

WORKING TOGETHER

POVERTY

Ten Bible studies inspired by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)



Contributors include:

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury

Bernard Ntahoturi, Archbishop of Burundi

Vivienne Faull, Dean of Leicester Cathedral

Kathy Galloway, Head of Christian Aid Scotland

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Front-cover photo: Yvette Komanda, a community animator with Christian Aid partner Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD), promotes community development and women's rights around Bumper, just outside Bo, in Sierra Leone. Traditionally, women in the area have not taken on leadership roles, but are now beginning to do so. Yvette believes that the role women played in bringing peace to the country was a turning point in changing attitudes towards women

Christian Aid/Antoinette Powell

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Foreword

The Bible provides the bedrock for the faith and vision that empowers the work of Christian Aid. It sets before us the complexity of understandings that have emerged through the generations as God's people have tried to understand and interpret the nature of humankind and their social relationships with each other and the environment.

In the book of Genesis, we are given a vision of Eden – the perfection of life as it was created to be: life in God and with God in his kingdom, where God and people walk together.

We are introduced to Moses, who was appalled by the violence and abuse meted out to the enslaved Israelite people.

We hear the cry of various prophets, who protested about cruelty and injustice, including the acts of prejudice and discrimination that tread the poor ever deeper into poverty.

Throughout the Gospels, the compassion of Jesus for the poor fulfils the prophecy of his mother Mary's Song of Praise.

Paul reminds us that humankind is made in the image of God, with male and female equality.

Then in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, we return to the vision of a world in harmony, where all can reach out and drink from the water of life, and all can share the peace of life in which there are no more tears, where death will be no more and neither will there be mourning or crying or pain.

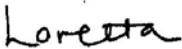
The Bible provides a theological foundation, a sociological platform and spiritual impetus, which drives us as we step out with determination to see an end to poverty and injustice, and a world in which all flourish, living life in all its fullness.

It reminds us of the resources entrusted to humankind, and that it is through the sharing of these resources that we can play our full part in the family of nations.

Christian Aid only works in developing countries through partners, and together we promote equality of opportunity for all, regardless of race, faith, social status or educational background. Our partnership with supporters for more than 60 years has enabled us to achieve a great deal, and those who currently support us are part of a wonderful movement for change.

I am so grateful to all who have contributed to this series of studies, as they are helping us to build that movement in the contemporary Church.

We offer these studies as a gift of thanksgiving to the Churches in the hope that they will inspire readers to continue to put their faith into action.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Loretta". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Loretta Minghella, Director of Christian Aid

Introduction

This set of studies has been commissioned by Christian Aid to provide individuals and church groups with an opportunity to discuss the topics of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) within a biblical framework.

In the year marking the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Holy Bible, the Archbishop of Canterbury has provided the foundation for the studies, looking at the Bible in the life of the Church today. Janet Morley wraps up the studies by reminding us that the teaching of Jesus has a very practical application for our lives. Christian Aid is hugely grateful for the contribution given by each of the authors. They have shared their personal insights, understanding and passion to enrich the life of the Church.

Addressing the United Nations Assembly in September 2000, at the summit at which the Millennium Declaration was adopted, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan said: ***'I am struck by the remarkable convergence of views on the challenge that faces us... You have said that your first priority is the eradication of extreme poverty. You have set specific targets related to that goal, and you have prescribed measures for achieving them. If the measures are really taken, we all know the targets can be reached.'***

The targets were laudable, but while the international community has made significant progress towards meeting some of them, we will not fulfil all of those good intentions by 2015. Recognising these shortfalls, Christian Aid has promoted the Poverty Over vision (see 'Further information' on page 48).

The MDGs are clearly in harmony with the Word of God and we hope that these studies will inspire you. Study is worthwhile, but once we have developed deeper insights, the challenge is to act. We hope that at the end of each study, group members will continue to reflect on the implications for their own lives and be encouraged to make a practical response to the challenge.

Each study follows a similar pattern: an introduction to the Bible passage, with pointers to contemporary relevance; a series of questions designed to help explore the topic; a reflection and prayer to develop a spiritual response to the subject of the study and, finally, a suggestion of a positive response or action.

STUDY 1

The Bible and the Church today

By Archbishop Rowan Williams

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. For its translators, one of the most important goals was that lay people in the Church should not have to rely just on the clergy for their knowledge of the Bible. They needed to be able to challenge what was said to them and test it against what was actually on the page – not so as to create an endless debate, but to make sure that the Bible was really being read in a cooperative or collaborative way, not misused by a powerful elite in the Church. The translators in their introduction to the whole Bible stress that when we have the Bible in our own language, it won't necessarily be easy to understand – but at least we'll be able to talk to each other about it and to develop the humility to ask each other for insight.

For the translators of the King James Bible, to see the Bible as God's Word was not to think of it as coming straight down from heaven with an answer to every question we might want to ask (and some we never thought of asking). It was to see the Bible as the unique record of how God and human beings had interacted in the long history that led up to the coming of Jesus, and how Jesus had changed once and for all the relations between God and humanity. Understanding this fully or rightly would take a lot of work and a lot of patient engagement with each other, and having the Bible in your own tongue was all about being free to join in this shared work and mutual collaboration.

You could say, then, that the whole idea of reading the Bible together in your own language takes for granted a situation in which every Christian voice is guaranteed a hearing. The very act of reading the Bible in the Christian community requires some degree of *justice* – a setting where no one is ruled out of the conversation. If the Bible is truly the book of the whole community, it won't do to think of it as first and foremost a book to be read by every individual in isolation. It needs to be read cooperatively – in worship, of course, but also in groups of believers seeking understanding together and committed to the idea that everyone will have something to say that the community needs.

This is how the Bible has been more and more read in societies where there is poverty and privation – in the shanty towns and the villages in Africa, Latin America and Korea and often in our own back streets and estates in Britain and Ireland too. It is not only the 'message' of the

Bible that offers new life and change in relations; it is the way the Bible is read. 'The medium is the message.'

So we read together in order to bring to light how the story of God and humanity in Scripture connects with the story of all those who are here and now seeking to understand their own human dignity. Because the great central fact that the Bible reports is that God takes human beings seriously – seriously enough to speak with them, sometimes to jolt them or shock them into new ideas and ways of life, and seriously enough to entrust them with making his purposes real in the world. Those purposes are all about human joy and the liberty to give to and receive from each other as we should, and as we need. God wants to see a world where relations are all two-way – not a one-way traffic of power and happiness away from the poor and towards the safe and complacent.

That's why reading the Bible has something to say in our discussion of the MDGs and development. It isn't just that the Bible has a lot to **say** about justice – though it does. It's more than that. The basic assumption of the Bible is about how everyone has the same dignity, the dignity of being taken seriously by God. We have to show how seriously we, in turn, take this by the way in which we read the Bible – and then by what we are prepared to do to make God's purpose more visible and challenging in an unjust world.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is your experience of reading the Bible with other people? Was it constructive or not?
2. Do you find it hard to believe that what you think about the Bible is worth listening to?
3. Which are the voices you think are most often silent or ignored in the Church when it thinks about global issues?
4. How do you expect to be changed by reading the Bible?

Reflection from Christian Aid

Three of the Gospels tell the story of Jesus being anointed with expensive ointment, possibly by Mary of Bethany. When her actions were criticised on the grounds that the money would have been better

spent on the poor, Jesus replied, '*You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me*' (Matthew 26:11).

The contextual meaning is clear: with Jesus's death imminent, nothing else matters. There will be plenty of opportunities to care for the poor later. So rather than understand Jesus's words as a resigned statement of defeat, we should see them instead as an encouragement to eradicate poverty in his kingdom on earth. To see a permanent division between rich and poor as somehow being God's will is not a Christian option.

Prayer

God of all times and places,
you bring light into the world's darkness.

Thank you for the guidance of the Bible.

Thank you for all those who, through great sacrifice, gave us
the Bible in our own language.

Open the ears of our hearts that we might hear.

Open our minds that we might understand and

fill us with compassion that we might respond with love.

Amen

(Christian Aid)

An act of worship reflecting some of the Bible's teaching on justice.

After each reading say:

Leader: Generous God, open our eyes to see as the prophets of old saw your truth.

All: *By grace, help us to hear your word.*

Reader: Isaiah said, 'Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter.'

