

Act on Poverty

Transcript from Act on Poverty Week 5: Hopeful Jess Hall, Campaigns and Organising Officer, Christian Aid, UK

I'm Jess Hall. I work in the UK activism and campaigns team at Christian Aid, and I've spent the last 12 years working alongside churches to campaign for global justice, as well as being involved in community organising with my local church in East London.

My journey into this work started way back in childhood. As a child, I was given a book about Florence Nightingale by my church and I was inspired by and sold on compassion. And years later, working for Christian Aid, I visited former partners in Brazil and encountered campaigning and advocacy that was lifting millions of people out of poverty and I was sold on people-power and seeking justice. [So] changes to the fundamental ways the world works and changing the systems and structures that keep people locked in poverty.

And I suppose the challenge is that there are still many systems and structures that perpetuate poverty. We see them all the time in the climate crisis. We see them in unjust debt burdens. But I also have hope that we can overcome. I've seen people-power reckon with injustice at scale in Brazil, in India, in the UK, in many countries around the world where ordinary people work together to build power and demand change from those sitting in seats of power. And I've seen them win change. So when it comes to the challenges of poverty today, us as Christians and churches in the UK need to take our place in those movements and seek change and speak out prophetically for justice.

One of the ways I've been part of that was through organising and taking part in the No Faith in Fossil Fuels Lent Vigil for climate justice, which was a collaboration of Christian Aid, Tearfund, Cafod, Christian Climate Action and others, and we held a vigil outside Parliament for 10 days, night and day, rain or shine - and there was quite a lot of rain! And it was an incredible 240 hours of prayer and protest, with people coming from across the UK to hold vigil. Some came just for an hour, some came for a day or more, people were praying, worshipping and meeting their MPs to talk to them about why we were there. And together we were praying, and demanding from the UK Government bold climate action. And we were also lamenting, we were lamenting the climate crisis and the injustice that's being experienced by people in poverty around the world who have done the least to cause the problem. And I find that in that lament, there is also huge hope in collective action that we take with others. And what I found particularly encouraging from that time was that when we step out in faith others join in. I met people at the vigil who'd never taken climate action before, but seeing other Christians stepping out and speaking up encouraged them to join in and raise their own voices in prayer and to the UK government as we stood outside Parliament.

I'm a bit of a natural pessimist, so my view of the world lands somewhere between seeing all of the problems, and all of the possible future problems, and a deep belief that there must be something better, that there's a promise and a vision of people being able to live life in all its fullness and of the Kingdom come. And that's not just for the hereafter of eternity, but it's for the here and now, God's Kingdom come on earth. And I suppose that's a natural place for me to sit as a campaigner - seeing

the mixed bag of the world as it is, and prophetically looking at the world as it should, and could be where people are living equal and where everyone has enough.

And there's a verse in Hebrews 11 that I'm reminded of which is: 'faith is what we hope for and certainty of what we do not see'. And this sums up campaigning for me. We campaign because we believe not only it is right to change what is wrong, but we also believe that change is possible. We act in faith and hope holding on with certainty to what we don't see right now. Because we believe we can see a world where everyone lives life in all its fullness.

I think it's quite easy, especially right now when there are so many issues pressing in on us to feel powerless. And I hear that from people in churches and I've experienced that myself. But one of the biggest ways that we give away our power to make change happen is to give in to the belief that we have no power. So my encouragement is always that all of us have power. We use it all day long as we make choices and decisions. Individually, we have power to do things, but where there's even greater power is when we choose to do things with others, when we act together, and the church is a brilliant community in which to act together.

When we look at any of the successful social movements in the past who've achieved amazing change, positive change - the civil rights movement in America, votes for women in the UK, land rights for landless people in India and Brazil, to the end of apartheid in South Africa - no one in those movements thought that they were in a successful movement. Until they were. And that's why the work of seeking justice is often called a struggle. We struggle along. It's hard, but it is right and it is just, and it is our calling to persist. Not only is it our calling, but God is with us. And it's God that's called us to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with him. And there's an invitation there to walk together and that we're not left alone in this endeavour.