

own just 0.6%.

- 16% of occupied homes (4 million homes) do not meet basic standards of comfort, repair, facilities and safety.

Hutton makes the point that there is no route to improving the condition of disadvantaged children without improving the income of their parents.

The prospects are not good. Privatisation of public services has seen shareholders' profit grow at the expense of long term investment. Our welfare system has been eroded, collective bargaining is under threat, health and education systems are deeply under resourced and wages have fallen in real terms. People are currently struggling to heat their homes and feed their families.

Ours is a deeply unjust society where poverty ruins lives and life chances. It is a society which has been constructed by political choices and the values that lie behind them.

Market values?

image

Successive popes have struggled with complex questions of responsibility for the kind of deep inequalities and injustices we see today. What role do the state, the market, civil society play? Writing two years after the financial crash of 2007, which deeply eroded trust in political and economic systems, Benedict called for a renewal of *values* at the heart of political and economic life in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. Renewal cannot be achieved by the market, he said, by civil society organisations or by political authorities alone, but by a renewal of all three.

He saw the church's contribution to public life as threefold:

- Through its social teaching it provides a space for reflection on the kind of public action needed to achieve justice;
- Through its charitable work it responds to individuals who are suffering or in material need (eg food banks; the work of SVdeP);
- Through its lay people it acts for the common good, because lay people take on the responsibility of citizens to join the work for justice through the organisations and institutions of public life.

Pope Francis makes clear that the struggle for justice is at the heart of the church's mission. He also sees it as a collaborative struggle – with organisations committed to social change, with other faiths and other churches, and with those in authority who share a vision of the common good.

So what is our role in responding to the present crisis?

I would like to share three examples of people who made an option for the poor in different contexts – and draw out some lessons from their approach.

Dumbarton

image

The first is an example from my own experience. Our Dumbarton J&P group, which began with a group of women, expanded in 1979 to include people

Agreement. She was the first woman in Northern Ireland to be given a life peerage, and she never stopped working in her local community.

May Blood personifies one of the insights that emerges from the option for the poor: that people in the poorest communities are often the experts in solidarity as a means of survival and resistance to injustice. It is from them that the seeds of new movements for change can come.

That can also be said about my final example of another activist: the Scottish author and anti poverty campaigner Darren McGarvey.

Glasgow

image

I went to hear him record one of this year's Reith lectures on the theme of 'Freedom from Want' in Glasgow City College last week.

He spoke about his own experience of poverty and addiction, and argued that the current political and economic system isn't working for a growing number of people. There are folk using food banks who never thought they would have to. No help is coming from government, he said, to address many of the problems we face, and it is up to citizens to confront the situation and rise to the challenge of inequality. We need to take personal responsibility for what we do and join those who are already organising.

What can we learn from his experience and that of the other examples I shared?

First is the commitment to take action where we are, in whatever way is open to us. In response to a question about how to tackle the lack of self worth among disadvantaged children at school, for example, McGarvey suggested that our response to a child who say he isn't good at anything is to tell him one thing he *is* good at, and he can bank it, and start building on it. The teacher's task is to find the talent and make it flower.

The second thing we learn is to make links with others who are also seeking to change our broken systems. It was obvious from the audience who came to hear McGarvey that there is a whole network of people out there who are engaged in the struggle for justice.

Third is the need to get organised. McGarvey suggested that trades unions are a good place to go to ask about how to organise, and campaigning groups can help us achieve common goals.

Finally there is affirmation – which we all need – that we are part of something bigger. That came across loud and clear in the warm response to Darren lecture and follow up questions. People went home energised.

End with a date for your diary:

The Reith lecture on Freedom from Want will be broadcast on Radio 4 at 9am on Wed 14th December.