Leader: Generous God...

All: *By grace...*

Reader: Jeremiah said, 'Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages.'

Response

Reader: Amos said, 'Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land, saying, "We will practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweeping of the wheat."'

Response

Reader: Malachi said, 'See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.'

Response

Reader: Jesus said, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And he said, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

All: In our hearing, God's word will be fulfilled. Amen.

(Christian Aid adapted - from Allan Boesak in Gathered for Life: Official Report WCC VI Assembly, 1983).²

Action

With the help of a concordance find some passages in the Bible that speak about social justice.

Visit the Christian Aid website: christianaid.org.uk and go to the 'Act now!' section, consider what action you might take as a group.

STUDY 2

MDG 1: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

By Archbishop Bernard Ntahoturi, the Archbishop of Burundi and Bishop of Matana

Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction

The 'last judgement' sayings of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 25, conclude the major part of his Gospel through which he tells of the message and ministry of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 4:12-25;46). Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, and people asked how they would qualify to enter into it. The story of Jesus told in these chapters is one of transformation, as the people of God seek to deepen their discipleship under the guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the kingdom of this world – which is characterised by wealth, power and authority – the kingdom of heaven emphasises compassion, generosity and social responsibility. The Christian is called to believe in a God of love and justice and to behave with integrity, openness and mutual support. These should be the values that guide our goal to eradicate poverty in the world.

When the leaders of this world put in place the MDGs, they were determined to *'spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to make the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want...'*

However, figures from the World Bank tell us that 1.4 billion of the world's population were living under extreme poverty in 2008.³ Although this number is very slowly reducing, their situation is complex. The poor lack food, healthcare, clothing and housing. Some do not have the basic skills necessary to make a living. Some feel they are not part of a community and do not have solidarity or dignity. Frequently, they do not feel free and they lack rights. Many poor people are insecure and vulnerable to violence, natural disasters and economic upheavals. These are some of the things they say:

'We poor people are invisible to others – just as blind people cannot see, they cannot see us.' (A man in Pakistan).⁴

'Don't ask what poverty is, because you have met it outside my house. Look at the house and count the number of holes, look at my utensils and the clothes that I am wearing. Look at everything and write what you see. What you see is poverty.' (A man in Kenya).⁵

These are the people that Jesus wants us to care for when he says, *'I was sick and you took care of me.'* What we do for others demonstrates what we really think about Jesus's words to us: feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless and look after the sick (Matthew 25:35-36).

But the poverty that the followers of Christ are called to address is not only material poverty. The Church is called to address broken-hearted poverty as well as spiritual poverty. Today, many people are the fruit of broken families; children who no longer have roots. They are unable to grow peacefully because they have no sense of belonging, they feel empty and there is nothing to fill that emptiness. There is a real loss of the quality of relationships in the family and society. There is the cry of loneliness and the need for love. Many people feel inadequate in their capacity to relate, love, listen and be compassionate.

The vision that Christ sets before his people is to be part of a worldwide movement of local churches that obey God in bringing justice and transformation within poor communities, reflecting compassion and commitment. God wants people to be free from poverty. He gave his son so that people may have and enjoy the fullness of life. It is when, in turn, we give that we become God-like; when we give ourselves for the sake of those who are vulnerable we are truly following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Our call is to restore relationships: with God, with ourselves, with others and with the whole creation. As we participate in God's mission, love should be our driving force in the building of communities and not only commodities.

Questions for discussion

1. Poverty reduction requires both rich and poor people to be transformed. The resources, the know-how and the technology are available to achieve the MDG goals. What might the Church do to bring about this transformation?
2. What mechanisms could be put in place to help people challenge their government, the elected people and the business world to keep their promises and be accountable?

3. How might the resolve to eradicate poverty shape our prayers, meditation, Bible study and worship?
 4. How can we discern the will of God in the work of eradicating poverty and close the gap between rich and poor?
 5. What is required in your personal commitment to living a life of obedience, clear conscience and with an abiding spirit?
-

Reflection

One target of MDG 1 is to halve the proportion of people whose income is less than US\$1 a day, between 1990 and 2015. This implies reducing extreme poverty, not eradicating it. The 'richest poor' on, say, 95 cents a day may well have had their income raised to more than US\$1 a day, but those on 20 cents a day may have little or no increase in their income. What is your response to this inequality among the poorest of the poor?

The teaching in Matthew 25:35-40 suggests that how we treat the poor reveals our true response to Jesus. Discuss ways in which you can turn your faith and worship into action.

Prayer

God of reconciliation and grace,
you promise us a world where all is new,
where love is born when hope is gone,
where broken relationships are restored to wholeness.
May we live as people who know your story of love,
and who have the vision to imagine what could be possible
if we dared to live this story.

God of abundant life, may we be witnesses of love,
hope and peace, and co-creators of your life in the world.

Amen.

(Christian Aid)

Action

Fundamental changes in the global, national and local structures that create and embed poverty are needed.

Write to your elected representative (for example, your MP or MSP) about Christian Aid's latest campaign issue. Visit christianaid.org.uk/actnow to find out more.

Commit to supporting the next Christian Aid Week appeal in your church, and discuss what fundraising event you could organise to increase local support for it.

Christian Aid Partner HARD working in Sudan

Christian Aid/Antoinette Powell



Farmer John Agang (pictured with his daughter)

While people from surrounding communities queue for food aid, John Agang works on his farm, determined that neither he nor his family should ever need this kind of support again.

Christian Aid partner Hope Agency for Relief and Development (HARD) worked with the family to teach them improved agricultural methods, resulting in increased crop yields. John and his family now train other community members in the skills they have acquired, and even travel to other farms – taking their own ploughs – to give hands-on demonstrations.

HARD, which was established in 1995, aims to alleviate hunger, disease, ignorance and poverty, through community-based sustainable development and education.

STUDY 3

MDG 2 – achieve universal primary education

Rev Dr Edmund Newell with Rev Dr Sabina Alkire

Reading: Proverbs 2

Introduction

It is all too easy to take for granted the benefits of our education. We who are reading these studies have learnt to read and write and process information, yet even today, many people across the world do not have the basic schooling, which most of us would regard as normal or desirable, to enable them to do what we are doing right now. In some places opportunities for education are severely limited, or there may be good economic or other reasons for parents not to send their children to school.

The value placed on education in ancient times can be seen in a range of near Eastern texts that have survived down the ages. This includes the Egyptian *Instruction of Amen-em-Opet* and the biblical 'wisdom literature' found in the Book of Job, Ecclesiastes, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, and most especially the Book of Proverbs. What is meant by 'wisdom literature' is broad but essentially comprises the tested thoughts and insights of generations of sages on God, the world God has created, practical life skills and ethics. Their wisdom was accumulated, handed down from generation to generation, and honed into the texts we have today. Some of it now seems outdated, but much of it remains as relevant as ever.

Wisdom is not the same as education, yet education is often regarded as a prerequisite to gaining wisdom. This understanding is at the heart of Proverbs 2. This chapter is the instruction of a teacher – perhaps a teacher in the royal court or a school associated with the temple, or possibly a parent or elder of a family. Proverbs 2:6 states that wisdom is a gift of God. The surrounding verses put this in context: the desire for wisdom leads to knowledge of God (vv. 1b-5); wisdom protects from evil and other temptations (vv. 12-19); and pursuing wisdom is therefore the right thing to do (vv. 20-22). For the teacher, then, if wisdom is God's gift then education is the means by which we can make the most of this gift. Yet for the teacher in Proverbs, the cost of missing out on an education was not only the valuable start in life

it can bring, but the loss of ability to fathom the mysteries of God and creation, or to live a godly life. This is quite different from secular appreciations of wisdom solely in terms of its ability to improve job prospects or earnings, or increase 'human capital'.

Education offers many opportunities. As we reflect on Proverbs, it is salutary to remember that many children today are deprived of this opportunity – hence the prominence of education in the MDGs.

MDG 2

Encouragingly, considerable progress had been made towards achieving the target of Goal 2, to: *'Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling'* and its related target in Goal 3, to: *'Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education...'*

In 2001, the number of children not receiving a primary education was 115 million. By 2010 it had fallen to 69 million – much better but still a long way from universal primary schooling. There is a possibility that the target of Goal 2 will be met by 2015, and it is likely that the gender parity target for primary education will be achieved by then.

