

Christians care about justice. The Bible sets before us a vision of a Kingdom in which the hungry are fed, the sick are healed and all live in harmony with each other and the created world. We know it is our duty and joy to build that future kingdom now, which is why we are so quick to condemn inequality and speak out against poverty.

But if we are to condemn injustice and inequality when we see it elsewhere, we must also be willing to address it within our own structures. And one area where we stubbornly refuse to do this is finance.

Recently the new Bishop of Liverpool wrote to colleagues to outline the severity of their financial situation, one that has resulted in urgent engagement with the national church and a partnership with an Independent Reviewer to help them identify financial solutions.

This is not because of mistakes on the part of Liverpool Diocese. Indeed that diocese has for years benefited from some of the finest financial managers in the Church and has shown courage and agility in naming and addressing underlying issues. The problem is that they have no inherited assets, whereas the average level of endowment in dioceses nationally is £40 million.

And in the Diocese of Blackburn we are not far behind. The 2022 deficit of the DBF in Blackburn is one of the lowest in the country, giving in our parishes is heroic and has bounced back from Covid. And yet in three or four years' time we may well be where Liverpool is now. Why? We too have almost no endowment income.

How is it fair that the finances of dioceses that are supposedly part of the same Church vary so wildly because of a freak of history which means that some got lucky when the big bucks were being given out?

How is it fair that parishes in Lancashire pay tens of thousands of pounds more per year in Parish Share for the costs of their priest than those in better endowed dioceses?

How is it fair that, according to data presented to the House of Bishops in January, seven dioceses will run out of money within the next four years whilst others sit on cash piles which will last them for decades?

The Church Commissioners, working with the Archbishops' Council, are to be commended for releasing funds on an unprecedented scale to dioceses for growth and transformation plans. But they resolutely refuse to increase Lowest Income Communities Funding, the formula-driven income stream which injects funds to the places where it is most needed. This is a decision which merely compounds the sense of injustice.

A few brave dioceses, for example Oxford and Ely, have made some gestures in the direction of sharing inherited wealth, and Gloucester is using it to support the Church's housing agenda. At the last Synod the Bishop of Sheffield drove through a measure which removed one of the possible legal bars to such generosity, but uptake is very slow in terms of richer dioceses taking significant action.

The increasing financial pressures that dioceses are under to maintain stipendiary clergy numbers (demonstrably the best way to grow the Church) mean that we can no longer kick this can down the road.

In the Diocese of Blackburn we will warmly welcome any investment from the national Church. But what dioceses such as Liverpool and Blackburn (both serving highly deprived parts of the country) need more than anything else is endowment. If we are one Church, why should not every diocese benefit from that average endowment figure of £40 million? The income from such a sum would both wipe out our structural deficit and give us a surplus to invest in mission without touching the capital sum.

And in a church which has so many billions held in DBF reserves accounts and by the Church Commissioners, much of it subsidising poor giving or unimaginative financial management, there is absolutely no reason at all why this should not happen tomorrow.

The ultimate question is a very simple one. Are we or are we not a Church that wishes to live in obedience to the Scriptures? In Acts 4:35 the disciples made distribution, 'To each according to their needs.' In Acts 2:44 the disciples, 'Held all things in common.' In 2 Corinthians 9:5, Paul incites his hearers to make not an 'exaction' but a 'willing gift.'

Paul also writes in 1 Corinthians 4: 14 'I write these things not to make you ashamed.' I don't want to shame anyone. But poorer dioceses such as this one are no longer prepared to put up with this gross and chronic injustice. So let's address it not out of shame, but in order to live the Gospel with even greater joy.

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