

# **Bishops' Appeal General Synod Speech**

May, 2014

Nelson Mandela likened a life in poverty to a life in chains, ensnared, imprisoned, suffocated by a never ending cycle of hunger, of worry, of instability, of destitution. Not only did he say that the poor were trapped but that while they remain so, none of us are free. None of us can rest, none of us can claim to have arrived, while so much inequality thrives and the structures and systems we live by actively increase the gap between the rich and the poor.

Our response as a Church is not so much an act of charity, but an act to protect the fundamental human rights of people to have a decent life.

- A decent life that is as basic as children not going to bed with a gnawing of hunger in their bellies.
- A decent life that is as basic as people having the tools to carry out basic agricultural practices.
- A decent life that is as basic as people not dying from curable, treatable diseases.
- A decent life that is as basic as access to a foundational education – do you know that in on average the EU spends 11 billion on icecream per year whilst the global economy spends only 6 billion on access to basic education.

And so our response much be a conscious, persistent effort to refuse to be indifferent to the suffering of millions

And of course there is understandable fatigue from stories of misappropriated funds that make us wonder who is on the receiving end of our giving; fatigue from corruption in Governments near and far, from struggling to cope with our own recession and from being overwhelmed with a sense that trying to make a difference is like trying to stop the tide from coming in armed with a bucket and spade.

To answer that I would say that part of the reason why Bishops' Appeal exists is to ensure that Church funds are allocated to the most vulnerable people in a way that is most effective and most sustainable.

One of the ways that we do this is by funding through reputable agencies who have developed relationships with local communities, local agencies and local churches. Some of our major partners include Christian Aid, Tearfund, CMS Ireland, United Society, SAMS, Mothers' Union.

Another way we do this is by valuing the names and the stories of the people we impact. Just last week I got a report of more children being fitted with specialised wheelchairs because they have cerebral palsy and one such boy, Udok, had spent his life being carried on the backs of older siblings or his parents or lying on the ground looking up at the sky. For the first time he was able to sit up and engage with people. It made me realise that the work we do quite simply allows people to participate in their own lives.

**Meselech, Ethiopia**

Holding on to that concept of being able to take part in your own life instead of being bound by poverty, Meselech was struggling to meet the costs of daily life for her family. On joining a self help group she received livestock training and then received a loan to buy two sheep. The first offspring were sold to pay off the loan, to start a saving scheme that was also set up by the self help group and to buy essentials for the home. Due to the benefits of her own learning and due to the discussion groups in the group, Meselech is now prioritizing sending her children to school.

When implemented properly self help groups don't just provide training for business or agriculture and set up saving schemes. Across the board research is showing increase in child school enrolment, improved nutrition, access to more meals, improved spousal relationship, greater community belonging and greater sense of dignity and empowerment.

If these are the outcomes we want to see more people gaining access to such groups in a way that meets the need of their context. This project was funded through Christian Aid. There are two more self help group projects in need of funding which will be run through Tearfund and through CMS Ireland. Projects such as these have been dubbed 'the forgotten projects' because although people are living in a daily crisis, a perpetual recession, an ongoing disaster, their plight is often overlooked. We are feeling the weight of that in light of such a wonderful heart-warming response to the Philippines, where Harvest giving and Advent giving was directed towards the people's survival after the Typhoon, and rightly so, but other projects earmarked for funding have had to be deferred, even up to today.

In order to fund these projects Bishops' Appeal needs support for our general funds to continue to support a variety of projects such as these or for parishes to target their giving and to take on raising funds for a wheelchair or a self help group.

If you want to learn more about injustices we are very grateful to have received Irish Aid funding for a limited number of Development Education workshops called Global Poverty and the Church's Response and more information can be obtained from our stand.

There is no time for hesitating; no time for looking the other way: the world is hungry, not for words, but for justice and for justice to take place in the lives of these people, we must be willing to act.

Let our hearts be broken with the things that break the heart of God.

People enmeshed in the chains of poverty breaks the heart of God. He's calling us not to take the easy option, not to take the comfortable option, but to take up the costly call to see people set free. We are called to bravely pursue justice – To see people like Udok and Meselech living a life that at the very least is a decent one.