While progress on Goal 2 is highly encouraging, it is not all good news. There are still many children not going to school, particularly in low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia. Those faring worst are indigenous people and ethnic minorities. The effect of warfare is also an issue, as is a lack of safety in schools in some parts of the world, particularly for girls who are in danger of sexual assault from fellow pupils and staff. More than three-quarters of children not receiving a primary education are affected by conflict.

Another concern is that school attendance does not necessarily equate to learning. In a number of countries where schooling rates are high, such as Tanzania, the quality of education remains poor; in India half of children in class five cannot read a class two text. The focus of development therefore needs to go beyond access to education and include educational quality and outcomes as objectives.

The effects of a basic education, such as learning to read and write, can be significant. Educated children enjoy better employment opportunities as well as benefits – enhanced marriage possibilities, for example. A sound primary education can be foundational in terms of promoting democracy and good citizenship, and hence stable societies. The ability to read a bill or a medical leaflet can help prevent economic exploitation

or improve nutrition and basic healthcare. The effect of education on empowering women in the household and society at large is particularly striking, for example as each year of a girl's education reduces, the later risk of her children dying before the age of five increases. Education and practical wisdom therefore go hand in hand. Interestingly, however, education is rarely seen as the catalyst for wisdom as envisaged in the Book of Proverbs: ethics, faith and values are often sidelined; and in some countries school curricula instil prejudice not tolerance, much less wisdom.

Despite the significant progress made towards achieving Goal 2, there is clearly much work still to be done in terms of providing schooling in some of the most impoverished parts of the world, raising educational quality, ensuring that schools are safe places for children to learn and be nurtured, and designing education so it becomes a springboard to wisdom.

Questions for discussion

1. What have proven to be the most important things you have learned in your life, and how did you learn them?
2. How much do you value your time at school? What opportunities did you take and what did you miss out on?
3. What would you do if you wanted to send your child to school, but there was some danger of violence on the way to school and even at school?
4. Imagine you are a parent who has never been to school and are illiterate; your seven-year-old child comes home from class with questions about the book she is reading. How would you respond to her questions?
5. How might we help to increase the quality of education in a school where children are attending but not learning?
6. What values did you learn at school? What values do you think schools can and should instil in children?
7. How could a Christian school educate children in wisdom?
8. From the knowledge and insights you have gained, what are the most important values you would like to pass on to today's children?

Reflection

The book of Proverbs includes many ancient sayings from the Middle East. If there was an appendix to the book that draws on the experience and insights of the poor from around the world today, what might it contain?

Biblical wisdom is also associated with Solomon. Soon after becoming King of Israel, Solomon offered this prayer, which 'pleased the Lord': *'I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind... able to discern between good and evil.'* (1 Kings 3:7-9)

Where in your life can you see the need for such a prayer?

Prayer

Almighty God,
as we pray for those impoverished by a lack of education
and give thanks for the wisdom that has helped lift many out
of poverty,
grant us understanding minds as we work to build your
kingdom,
in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Action

Pray for teachers, that their dedication may be sustained across decades; for intelligent children studying in ramshackle schools, that their talents might find nourishment; for disabled students without adequate support; for malnourished students, who cannot concentrate easily; for students whose parents are uneducated, and for those teaching and learning in poor classrooms or in the midst of violence.

Write to and encourage your political representative to use development assistance to continue strong support for a high-quality basic education in developing countries.

Visit christianaid.org.uk/sofasessions where there is a great study on education. Encourage your youth group to explore the Sofa Sessions.

STUDY 4

MDG 3 – promote gender equality and empower women

Fran Beckett OBE

Reading: Luke 1:26-55; 2:19, 51 and John 19:25-27

Introduction

Over the centuries, views on Mary's importance have varied greatly. However, the debate has left us in danger of overlooking timeless truths about what she has to teach regarding the dignity and worth of all women everywhere.

In these readings we initially meet her as a teenage peasant girl, uneducated and seemingly possessing few outward qualifications for the task of bringing the Messiah into the world. As a member of an oppressed people in a country occupied by Roman invaders, and as a young Jewish woman, she would have been regarded by the enemy occupier and her male Jewish counterparts alike as being of little worth. Women were largely regarded as possessions, with all the negative consequences that this entails. Where she lived also made her an unlikely candidate of God's choosing. Nazareth in Galilee was viewed with suspicion and prejudice by many Jews because it was a place where large numbers of Gentiles lived, with the resident Jews being particularly known for compromising contact with Gentiles and their pursuit of 'unclean' trades.

It's the very ordinariness of her background that makes all the more extraordinary the breathtaking scale of the task with which she was entrusted. It had huge theological and political overtones. The child she was to carry was the Messiah, the descendant of David, who would reign forever and be uniquely God's son, too (2 Samuel 4:17; Psalm 2:7; 89:27). In entrusting a young peasant woman with this role, and the responsibility of parenting Jesus into adulthood, a profoundly counter-cultural statement was being made by God: women have worth, they are as important as men. As with Mary, social background, ethnic origin, and status make no difference to the intrinsic value of all women. And it is vital they are treated properly.

At intervals in her life, Mary is described as a thoughtful, reflective woman, someone who pondered over what she saw and heard of God's activity. Even as a teenager responding to the angel's startling

pronouncements, she was compared favourably to Zechariah, who as a respected older member of the male establishment displayed a hesitant, unbelieving attitude when experiencing an angelic visitation. We are given the impression that despite no education, here was a woman who grew in wisdom, someone with depth and maturity, possessing profound dignity when ultimately we find her at the foot of the cross.

Tragically, in many parts of the world, women's circumstances have changed little since Mary's time. Millions of women are still regarded as second-class citizens. Throughout entire countries, for example Uganda, and in other places, such as Gaza, they are denied land rights. Many continue to be treated as property to be used and abused as others see fit. Women are trafficked across continents for slave labour, sexual exploitation and monetary gain. Girls regularly come second when it comes to educational opportunity, and the idea that women could be directly involved in significant religious and political activities is a strong taboo.

Questions for discussion:

1. Imagine yourself an onlooker to the conversation between Mary and the angel. What questions would you want to ask them both, and why?
2. What do you think are the reasons for God selecting Mary to be the mother of Jesus? What does this tell us about what God considers of real importance?
3. Mary called herself 'the Lord's servant' (Luke 1:38). Was she adopting a subservient position typical of women of her day or was this in some way different? If it was, how?
4. In what ways might Mary's song of freedom and praise have relevance for oppressed women in the 21st century?
5. Consider both Mary's obedient response and what her praise song tells us about God's own activity. How might our human response and God's activity combine to bring about the 'lifting up of the humble' (Luke 1:52), in this case women who are legally and practically treated as second-class citizens?
6. Read John 19:25-27. What does this teach us, if anything, about the role men can play in ensuring women are treated with care and dignity? In what ways might this be applied in our contemporary context?

7. What messages of hope for women across the world facing different circumstances does the story of Mary bring – for example to women denied education; women who watch their children die, powerless to do anything about it; women who when raped are forced to marry their rapist for the sake of respectability; or women with no land rights who have nowhere to go when their male next-of-kin dies?
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Reflection

Poverty is an issue of power. It reflects the unequal distribution of, and unfair abuses and misuses of power. Gender inequality reveals the fundamental power imbalance, shaping the lives and opportunities of women and men at every level from the household, through communities and national governments, to global business and policy debates. Gender is how power most directly affects millions of people's lives, every minute of every day. In most of the world, females face discrimination on the basis of their sex – women are often the poorest of the poor.

What is your response to the following statistics?

More than six out of ten people in the world living in poverty are women.⁶

Of an estimated 101 million children not in school, more than half are girls.⁷

One per cent of the world's wealth is owned by women.⁸

Seventeen per cent of seats in national parliaments are held by women.⁹

Prayer

Pray that girls will be able to choose the time of their own marriage and that it will not necessitate sacrificing their schooling.

Pray for more female teachers to be trained in countries where there are cultural constraints against women's education.

Action

Watch the film *Girl Effect* – girleffect.org – and discuss your reactions.

View the Sofa Session film clips on gender: christianaid.org.uk/resources/youth/guides/sofa-session-gender.aspx?Page=2

Christian Aid partner CPI/ARQMO in Brazil



In Brazil huge wealth sits alongside crippling poverty. Eleven-year-old Helen lives in a Quilombola village deep in the Amazon. The Quilombola people – descendants of escaped slaves who fled into the forests – face discrimination, and one in ten Quilombola children is malnourished.

