

# The Churches and Poverty: a CTAL Statement

## **1. Introduction: Life as it is for some:**

- A lady suffering from severe arthritis and approaching retirement has had her incapacity benefit suspended. She is expected to apply for job seekers' allowance, and travel to Leominster to attend the job centre. It will be six weeks before she can appeal, and will not receive any payments in the meantime. On requesting a food parcel, she said "I never thought I would be in this situation. It is quite surreal, I am not a scrounger"
- A young mentally disabled adult had to attend an incapacity benefit assessment. Her mother spent 3 hours helping her to dress and get ready. At the assessment she was asked "Can you work?" She did not understand the question, so said "Oh yes". Her benefits were stopped, and she is expected to find work.

## **2. The CTAL Report of 2012: Ludlow Under Pressure**

- *Ludlow Under Pressure* identified key areas of need in our community in a period of economic recession and cutbacks in public services. It noted especially the needs of older people, and the 16-24 age group, together with local transport problems and a dire shortage of social and affordable housing. Here is a progress report and the reasons behind the work.

## **3. What Has Been Achieved So Far:**

- The Food Bank, started by former Baptist minister Jonathan Edwards and coordinated by the Baptist Church, continues to meet a growing demand.
- A Fuel Poverty scheme has been relaunched, with gifts of cash to resource modest grants for gas and electricity costs. Applications are handled by staff of the South Shropshire Furniture Scheme on the recommendation of social workers, housing officers and others.
- Several Quakers and others have opened Credit Union accounts to increase the cash resources of these cooperative savings and credit organisations, and steps are being taken to increase people's awareness of this alternative to the loan sharks who prey upon vulnerable people.
- An extension of a No Interest Loan Scheme already established in Tenbury has been set up in Ludlow. This will enable financially hard-pressed families to replace (say) a broken washing machine or buy a bus pass when urgent need exceeds available resources.
- A 'Young at Art' exhibition was staged in St Laurence's Church last September, and another planned for the weekend of October 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> this year. This kind of inter-generational event, where younger people can meet older people, can be one contribution of the churches to youth work in Ludlow. Youth work continues to be under serious financial pressure.
- The needs of isolated, older people continue to concern us. Very few are taking up offers of practical help from the voluntary sector or from the Council, perhaps because they don't know of what is available, or because they are reluctant to apply.
- CTAL also helped set up the Ludlow Community Transport Scheme, 'The Ludlow Traveller'.

## **4. What is in the Pipeline:**

- A Ludlow under Pressure initiative called Hands Together Ludlow will be launched in June. It is designed to bring together voluntary resources from across and outside the churches and to prepare them for working alongside professionals on both new and existing projects. One of its early aims is to provide nutritious meals to people on limited budgets, offering

guidance in preparing meals. Hands Together Ludlow works alongside existing schemes such as Meals on Wheels, and the No Interest Loan Scheme. There is a strong management team in place to help it grow, but as with all new projects, success will depend on volunteers coming forward to help.

### **5. Is CTAL being Political?**

- In the light of what Christians believe about God, there can be no 'no go' areas for the Church: Christianity is concerned with the whole of life. So, yes, CTAL is being "political". How else are some of the problems we are addressing – housing, especially – to be solved otherwise? But our starting point is the Christian faith which we all share, and particularly its concern for the poor – a concern which derives from Jesus himself and from the Old Testament prophets.
- The initiative of Ludlow under Pressure was prompted partly by the Prime Minister's concept of the Big Society, which envisaged community-based projects complementing the provision of statutory services. But we should also be challenging policies which add to the hardship of the more vulnerable. It is here that the church may be accused of 'playing politics'. Politics is about how a society is managed in the interests of all its people and that matches the church's social mission. So the church must use its moral authority to speak truth to power, yet avoid being captured by any one political ideology. The concern is for justice and fairness, maintaining the Church's traditional concern for the poor and oppressed and encouraging a more cohesive society.
- We have had constructive meetings with Philip Dunne, Ludlow's MP, and with Keith Barrow, Leader of Shropshire Council, and we anticipate further meetings with them.

### **6. The Wider Scene and Future Prospects:**

- Whilst the church continues its historic role of challenging unfairness and injustice, and using its own resources to support those in need, much of its practical action is likely to be confined to local communities. And here we are not powerless. To date the developments which have followed from Ludlow under Pressure have helped to stimulate a wider understanding of local need and to bring the church into closer contact with the community. There is a growing collaboration between churches and other voluntary organisations.
- Inequality, however, is growing nationally and globally. But whilst we recognise that the economy is unlikely to maintain recent welfare programmes - elements of the welfare programme do need reform - as often, it is the poor who suffer most. The demonising of those dependent on benefits is especially disturbing. In Shropshire a severe reduction in local authority staffing and in the resources made available is a huge worry. The CTAL Steering Group will do all it can to monitor developments and encourage response to emerging need.

### **7. Hope and the future**

- Churches have a vital role in encouraging social cohesion and representing values other than economic. They can bring hope, and point to what constitutes the good life. A message of hope seems especially appropriate at Easter, because the resurrection of Jesus has a message for this life as well as the next. It represents God's 'Yes' to Jesus' compassion for and ministry to the poor and the marginalized.