

# Baptism and children living in poverty

CHILDREN living in poverty should be a scandal in the UK, one of the richest countries in the world. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports that some 4.3 million children are living in poverty in the UK and the rate is rising. With the current cost of living crisis things are likely to get worse. Food banks, now entrenched into the work of churches, have become an accepted part of daily life for many.

What is the solution to child poverty? For some it is clear: the Government should intervene and change its social, economic and taxation policies to raise the incomes of the poorest families and lift children out of poverty. Put simply, the Government is in a position to fix the problem and should do so. Such policy-centric approaches are well-intentioned and helpful contributions to public discourse. Yet this approach has limitations, as it leaves the solutions up to experts and politicians. While they could do much to solve the problem of poverty, politicians work under the constraints of public opinion and they will only act on child poverty if they feel there are votes in taking the right actions.

While Christians can support politicians with policies that aim at alleviating poverty, they can also examine the beliefs and practices of their churches, with the aim of making a unique Christian contribution to the issue of



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child poverty. This theological work can include thinking theologically about children living in poverty and acting in ways to create an environment where children have better social outcomes.

## Value

Beginning with Jesus, we recognise that he was himself an infant, a child and then a man. By incarnating as a human and passing through all stages of human life, Jesus gives value to childhood. In his ministry, Jesus kept children close to heart, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18. 4-5). Jesus' acceptance of children runs counter to those who try to make children second class and in the background: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matthew 19. 13-15).

All Christians are not only to approach God as a child, we are also children of God; "we are God's offspring" (Acts 17. 29) and "sons and daughters" (2 Corinthians 6. 18). Made in the image of God

and as descendants of one couple (Adam and Eve) all of God's children have equality with one another.

Our compassion for children living in poverty should reflect God's grace and compassion. When we baptise infants into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12. 12-26) we are demonstrating God's grace and love for children and in doing so we make them members of the family of God and members of a new society, the Church.

The 1999 Worship Book of the British Methodist Church publicly demonstrates that raising a child in faith is too important to be left to parents alone. Godparents and the congregation as a whole have a responsibility to offer guidance and support to the child being baptised.

The baptismal liturgy states that the parents are to care for the child's "body, mind and spirit", while the godparents and congregation are asked if they will nurture the child in their faith. This, however, reinforces a body/soul divide; it is the parents that look after the body of the child, and not the community of faith, who only looks after the soul.

In earlier baptismal liturgies there was provision for the congregation or godparents to provide material things for the child, or to protect the physical well-being of the child. For example, in the Sarum Rite, used in England up to the eve of the Protestant Reformation, we read "Godfathers and godmothers of this child we charge you that you charge the father and the mother to keep it from fire and water and other perils to the age of seven years" [modernised]. The godparents are to assist in protecting the child from fire, water and other perils to bodily life. Here th-

ere is wider community responsibility for the material welfare of children.

Could British Churches examine their baptismal liturgies and perhaps change them to reflect this community responsibility for children? There is historical precedent for this in ancient liturgies where those present at the baptism of a child vow to look after the material needs of the child. This view is also expressed in the African proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child."

## Conflict

However, in society we sometimes hear people say parents alone have the responsibility to raise their kids. This is not only contrary to the Christian belief in the community taking responsibility for the well-being of children, it is in conflict with cultures where children are raised in the wider network of familial relationships. It also conflicts with the Gospel

message where we are encouraged to bear the burdens of others (Galatians 6. 2).

To help children in poverty it is not enough to argue for changed policy, although that is very important. There must be a will for the necessary changes and ideally the public opinion to support politicians in their policy deliberations. Christians in the United Kingdom have a lot to offer the children of the country and that goes far beyond Government policy. Churches are involved in welfare provision and benefit advocacy. They can also contribute theologically through Christian worship and practices and teachings that elevate the worth of children as gifts from God, recognise their full humanity in all stages of life, and value them in their own right, ensuring that they have what they need for a good wholesome start to life.

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