Helen's nearest secondary school is eight hours away by canoe. But now she and seven other village children take the new bus-boat to school. The motorboat and fuel are provided by the council in a deal negotiated by Helen's mum, after lobbying training from our partner San Paolo Pro-Indigenous Commission/Oriximiná Municipality Association of Remnant Quilombola Communities (CPI/ARQMO).

Helen says: *'It's important to learn, so that you can be someone.'* Without this boat, there is simply no way that she could get to school.

CPI, which has also helped some 7,000 people to obtain title deeds to their territory, is bringing large-scale, lasting change for Helen and Quilombola generations to come.

STUDY 5

MDG 4 – reduce child mortality

The Rt Rev Sebastião Armando Gameleira Soares

Reading: Lamentations 2: 11-12, 19-21; 4:1-5

Introduction: Children, tragedy and hope of the world

The death of a child is a human tragedy – witness the commotion at the house of the dead child when Jesus arrived and before he healed her in Mark 5:38. Such distress is being played out across the world all day, every day.

UNICEF published an analysis of background characteristics in 63 developing countries, which indicates that child mortality is considerably higher among children living in rural areas and in the poorest households. The fact that the greatest percentage of these are from the poorest of the poor does not diminish the pain and anguish.¹⁰

'My eyes are spent with weeping... because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city' (2:11).

Lamentations emerged from the misery endured by the people following the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the great temple. They are poems of grief and mourning for a nation reduced to lowliness first by the Babylonian and then the Persian Empire. Yet, when we explore these poems, we surprise ourselves with their tremendous actuality.

In the destruction of the Holy City (although holy are all cities, women and men, because we are all of the image and Temple of God) it was especially hard to observe the fate of children, as referred to in Lamentations.

It is not difficult to see these texts as a mirror of what is happening today. Children on so many of the world's streets are homeless and without bread, many swooning in the laps of their mothers, although many of them don't have even this maternal lap on which to die. The disintegration of families and the precarious conditions of life lead many children simply to survive on the streets of cities throughout the world; even worse, it is as if hunger devours them.

These children suffer in a world where there has been amazing

scientific and technological progress; in a world where consumption without limits makes 'Babylon' drunk of power, almost divine (see Isaiah 47 and Revelation 17:2-7; 18). However, the sound of lament can again be heard (Isaiah 13:1-14 and Revelation 18:9-24), as death prowls around and even the very planet is under threat. The constant companions of this apparent progress are war, pollution, greed and famine. Many of the victims are, of course, children.

Isaiah 11:6 *'A child will guide them'*

Throughout the Bible we read of the hope of human coexistence, and children are found at the centre. The prophet Isaiah lived at a time when the serious political threat came from the Assyrian Empire. King Ahaz trusted in military might, while the prophet, with eyes aimed well beyond his own time, was convinced that the salvation and peace of the people could not be found through increasingly powerful weapons. Universal peace – shalom, harmony, happiness – would only emerge as we become like children. This is the definitive revolution.

Isaiah wrote the *Book of Immanuel* (chapters 6-12) to warn King Ahaz. If we read it carefully, we will find at every step a mention of the child, the 'Holy seed'. The sign is that *'a young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel'* (7:14). The great hope was that *'a child has been born to us, a son given us'*; and he can establish peace (9:1-7).

Children, the ones who are often least in the eyes of the world, were credited as being the very hope of the nations. The Apostle Paul described himself as 'the least of the apostles' (1 Corinthians 15:9) and spoke of those who were chosen by God and who would serve the kingdom as 'what is low and despised in the world'.

Mark 10:15 *'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter into it.'*

During the time of Jesus, children were considered to be of little value, but Jesus takes a radical stance, saying that only those who become as a child will receive and enter the kingdom of God. Children occupy the centre of the kingdom. He moves the reference point; we adults must learn to become like children, to imitate them.

Furthermore, our attitude towards and treatment of children is the supreme criterion by which the authenticity of our faith in Christ is judged. So, to scandalise them – that is to place obstacles in their way – is to become worthy of the worst punishment (Mark 9:42 and Matthew 18:6), whereas a gesture of relief and protection to children – even a simple glass of water – will not be without a response from God (Mark 9:41 and Matthew 10:42).

The way we treat the vulnerable, for example children and older people, the weakest links of the chain, speaks of our humanity and is a measure of our values. In our societies, all too often there is no place for children and older people; there seems no longer time to care for and serve them. This is so very different from the way of God, who says he cares for us with affection – as is beautifully expressed in Hosea 11:1-4.

UNICEF has said that many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have made little or no progress in reducing the number of child deaths.¹¹ Yet if the goal of MDG 4 is achieved, the deaths of 5.4 million children under five will be averted in the year 2015 alone (as compared to the situation in 2006). But if current trends continue and the goal is not achieved, an additional 4.3 million child deaths could occur in 2015.

Questions for discussion:

1. Reflect on the treatment of children in our society.
 - a) Do adults give enough time to children?
 - b) Do we invest enough in education of children 'for life'?
 - c) Or are adults more inclined to impose their values and standards upon children?
 - d) Do you think that a child should be given the same respect as an adult? Please explain your answer.
2. Discuss your view of the place of children in our society today. Are they treated as the least in society, or are they in an elevated position? What are the implications of this for them and for society?
3. What do you think Jesus meant when he spoke of people receiving the kingdom of heaven like a child?
4. What are the qualities of children that adults may need to re-learn in order to obey this demand?

Reflection

A child is born with no choice about her parents. She has no choice over her home or into which religion she is born. She has no choice about the income of her family, nor about her race and colour. A child is born with no choice about his or her gender or genes.

The child Mary (mother of Jesus) was born and nurtured in a stable, positive and morally upright family.

The child Salome (daughter of Herodias, Mark 6:17-19) was born into an unstable and destructive family setting.

Children are of equal value and potential. Children are to be loved.

Prayer

God of the kingdom, you call us to come to you like children.
Thank you for the beauty and variety we discover in children.
Help us to discover that richness within.

And in those places where children suffer, and are abused
and neglected, use us and all of your Church
to bring hope and peace and love. Amen.

(Christian Aid)

Action

Visit christianaid.org.uk/whatwedo then select one of the topics and consider how children are affected by Christian Aid's work.

Consider the role and place of children in your church and community.
Is it consistent with the scripture you read today?

STUDY 6

MDG 5 – improve maternal health

The Very Rev Vivienne Faull

Reading: Luke 1:39-45

Something utterly extraordinary has happened to Mary through the angel's appearance. By the power of the Holy Spirit and in faith, love and will, Mary has conceived. And now she hurries away from home. It seems she cannot bear to be alone. Perhaps she is frightened of herself, of the power she has discovered within herself. Perhaps she is frightened of those around her, who may not wish her well with the pregnancy. Perhaps she is frightened of the future, of the pain and the danger that is to come for her.

And miraculously (of course, as Luke writes it) there is another woman to share this with her: Elizabeth, her relative. No doubt even the most loving must be wondering about these two women. Mary is too young, Elizabeth is too old, one is too fertile, another is too barren, one is without a husband, the other is with a husband past usefulness. So it is in each other's arms, visible bump to invisible bump, they are affirmed, encouraged, freed to speak God's truth and sing God's praise.

Let's consider Elizabeth's situation a little further. Her barrenness had caused shame, stigma and isolation, and infertility still does. The World Health Organization reports that infertility affects 15 per cent of reproductive-age couples worldwide and in sub-Saharan Africa more than 30 per cent of women aged 25-49 suffer from secondary infertility – the failure to conceive after an initial first pregnancy.¹²

Let's consider Mary's situation a little further. The gospels don't tell us if she was supported by a midwife. Far from home in Bethlehem, she may have been completely alone as she gave birth. Her people would have known that was risky. Her most renowned foremothers were attended by midwives: Rachel in Genesis 35:17; and Tamar in Genesis 38:28.

