven Ways to Change the World*, Jim Wallis argued that the church is a body that has experience in operating as a global community for over 2,000 years. Globalisation has happened rapidly, economic growth being the driver of decisions rather than values of justice and equality. In such a context, the global church 'could offer critical prophetic leadership to help establish values and rules of globalisation that would protect the vulnerable populations on the planet'.<sup>41</sup>

Global cooperation is urgently needed for one of the biggest threats that humanity is currently facing – climate change. It is an issue of justice where the world's poorest people are already being affected the first and worst, yet have done least to create the crisis. As stewards of God's Earth, this is something that Christians cannot ignore. Referring to climate change, Rowan Williams

stated: 'Our present ecological crisis, the biggest single practical threat to our human existence in the middle to long term, has, religious people would say, a great deal to do with our failure to think of the world as existing in relation to the mystery of God, not just as a huge warehouse of stuff to be used for our convenience.'<sup>42</sup>

There is an urgent need to advocate climate justice and persist in the face of scepticism. The church must stick with the issue even when it is unpopular because it is the right and just thing to do. It must remember campaigners, like William Wilberforce, who had patience, determination and hope that change can be achieved.

### **The prophetic church in the 21st century**

There are a number of recent examples of the prophetic church challenging and changing our world. Hundreds of churches across the country took part in the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign, which called for the cancellation of debt from developing countries. The idea of the biblical Jubilee underpinned the campaign, and this biblical base helped the churches grasp the campaign's aim and brought thousands onto the streets, most

notably in Birmingham in 1998. The movement brought together people from a vast range of churches, cutting across denominations. In seeing the issue, the church felt a mandate to respond; it shared an alternative vision of countries free from debt, it spoke out, challenged politicians, was relentless and ultimately helped ensure the cancellation of more than \$100 billion of debt from 35 developing countries.<sup>43</sup>

Following this, the Make Poverty History campaign in 2005 brought together hundreds of organisations in the fight to end poverty. It continued the focus on debt cancellation, but also campaigned to increase aid and to make trade fair. As part of the campaign, the trade justice movement held the largest ever mass lobby of parliament, with 375 MPs lobbied in a single day. The campaign culminated with a march in Edinburgh where 225,000 people gathered in Edinburgh ahead of the G8 summit. On 13 January 2006, 600 female clergy, along with Dawn French, delivered a Make Poverty History card to Tony Blair.

In 2013, the Enough Food for Everyone IF campaign also saw mass mobilisation ahead of a G8

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The prophetic church in the 21st century keeps challenging, keeps questioning, and strives to change the world.

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summit, this time in Enniskillen. More than 200 organisations joined forces to campaign on the issues of aid, tax, land and transparency. Thousands of people took part in sending messages to the UK Government and participating in stunts, and tens of thousands mobilised for Big IF rallies in London and Northern Ireland. Again the prophetic church played a key role in this campaign. Motivated by their faith, thousands of UK churches got involved by hosting launch events, displaying banners outside their church, taking actions and attending the rallies in London and Belfast. The ecumenical service held on the day of the Big IF rally in London was full to capacity and people started to spontaneously hold services on the green outside the hall.

The church is already in action, but its prophetic voice can grow even stronger. With this, a just world will move even closer.

### Conclusion

The prophetic church in the 21st century keeps challenging, keeps questioning, and strives to change the world.

It reacts with urgency in situations where there is injustice. It is

countercultural in embodying an alternative. It challenges specific policies and values. It is motivated by the vision and hope for the kingdom of God on Earth. It acts as a global body in solidarity with the poor. It is brave outspoken and revolutionary.

The prophetic church says: 'It ain't over until God says it's done'.<sup>44</sup>

*'It is from the numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.'*<sup>45</sup>

Robert F Kennedy

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# Join with us to campaign for justice for the world's poor

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- download further copies of *The Prophetic Church*
- download a summary of *The Prophetic Church* which includes help for small groups wishing to use this resource
- sign up to receive regular campaigns updates and actions
- become a local lobbyist and take our campaigns to the heart of government
- find out what activities are happening in your area
- Access background information and further resources on our campaigning, including our work on tax justice and climate justice.

Together we can hold governments and institutions to account and tackle the causes of poverty head on.

The Christian Aid Campaigns team can be contacted via email at [campaigns@christian-aid.org](mailto:campaigns@christian-aid.org) or phone 020 7523 2264.

In December 2009, 30,000 people marched in London to support a just and workable agreement at the United Nations Climate Change conference.

Christian Aid/Rachel Stevens

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'In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
he will not falter or be discouraged till he  
establishes justice on earth. In his law the  
islands will put their hope.'  
**Isaiah 42:4**

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