

The economic crisis

Towards sustainable economies and livelihoods

A day conference organized by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (www.ctbi.org.uk)

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Its time to Get Fair

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In the face of the growing economic crisis gripping the UK, the Church has a clear duty to listen to and speak up for those most affected.

For the past few months, it has been almost impossible to pick up a paper or listen to a news report without hearing talk of impending economic doom. As Christians, we must never lose sight of the fact that the casualties of the current economic crisis will predominantly be those already struggling to make ends meet.

Maureen's experience is typical of millions struggling to make ends meet as a result of the record rises in food and fuel bills during the autumn – even before the worst impacts of the recession started to kick in.

“Practically everything has gone up. My gas and electricity was £62 a month. It's now £90 a month. Water rates, they've gone up. Bus fares have risen eight times in the last couple of years. With us being on benefits, it's a hard thing to have to fork out for. I know it sounds awful, but I buy my milk wherever I can get it cheapest. If I've got to walk there, I'll walk. By the time the weekend comes around, if we haven't got it, we go without. I'm trying to get a holiday this year. I want to be able to go to the sea, in a tent with my two grandkids. Is that too much to ask?”

The economic crisis also raises bigger questions about our economic and political priorities as a nation. In his New Year message, Pope Benedict described 2009 as a year “marked by uncertainty and concern for the future” and called for a reduction in “the gap between those who waste the superfluous and those who lack even the necessary.”

The past few months have certainly brought to public attention the vast excesses of wealth that some have ‘enjoyed’ in recent years. The ‘bonuses’ paid to workers in the City of London, which totalled over £13 billion in 2007 are – hopefully - now a thing of the past.

But, as our Christian faith is clear, society is judged not so much by the wealth and privileges enjoyed by the rich and powerful – but by how it treats those on the margins of society. In Jesus' words “in as much as you did it to the least of these you did it unto me.”

Some estimate that at least 600,000 people will lose their jobs this year; half a million people will get into serious arrears with their mortgages and more than 75,000 families will lose their homes as a result.

The human suffering involved is incalculable: loss of dignity; loss of self-worth; long term damage to health, relationships and family life and to a new generation of children being brought up into poverty.

For many, the struggle with poverty goes on quietly behind closed doors, barely noticed by friends and neighbours. Bernadette, a pensioner whose story is featured in *Voices from the Edge* struggles to make ends meet on the basic state pension of £542 a month – almost half of which goes on gas, electricity, rent and bills – leaving her less than £70 a week to live on.

“The situation we find ourselves in, it’s like everything is being stripped away from us. Begging for handouts the whole time. And we’re losing our dignity.”

Ten years ago, in a far sighted report, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales commented that: “There must come a point at which the scale of the gap between the very wealthy and those at the bottom of the range of income begins to undermine the common good. This is the point at which society starts to be run for the benefit of the rich, not for all its members.”

More recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has called on the government to do more to protect the poorest and most vulnerable from the likely consequences of an economic downturn, and highlighted the fact that government targets on tackling poverty risked not being met and warned that in a period of economic decline the poorest in society are most at risk.

As the economic crisis deepens, a major new campaign – Get Fair – is seeking to mobilise people of goodwill – in the churches and beyond – to challenge our political leaders to take seriously the moral imperative of putting first the needs of those suffering the effects of poverty, debt, homelessness and destitution.

Get Fair brings together an unprecedented alliance of churches and charities from Church Action on Poverty, Housing Justice, Caritas Social Action and the Church Urban Fund through to Oxfam, Shelter and the Refugee Council. But for Get Fair to have any chance of success, it is imperative for individual churches and individual Christians to add their voices to the campaign – and to join the lobby of MPs planned for the end of June 2009.

The message of the campaign is simple: For the sake of Maureen, Bernadette and thousands like them - it’s time to Get Fair.

www.getfair.org.uk