During the Egyptian bondage there were two midwives who attended the Hebrew women. There is a curious passage in the Talmud (Cotah 2b) in which it is said that the two midwives had different duties – Shiphrah dressed the infant and Puah whispered to it. One Jewish commentator on this supposes that Puah used artificial respiration

by blowing into the child's mouth. Many midwives would have had considerable skill, as a case such as the delivery of Tamar's twins would have required some amount of manipulation.¹³ The duties the midwives had to perform are enumerated in Ezekiel 16:4 – the division of the cord, washing the infant in water, salting it and swathing it in swaddling clothes. Scholars assume that those who could not afford a midwife probably called in older female relatives and friends.

Without a trained attendant at childbirth using simple techniques and proper infection control, mothers were, and are, at serious risk. The risk of dying in pregnancy and childbirth in Niger, where there is least access to care, is 1 in 7, while it is 1 in 75 in developing countries and 1 in 7,300 in developed countries.¹⁴

For every woman who dies in childbirth, about 20 more suffer injury, infection or disease – approximately 10 million women each year.¹⁵ Unavailable, inaccessible, unaffordable or poor-quality care is fundamentally responsible for all this. About a million children are left motherless each year. These children are 10 times more likely to die within two years of their mothers' death.¹⁶

Questions for discussion

1. Many people consider the day their child was born to be the happiest day in their life. Do you agree? Why? Even in Britain and Ireland there are memories of high rates of death in childbirth. The Book of Common Prayer 'Churching Service' begins *'forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his goodness to give you safe deliverance, and hath preserved you in the great danger of childbirth'*. Occasionally this service is still requested. Clergy have pastoral responsibilities for caring for families where mothers die in childbirth and have serious health problems following, for example, pre-eclampsia. What experiences do you have of the risks of childbirth?
2. In poorer countries, the day a child is born is all too often the day its mother dies. In the last 20 years, deaths have been declining at a rate of about 1.4 per cent a year, but this is insufficient to meet the first target of MDG 5 (which is one of the least likely goals to be met). Why do you think this target is so hard to meet?
3. Mary was 'too young', and unmarried. Elizabeth was 'too old'. Who do you think finds it especially hard to get support and help when pregnant and so faces particular risks?

4. Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb'. In our world what is the best way of communicating the message that every pregnant woman (and every child) is blessed, and so worthy of care?
-

Reflection

Life is a precious gift – no woman should die giving life – and yet every day, about 1,000 women around the world die in pregnancy or childbirth from primarily preventable causes.¹⁷

It is a seriously unfair world – if you were born in Britain and Ireland, your mother probably didn't worry about dying during childbirth, but in some countries that's a very real fear. In Britain and Ireland the risk of maternal death is one in every 8,200 people, in Afghanistan it's one in eight.¹⁸ Girls under the age of 15 are five times as likely to die in childbirth as women over 20.¹⁹ What might this suggest to us about child marriage?

Prayer

Blessed are you, Mary:
for the risk of your 'yes' and the hope of your song, and then
for suffering to bring God's new life to birth.

Blessed are you, Elizabeth:
for the patience of your endurance through years of emptiness,
and then for first proclaiming the Advent of the Lord.

Blessed are you, Jesus:
for the need and nakedness of your birth, wrapped in a woman's blood, and then for bringing release to the captive, healing to the sick and hope to the poor.

Hear our prayer for all those who labour to give birth these days and then for those who keep company with them, and for all who are midwives of hope, possibility and change.

Action

Extreme poverty is the main underlying cause of these risks to a mother's life. Visit christianaid.org.uk/getinvolved/supporter-stories where you will find examples of practical ways in which you can act locally in support of those living in extreme poverty.

Christian Aid partner MCSL in Sierra Leone



Fuchsia Watson

MCSL provides care during a home visit to girl living with HIV

Seventy-seven year-old Bintu Mattia* endured significant chest pain and headaches because of her HIV. Unable to walk due to dizziness, Bintu struggled to get help, becoming isolated.

MCSL provided blankets, food, medication and care for Bintu, who can now walk around with ease. With the support of volunteers also living with HIV she no longer feels cut off from others around her.

Bintu is not alone – many of the people to whom MCSL reaches out have been shunned by family and cut off from others. Often they fall ill and with no one to care for them, become bedridden and lose hope. By providing emotional and physical support and education, individuals living with HIV are given an opportunity to overcome the stigma and enjoy life again.

* This name has been changed as the person requested anonymity.

STUDY 7

MDG 6 – combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

The Rt Rev Dr Alastair Redfern

Reading: Mark 9:2-29 'The Challenge down the Mountain'

When an illness reaches epic proportions, it highlights all that is best and worst in human beings. HIV/AIDS, like malaria and other viruses and diseases across our world, is bringing the best out of people: concern for suffering, pastoral care, significant medical developments, and impressive political and social cooperation. All these responses offer hope and support.

At the same time, the power of what seems to be beyond human control raises other reactions: in some, fear, while others will lay blame – especially in terms of what may be perceived as immoral behaviour, and there are those who react with prejudice, stigmatisation or discrimination. There is a common response to put distance between 'them' and 'us' – and to offer support only where it seems to be deserved (on our terms).

In the passage from Mark 9, we see a picture of the church (the 'faith-based community' of Jesus and his disciples) which can encourage us and challenge a world continually confronted by disease and suffering. The key is how the church operates in this tragically familiar human situation. What we learn from the approach Jesus endorses can point towards what might be distinctive about our contribution with regard to MDG 6.

Jesus takes three disciples up the mountain, leaving the other nine on the plain – in the midst of the everyday world. Immediately, those on the plain are confronted with two things: the reality of suffering – with all the complex range of reactions noted above, and the expectation that religion should provide an 'answer'. Everyone is frustrated: the suffering boy and those around him – because they look to the church to supplement 'medicine' with a decisive extra healing ingredient, and the disciples – because they aspire to help and heal, and feel helpless, a failure. The scale and power of the suffering is dramatic, and apparently beyond the control of medical or religious resources.

Jesus and the three disciples come down from the mountain to hear the cry that emanates from so many in situations of uncontrolled

suffering: 'I believe, help my unbelief.' In other words, 'I want to hope for healing, but I need resources beyond those that normally seem to be available.'

Jesus offers prayer and an encounter, which brings healing and hope. What he and the three offer is an invitation to trust in a greater reality: the fulfilment of living in a faith that embraces the suffering, their supporters, their systems, their seeking – in a new fellowship, in a bigger perspective, in a miracle of calm trust that all shall be well.

This is faith that can be tasted now, as we come together to seek hope and support. It is faith that leads to a fellowship of action as we respond to the love and presence of God. This fellowship offers care that takes suffering seriously – as part of God's concern.

It offers a personal engagement, which includes reaching out in faith on behalf of those who seem to have exhausted their ability to hope for more than survival.

It offers a prayerful expression of solidarity within the purposes of God's creation, expressed in fellowship, a shared hope and a reckless giving of oneself for the wellbeing of the 'other'.

It offers the promise that every hurt, like every moment of mortality, can be embraced in a larger, more gracious kingdom of wholeness – simply because of our creator's generous love for each creature in our struggling, vulnerable humanness.

This good news is easily lost in the mayhem of the suffering and sickness on the plain of the world. It is best accessed and absorbed by the disciple by going up the mountain: with a total focus on Jesus the Saviour.

This enlightening is what equips and enables disciples to transform the church from a hopeless failure, to an agent of grace that enables hope against hope, salvation from suffering and resurrection from the dead.

The key is our Lord's desire to cast out the evil spirit of human narrowness, fear and prejudice. What we glimpse, by withdrawing to pay attention to him in all his glory, becomes the healing hopefulness of a kingdom beginning to unfold in our midst, but assured of a consummate wholeness in God's greater mercy.

Those of us who observe the discipline of going 'up the mountain' to see Jesus as the fulfilment of the law and the prophets, are those entrusted with a treasure that comes like balm to our human sickness. Not as a total solution in physical or medical terms – but as a soothing sign of the healing potential that can result as we come together. It is the miracle of a calm trust that all shall be well, but not a passive come-

what-may attitude, rather the empowerment of faith put into action.

It is the churches' responsibility to bring these unique forces together. We must develop a foundational focus in Jesus – as the fulfilment of the law and prophets – through which we approach every human desire for wholeness and hope. And a largeness of faith that can hold and transform all other struggles with sickness and suffering, by enacting and enabling an assurance of being noticed, cared for and connected with the promise of ultimate reconciliation – with self, with others, with one's maker.

