

# Act on Poverty

## Transcript from Act on Poverty session three: Generous

### Kerry Scarlett is Vice President of the Methodist Conference in 2023/2024

Hi, I'm Kerry Scarlett. I'm an ordained Methodist deacon and I'm currently serving as the Vice President of the British Methodist Conference. That's an elected role, [and I'm] elected into that role for one year and it's mainly relational and representative in nature.

I think growing up in Northern Ireland, and particularly growing up in the 70s and 80s, has really shaped my understanding of what it means to act for transformation, justice and peace in the world. What I noticed growing up was the ways that we tried to shape and enable resilience in one another. The subtle ways in which we tried to call out what we knew was unjust and wrong, even when we felt powerless, and that was often in really small ways. So, I remember when all around the narrative that we were hearing was one of deep, deep division, of them and us, I remember older relatives trying to counter that with their stories of lived experience of neighbours who were Catholic or Protestant, depending on who the relative or friend was, who had helped them out, who had been generous towards them. You would hear people in rural communities saying, well you know my neighbour used to do the milking for me when it was a special day within my tradition and vice versa. My colleague was always really kind to me. I remember my mum saying that a colleague had lit a candle for her in her Catholic church when mum was going through a difficult time and how meaningful that was. All of these little, tiny stories that never quite made the news and never managed to break that overriding narrative of sectarianism but nevertheless existed.

Now, when so much of-what we are hearing from some sections of the media, from some people who have particular views, this idea of them and us, it's because of them that there aren't enough jobs, it's because of them that this service is struggling, it's [about] building those relationships and finding those real stories to counter that. [Those real stories, they] certainly have more power on [the] local level, and I think as Christians we're ~~called~~ absolutely called to be part of that.

For me, generosity was never about being in the kind of circles of people who were able to make grand gestures with their money. Like lots of folk my life hasn't been straightforward. I've had times when, you know, financially things are okay, and I've had times when financially things are really tough. And my husband Steve's given me permission to share some of his story, which is that when I met him just over 10 years ago, he had a debt repayment plan. He had ended up in debt like so many people through no fault of his own, because of multiple redundancies, because of having to take leave to care for a family member, because of unexpected expenses with a car that he needed to get to work because there was no other route, [because of] having to lend a family member money. And then ending up in that situation where everything felt unbelievably overwhelming. And [then he experienced] that gift of then realising that debt management plans existed, and that there was a way out, that there was the possibility of hope.

I think within lots of our churches there is still an expectation that most of us are, and I've heard people say this, we're all middle class here. None of us will have known what these people, and that kind of gesture to a

community group that are meeting, are going through. And I think on one hand I get that. I think there is a need to be honest and name that, but I think we have to be really careful that we are not naming that for other people and then in doing so closing down their stories, because I have heard that said in rooms where I know that I and other people have had lived experience of some of the things that folk are mentioning, and it is then quite difficult to then say, 'well actually', [because] you don't want to have your experience doubted, questioned, you maybe don't feel ready to share that yet. I mean Steve and I had to talk quite a bit about how much of his story he was really happy for me to share, and actually we feel it's really important to talk about that, and the more that Steve has shared his story, especially with colleagues that he works [with] in the factory that he works in, we've discovered that lots of folk are dealing with that kind of hidden debt. They are keeping it quiet; they're struggling through on their own and don't have a sense of a way out. That narrative of everyone's doing okay and you know we have a job and a car, and a house, is quite difficult to then be honest when things are tough.

Being a part of Street Banquet is both joy and challenge, because there's absolute reality there at Street Banquet. This isn't about who we are and what we've got, it's about our shared experience, so actually how's your day been? We'll quite quickly go quite deep. You might choose to have a conversation about the meal itself, the kind of food that you're enjoying eating, other meals that you have enjoyed and that again can open up all kinds of shared experiences from a really simple question. So, there's a real need to think carefully about who we are, what it is that we bring, our own privilege and expectations.

Thinking about generosity I've been reminded of one of the definitions of mission that's included in a World Council of Churches report called Together Towards Life. I often come back to that because I find it really rich, and it talks about mission as starting from the love which binds the Trinity together and then overflows to all humanity. I just love that reminder of that abundant, overflowing, generous love of God. And I think it's that same abundance of spirit that we're called towards as Christians, and that can be really difficult when we are feeling under pressure, when the narrative all around us is one of scarcity, when we ourselves are feeling caught up in scarcity, when we're worried about what lies ahead. For me one of the ways that we again stand in resistance against that narrative of scarcity overtaking our lives and diminishing us as people, diminishing our community, is to think about the little ways in which we can give and we can be generous. The ways in which we say actually we're going to stand in solidarity with other people who are experiencing poverty, who are struggling and even more so than we are. And I've seen that in communities that I've worked amongst, where I can identify a group of people who I think are really struggling, well when you know them, [and] they'll tell you about the folk they know who they think are struggling even more and what it is they're trying to do to help. That I think is the kind of shade of generosity that we are called towards as Christians.

For me we are called as followers of Jesus to recognise that God's intention is for all of God's creation, wherever and whoever we are across the world, to flourish. That we are inextricably interlinked as people created by and loved by God, and therefore we are all siblings to one another.