The foundation in Jesus the crucified-one reminds us that the path to new life will be uneven, testing and sometimes almost engulfed by darkness and despair. This reality remains part of our human condition. Yet the mystery of new life arising from these challenges provides the sign that can underpin and nourish the prayerful faith that can be so transformative.

The contribution of the Church emerges from this intersection of the challenges of the plain and the exalted insights 'up the mountain'. We are called to action in terms of confronting the causes of diseases, including lack of education, stigma, and healthcare. Also, we are called to radical solidarity with those suffering, and the need to develop better systems of care, support and development. And all this within the deeper trust engendered by the discipline of spending time 'up the mountain'.

The interaction between these two sites of operation provides the challenge and confidence that the Christian faith uniquely offers. This is the saving, transforming dynamic that the Church is called to bring to all who cry from the darkness of suffering and sickness – 'help my unbelief'.

Questions for discussion

1. How do you see/experience the relationship between gathering for worship and engaging with sickness?
2. How can people of faith better show solidarity with those suffering from sickness? What is the importance of this face-to-face encounter in Mark 9?
3. What should we say to those who criticise our churches for 'failing' to provide solutions for sickness and suffering?
4. How can we challenge fear, stigmatisation and blame, and offer the agenda of faith, mutuality and hopeful humility?

5. What kind of local witness can Christians make?
 6. What are our responsibilities as global citizens?
-

Reflection and prayer

Lord, we come before you with hearts of praise and thanksgiving.

We give thanks for the ministry of your son, thanks for his life lived among those that society rejected, thanks for his mission to turn the existing order upside down. But our praise is tempered with sorrow.

We are deeply sorry for our failure to respond to Christ's calling, sorry for our lack of imagination and compassion, sorry for the assumptions we make, sorry for our greed for which someone else pays the price.

We have sinned. And we ask for your forgiveness. Lord, we believe in the grace of your healing, your power to mend all that is broken, and your desire for wholeness and renewal. We pray that we may be healed and made whole, so we discard our excuses that make us feel exempt from responsibility, and treat all affected by HIV in the name of Jesus. Amen.
(Christian Aid)

Action

Visit christianaid.org.uk/whatwedo and select 'HIV and malaria' to see what Christian Aid is doing. Consider what support you could give.

Look at netsnow.org to learn more about the work that Christian Aid partners are doing to combat malaria.

STUDY 8

MDG 7 – ensure environmental sustainability

Rev Kathy Galloway

Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

We can think it likely that either Paul, or another, wrote Ephesians as a general letter to a number of churches at a time of turmoil and unease. But in that process, it became a kind of working-out and clarifying of Paul's theology, a private meditation for a public reception, and central to that is a reflection on the divine purpose at the heart of the Christian message. So it is first of all, and above all, a great hymn of thanksgiving for God's ultimate principle of unity and reconciliation. Out of a divided humanity, God is making a united one in Christ.

But not just a united humanity. This is a passage with a cosmic vision. That redemption and reconciliation that has been in the mind of God from the beginning is universal; it is for the whole creation. Almost 2,000 years before Albert Einstein, here is recognition that there is no such thing as dead matter. Here is a great statement of a major Pauline theme – that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God, because that love and that promise extend to the whole of creation.

The tone and mode of this passage is one not only of thanksgiving but of assurance. Because there is nowhere that God's love has not extended, we can be confident in the love of God, who has chosen us unconditionally.

And these notes of thanksgiving and assurance are recapitulated and find their coda in Christ. This is a great love song to Christ. In the restoration of Christ into the life of God, the theological fault line is encompassed, and the whole natural order of creation becomes potentially full of the healing powers of life. Love is the element in which we dwell.

Respect for nature. Prudence must be shown in the management of all living species and natural resources, in accordance with the precepts of sustainable development. Only in this way can the immeasurable riches passed to us by nature be preserved and passed on to our descendants. The current unsustainable patterns

of production and consumption must be changed in the interest of our future welfare and that of our descendants.
(UN Millennium Declaration)²⁰

It is good to remember the integrity of humankind with the whole creation. Unless and until we recognise that what we do to the earth, we do to ourselves, we will be unable to ensure environmental sustainability. Human beings are a small part of the natural history of the earth, but have shaped it hugely. Our tendency to assume that the universe is at our disposal, that it has no intrinsic worth other than its utility to the human species, has made us careless to the point of extreme culpability. According to WWF in the last 25 years alone, we have destroyed 30 per cent of our non-renewable natural environment. It is a kind of blasphemy.²¹

The created order in all its complexity and beauty moved a quantum physicist to say that the appropriate response to it is one of sheer wonder and love. But such a celebration requires the dethronement of human ego and the birth of cooperation with, rather than domination over, nature. This created universe is alive with a life in which I participate, and in my participation, I am in Christ.

In Christ, the whole created order is raised. God being earthed, raises earth to heaven. We are encompassed by the stuff of eternity. Such stuff demands respect. Jesus embodied the potential of life lived in solidarity with the purposes of God's realm. All that degrades or denies that potential is a kind of blasphemy, all that cherishes and affirms it is praise.

Questions for discussion

1. What aspects of the natural world fill you with wonder and love, and move you to thanksgiving?
2. Where do you most feel a sense of loss or sadness, even of blasphemy, in considering the damage done to the earth by human activity?
3. What does it mean for you to imagine that the love of God extends to the whole of creation?
4. What kind of changes do you think we need to make in the interests of our future welfare and that of our descendants?

5. What implications might this have for your own way of life?
6. What resources does your faith offer you in confronting these challenges?

Reflection

The Church of Scotland is concerned that climate change poses a serious and immediate threat to people everywhere, particularly to the poor of the earth; and that climate change represents a failure in our stewardship of God's creation. We accept the need to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases urgently to avoid dangerous and irreversible climate change; and to promote a more equitable and sustainable use of energy.

(Church of Scotland Church and Society Council)

People sometimes ask why organisations such as Christian Aid, whose purpose is to overcome global poverty, should be concerned with climate change. Everyone who believes that poverty is an outrage against humanity has to be concerned about climate change because it affects the world's poorest and most vulnerable people first and most.

Climate change hits the nomadic herders in Northern Kenya, who trek hundreds of miles in search of water, only to encounter danger and conflict when they find some; and poor farming families in Bangladesh, forced by rising sea levels to leave their homes for temporary and illegal camps on embankments, where they cannot earn a living; and poor rural communities in Central America who live with increasingly frequent and intense hurricanes.

None of these people has more than a minimal responsibility for the carbon dioxide emissions that have caused and continue to exacerbate the current crisis. These are the people who have done the least to cause the problem and have the least resources to do anything about it. Organisations such as Christian Aid are certain from what our partners tell us that climate change causes loss of homes, land, livelihoods and security.

What we do to the earth, we do to ourselves. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than climate change. This created universe is alive with a life in which we participate, and in our participation we are in Christ. If we really believe that, our faith commits us to live more sustainably.

Prayer

This we know, the earth does not belong to us,
we belong to the earth.

This we know, all things are connected,
like the blood that unites one family.

This we know, we did not weave the web of life,
we are merely a strand in it.

This we know, whatever we do to the web,
we do to ourselves.

Let us give thanks for the gift of creation.
Let us give thanks that all things hold together in Christ.

(from Iona Abbey Worship Book)²²

Action

Visit christianaid.org.uk/actnow Consider joining Christian Aid's Climate Justice campaign and encouraging your church to do the same.

Consider signing up to green energy company Ecotricity:

ecotricity.co.uk/landing/?partner=CA3

By changing your electricity and gas supplier to Ecotricity, you'll be turning on to greener energy and helping raise money for Christian Aid too. Switch to Ecotricity and they will donate £60 to Christian Aid. They will also send you four free energy saving light bulbs helping you save up to £40 per year on your bill. Terms apply.

Christian Aid partner CCDB in Bangladesh

Christian Aid/Genevieve Lomax



Christian Aid partner CCDB provided Roban Biswas (pictured) with money that he used to buy Campbell ducks, which are adapted to the environment and help him earn a living

Roban Biswas lives in a water-logged area of Bangladesh, where the water has become salinated partly as a result of climate change.

Christian Aid partner the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) provided Roban with funds so that he could purchase ducks to rear for eggs and meat. Duck-farming is well-suited to conditions in the area.

Roban says that the money he earns from rearing ducks and selling their eggs has changed his family's lives. 'Now I can send my children to school. I can buy their school books and their exercise books,' he says.

CCDB is also supporting Roban's wife Sheila through her membership of the Golden Dream Forum, a savings and credit group, which provides women with training and livelihood opportunities.

Christian Aid has supported CCDB since 1998, in its work to improve the representation of the poor, tackle inequality and boost poor communities' access to healthcare, education and work.

STUDY 9

MDG 8 – develop a global partnership for development

Rev Graham Sparkes

Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

This is a very uncomfortable story. We are used to being told to stand on your own two feet, to give a fair day's work for a fair day's pay and to expect your just deserts in life. But in this story about labourers in a vineyard, Jesus seems to discard all such principles. Everything is turned upside down as those who have worked for only an hour and who surely only deserve a very small reward, get paid exactly the same as those who have toiled all day in the hot sun. Here is a story that breaks all the rules designed to control the way society functions.

Of course, those rules had brought about the problems in the first place. The labourers standing around in the market place were not lazy, they wanted to work. But all they could do was wait in the hope of being hired by landowners, who could pick and choose who they wanted. Not only were these labourers very poor, dependent on anything they could earn during the day to feed themselves that night, they were also extremely vulnerable. They had a precarious, insecure existence, forced to grab whatever was going for them in order to survive – and even to resent those who managed to get more favourable treatment.

In the face of these realities, Jesus offered a radical vision for a new way of ordering relationships. The deep inequalities and injustices that had reduced those labourers to a state of poverty and denied them any dignity are challenged by the shocking, life-giving generosity of the employer. It is not that he fails to honour any agreement he has made; rather, he refuses to be bound by conventions that diminish and divide. The simple fact is that the *needs* of every one of the labourers are much the same, and so they each receive the same.

It is definitely a story about generosity; yet just as importantly, it is about partnership. Instead of a concern for self-interest, the labourers are invited to recognise their shared situation, to see that they all have basic needs in common that makes them partners, and so to share and rejoice in building a generous solidarity that gives birth to a new equality. A new unity is called for.

In a world scarred by injustice and inequality, where the rules that govern trade and finance are too often designed to encourage the exploitation and oppression of those who are the poorest, we urgently need relationships of partnership that will overturn the old order. We need to be in solidarity with one another, recognising the needs we all have and learning to share generously. Wealth and power must be shared that all may find fullness of life. Do the labourers in the story understand this call to solidarity? Jesus does not tell us and we are left to wonder. Will we grasp the significance of partnership for our world today? It is time we understood that we're all in this together.

Questions for discussion

1. How do you respond to the story of the labourers in the vineyard? What does it say to you, overall? What words would you use to describe its impact and meaning?
2. By paying everyone the same, do you think the employer in the story acts in a just way? How do you understand justice?
3. The labourers in Jesus's story are very vulnerable, and poverty is often about a lack of power. Can you give examples of ways in which power is used to keep people in poverty? Are there stories from the past or present that illustrate what it means to empower people?
4. Discuss the different ways in which solidarity and partnership are needed in our local communities and in our world. Share some examples of partnership working in practice.
5. Explore some of the different kinds of partnership that exist. What might be the basis for strong, effective partnerships?
6. In what ways might you and your church express a commitment to partnership with those in our world who are poor and marginalised?

Reflection

God calls us to be in partnership. We are to partner God in being messengers of hope, healing and reconciliation. We are to be partners with God and one another in caring for creation, learning to protect the fragile earth on which we and future generations depend. We are

to partner one another to ensure the needs of all are met and poverty is ended. We are called to be in relationships of mutuality, working together in the search for the justice of God's coming kingdom.

Prayer

Our loving God, we thank you that in Jesus Christ you came to partner us in our humanity, sharing the glory and the pain of our life together. You teach us that we belong in relationships with you and one another.

When we are encouraged towards self-sufficiency, remind us of our dependence on the gifts and grace of others. When we become consumed with our own needs, call us to recognise our interrelatedness with all of creation.

Together may we learn to live in partnership, voicing our solidarity with all who experience poverty and injustice, so that your Spirit may lead us towards the coming kingdom where the last will be first.

Amen.

Action

See the Christian Aid report *Poverty Over: We're all in this Together* – christianaid.org.uk/images/were-all-in-this-together.pdf

The report's recommendations encourage the UK government to:

- push through its international contacts for additional measures that address the causes, not just the symptoms, of poverty
- ensure that the Department for International Development engages actively with United Nations agencies to frame a successor to the MDGs that addresses the weaknesses of their approach and maximises progress towards poverty eradication.

You might like to write a letter to the Prime Minister from your group, describing what you have been studying and urging these points. If you wish Christian Aid to comment on a draft before you post it, please send it to: churches@christian-aid.org

STUDY 10

Life before death

Janet Morley

Reading: Mark 10:17-27, 'Do not defraud the poor'

The story of Jesus and the rich man is very familiar. We have heard it before and usually pass over it quickly, believing (a) that we ourselves could hardly be described as rich and (b) that Jesus's recommendation to give all his money to the poor is an exaggeration for the sake of effect, or at least (please God) not a general rule for us all to observe.

But it is a very interesting dialogue, and in Mark's account includes some arresting details. He says that Jesus looks at the man who is so earnestly searching for 'eternal life' and warms to him – he 'loved him'. 'Eternal life' here is unlikely to mean 'life after death'; it is more likely to be an urgent question about how to live well, especially as a rich man surrounded by the temptations of wealth (see Mark 8:36).

Jesus certainly treats this question as one about ethical living. But he includes in his list from the Ten Commandments something that is not normally there: 'Do not defraud.'

What is he talking about? It seems that Jesus is referring to a large strand of Jewish teaching that explicitly protects the rights of the poorest and most vulnerable people. Those with assets and power are not only to be generous and charitable; they are also not to deny justice to the poor.

Living well – 'life before death' – entails recognising the human dignity and rights of those who do not have the power or influence to defend themselves against exploitation. For example, landowners hiring harvesters should not 'defraud labourers of their wage' (Malachi 3:5, NIV). The rich man no doubt owned land; this may be why Jesus reminds him of his obligation not to cheat the poor.

Apparently, it was common for landowners to delay paying the wages of day labourers, either because they didn't care whether or not people were able to eat that day, or because deferring payment or failing to pay at all added to their own assets. This practice went against the Jewish law (for example Deuteronomy 24:15; Leviticus 19:13; Job 31:38-39), and the early Christian communities also criticised this practice of the rich in the strongest terms. The book of James speaks of the 'wages

of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud' crying out to the Lord for justice, as the blood of Abel cried out against his murdering brother (James 5:4, NRSV).

In our contemporary world, one of the most significant ways in which the rich currently 'defraud' the poor is through the systematic dodging of taxes. Tax revenues provide governments with the wherewithal to sustain their country's infrastructure (for example, transport, and law and order) and offer some protection to the needy (such as benefits, healthcare and education). Businesses benefit, as all citizens do, from such expenditure.

But large corporations with interests in different parts of the world now have whole sections of staff devoted to planning how the minimum of tax may be paid in any of the countries in which they work. Different sections of companies are located in different tax regimes, and internally sell each other services and goods so as to rack up debt, where taxes are high, and income, where they are low.

Sometimes a company's presence in a tax haven amounts to no more than an office and a couple of staff or even just a computer, while all their real trade is done elsewhere. Weak and under-resourced revenue authorities in poor countries struggle to keep up.

The complex tax dodges of some corporations are almost impossible to trace and untangle. And governments, who have limited resources for pursuing revenue and want to compete with other countries to bring in business and employment, make deals with the rich and concede that they may pay less tax than they really owe. Christian Aid estimates that as much as US\$160bn (that's around one-and-a-half times the global aid budget), which could benefit the poor, is lost in this way.

Questions

Before discussing the passage, look up and read out all the references mentioned and then read out the story from Mark's gospel, so that you hear the conversation in context.

1. Why do you think Jesus loved the rich man?
2. Would you describe yourself as rich? If not, what sort of person would you say is rich? Do you aspire to be rich? (And why/why not?)
3. The story does not say whether the man followed Jesus's advice. What do you think he did, and what does this say about your own attitude to wealth?

4. How positive or negative do you feel about paying tax? Where do those feelings come from, exactly? Try making two lists and comparing them – one of the negative and another of the positive aspects of tax.
 5. What moral distinctions would you make between the following approaches to tax (and be honest about your own practice):
 - taking advantage of tax-free opportunities (for example ISAs)
 - evading tax that is due (for example paying cash in hand to avoid VAT, or failing to declare all your income to the tax office)
 - constructing legal ways of avoiding tax against the spirit of the law (for example inheritance tax planning)
 - investing in companies (including via your pension plan) that use tax havens in order to minimise tax paid and maximise shareholder profits.
 6. Why do you suppose Jesus's command, 'Do not defraud,' has received so little attention in church tradition?
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Reflection

There is probably no subject so hard to discuss openly as our financial affairs; many people fear the subject and fail to investigate how even their own finances are doing, let alone the world of global finance. We are surrounded by a culture that describes taxation as at best a necessary evil.

Many parts of the media give us the impression that 'the taxpayer' is let down by the wasteful expenditure of revenue. Very seldom are the benefits of contributing for the common good expounded. And while there is talk of 'benefit thieves', who take benefits they are not due, we do not tend to hear about 'tax thieves', who fail to pay the full tax they are due.

In such a climate, it is easy to feel 'entitled' to find any ways we can to evade tax. Even if we do not do this, many of us have pensions (the basis of our future financial security) that involve us indirectly in the world of tax havens. So working for a world where the poor are not defrauded will involve a good deal of personal heart-searching, as well as active campaigning.

Prayer

God of the whole earth,
defender of the poor, yet lover of the rich,
you hear the voice of those who are defrauded
of the right to a life before death.

We confess that we are involved in a murky world
where desire for self-enrichment defeats the common good.
Nothing we do is hidden from your sight;
you understand the deals that are made in secret.

You know how hard it is to be human
when we strive to rely on our wealth
instead of on you.

Call us into the company of your friends,
to be partners with the poor,
so that all may inherit your eternal life
promised in Jesus Christ.

Action

Review your own tax-paying practices and resolve to sort them out,
even if this means dismantling trust arrangements that will benefit you
or your heirs.

Visit christianaid.org.uk/actnow and consider getting involved in
Christian Aid's Trace the Tax campaign, and encouraging your church to
do the same.

Endnotes

- 1 un.org/millennium/webcast/statements/embarged.htm
- 2 Adapted by Christian Aid from Allan Boesak in *Gathered for Life: Official Report WCC VI Assembly, 1983*.
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- 3 World Bank – siteresources.worldbank.org/INTVIETNAMINVIETNAMESE/Resources/pfDeepa_mar.ppt
- 4 World Bank – siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVERTY/Resources/335642-1124115102975/1555199-1124115187705/ch2.pdf
- 5 World Bank – siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVERTY/Resources/WDR/approutl.pdf
- 6 World Food Program – wfp.org/hunger/stats
- 7 UNICEF – unicef.org/education/index_access.html
- 8 UN Development Fund for Women – womenfightpoverty.org/docs/WorldPovertyDay2007_FactsAndFigures.pdf
- 9 World Bank – <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>
- 10 UNICEF – unicef.org/publications/files/Achieving_the_MDGs_with_Equity-Pamphlet_EN_092010.pdf
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 WHO – who.int/bulletin/volumes/88/12/10.011210.pdf
- 13 Alexander Macalister cited in Orr, James, MA, DD, General Editor, Definition for 'MIDWIFE', International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE).
- 14 WHO – who.int/making_pregnancy_safer/topics/maternal_mortality/en/
- 15 WHO – who.int/features/qa/12/en/
- 16 Ibid.
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- 23 *Poverty Over: We're all in this Together*, Christian Aid, 2010, christianaid.org.uk/images/were-all-in-this-together.pdf
- 24 *Poverty Over*, Christian Aid, 2009, christianaid.org.uk/resources/policy/poverty-over.aspx
- 25 *Theology and International Development*, christianaid.org.uk/images/theology-internationaldevelopment-May2010.pdf
- 26 christianaid.org.uk/ActNow/trace-the-tax/index.aspx

Further information

What do we mean by 'poverty'?

If by poverty we are referring to the bottom one per cent (or five per cent or 10 per cent) of the world's population, then there will always be people living in poverty. Christian Aid has a clear understanding of what it means to live in poverty. It is more than the level of income, as poverty is multi-dimensional. Poverty is a lack of opportunity, a lack of power over one's own life and prospects, a lack of human dignity, where human flourishing is denied due to a variety of factors. Poverty is disempowerment and the injustices that result.

Ending poverty means enhancing the power of the individual to make fundamental, although not unlimited, choices about economic, social, personal and political aspects of his or her own life. It cannot be limited to treating the symptoms of poverty, important though that is. Real progress will be made when the systematic and structural causes of poverty are challenged. Those in poverty must be supported to take power over the constraints they face; those in power must be held accountable.

The MDGs

As we suggested in the Introduction, the MDGs provided a positive starting point for eradicating poverty, not least in raising the profile of a shared global desire. However, despite the progress that has been made, there are serious shortfalls. Those who share the vision of ending poverty must ask why a number of the MDGs are not on track. The answer may be unpalatable, but as each year passes it becomes more obvious.

The essential purpose of Christian Aid's Poverty Over approach commits us to exposing the scandal of poverty and taking practical steps to root it out, by challenging and changing the structures and systems that are the fundamental cause of poverty.

Notes for group leaders

The group leader is more of a facilitator than a teacher – it is his or her role to create a relaxed atmosphere so that each member of the group feels comfortable to share personal thoughts and experiences.

The facilitator should be able to hold the discussion together, draw some key insights from the group members and consider some practical outcomes.

Adapt the studies for talks

These studies would provide an excellent framework for a series of sermons. Such practical topics are often avoided in churches because they deal with difficult and complex topics. However, by using the passages provided and taking guidance from the insights given, a congregation can benefit greatly from being led to a deeper understanding.

We recommend careful reading and study of the suggested passages. Then consider the likely answers to the discussion questions that relate the topic to our contemporary world.

- On what key points would you like to focus?
- How might you relate these to your congregation?
- What would you like them to learn?
- What are the challenges you will leave with people?
- How do you hope they will respond?

Further reading

Christian Aid has produced a number of resources to help you develop your understanding of international development.

Poverty Over: We're all in this Together, Christian Aid, 2010 – a report looking at the MDGs and a future global agreement.²³

Poverty Over, Christian Aid, 2009 – our view of what constitutes poverty and how it can be eradicated.²⁴

Theology and International Development, Christian Aid – a report exploring the theology that underpins the work of Christian Aid.²⁵

From Hope to Action: Living out our Faith – a set of resources to help churches respond in practical ways.

Trace the Tax – helpful information on our international tax campaign.²⁶

For all of these and many other resources, please visit our website: christianaid.org.uk

If you would like to contact us about these studies you can phone +44 (0)20 7620 4444 or email churches@christian-aid.org

Phone numbers for regional offices in Britain and Ireland

Loughborough	01509 265013	Southampton	023 8070 6969
Birmingham	0121 200 2283	Warrington	01925 573769
Bristol	01454 415923	Glasgow	0141 221 7475
Exmouth	01395 222304	Perth	01738 643982
Isle of Man	01624 672224	Edinburgh	0131 220 1254
Leeds	0113 244 4764	Cardiff	029 2084 4646
London, Essex, Kent, Surrey and Sussex	020 7523 2321	Bangor	01248 353 574
Newcastle	0191 228 0115	Carmarthen	01267 237 257
Norwich	01603 620051	Belfast	028 9064 8133
Oxford	01865 246818	Cork	+353 (0)238 841 468
Peterborough	01733 345755	Dublin	+353 (0)1611 0801

Christian Aid is a Christian organisation that insists the world can and must be swiftly changed to one where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty.

We work globally for profound change that eradicates the causes of poverty, striving to achieve equality, dignity and freedom for all, regardless of faith or nationality. We are part of a wider movement for social justice.

We provide urgent, practical and effective assistance where need is great, tackling the effects of poverty as well as its root causes.

'We have a great deal to be proud of in Christian Aid, the churches' agency for development'

Archbishop Rowan Williams

Christian Aid provides many resources to help churches engage with issues of poverty and injustice.

christianaid.org.uk/churches