



Truth and lies about poverty: a group study guide

Introduction

This study is written to help groups explore attitudes to poverty, and can be used alongside the report, *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty* (available at www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandlies). This session can be used to consider how injustice can be sustained by misinformation, prejudice and ignorance. Carrying stereotypes, received wisdom and prejudices about others is part of being human – where we do not have reliable, first-hand experience, we tend to fill in the gaps ourselves. These exercises help to make us aware of these gaps, and begin to think about our attitudes in the light of Jesus Christ's example.

It will be important to be sensitive to the variety of experiences of people within your group, and not assume that no-one has personal experience of poverty.

You will need: copies of the “benefits housing scandal work” poem for each members of the group, pens, paper, and possibly a flipchart for recording the ways of responding locally. The session should ideally not last longer than 90 minutes.

How we talk about others

Begin with a profile of a people living in poverty today. Print out and read the automatically-generated poem at the end of this study. “Benefits housing scandal work” is created by a mathematical process, taking the most frequently used words in a random selection of articles about social security in the Daily Express. Even though it's nonsense, it conveys the tone and atmosphere of much of the debate.

Ask: are there any phrases or words that stand out in the poem? Are there words missing that we might expect to be there?

Create a tabloid story

Using the words in the poem, spend ten minutes constructing a headline and opening for a tabloid article. Divide into sub-groups and introduce a light element of competition if there are enough people in the room. Allow connecting words – “if, when, that, and etc” but no others.

Listen to the contribution and compare them.

Questions

- **What impression of people living on benefits does this give? Could you make a profile of a typical person in poverty from this?**
- **How would this profile match up with common perceptions of poverty in the UK? What differences might there be?**
- **How many people like this do we know personally? What difference do you think this makes?**

The truth and lies quiz

You can use this quiz to introduce a discussion of perceptions and reality about poverty.

Perceptions

1. What proportion of the UK population believes that “large numbers falsely claim benefits”
(Over 80 per cent)
2. How many people in Britain believe that benefits are too high.
(Over 50 per cent)
3. What proportion of the UK public says that the poor could cope if they handled their money correctly.
(60 per cent)
4. What is the most commonly cited cause of UK child poverty among churchgoers and the general public?
(Parents are unwilling to work.)
5. And the second most commonly cited cause?
(Addiction to drink and drugs)

And reality

1. According to official estimates, less than 0.9 per cent of the benefits budget is lost to fraud.
2. The sick and the unemployed are the least satisfied and happy with life. Since 1979, benefit levels have halved relative to the average wage.
3. An unemployed person over 25 will receive 40 per cent of the minimum income standard calculated by the Joseph Rowntree foundation, while a couple with two children will get 60 per cent of their needs. All evidence is that people living on benefits manage their money very carefully
4. The majority of working-age households in poverty are in employment. 1.4 million of these work fewer hours than they would wish, moving in and out of low-paid and insecure jobs.
5. In fact less than 4 per cent of people on benefits report any kind of addiction.

Over 13 million people live in poverty today. Of those who are of working age over half are in households that are working. Poverty means that these people struggle to provide the basics for their families, and are hindered from participating in normal social life.

Bible reflection

Read the account of Jesus' encounter with Bartimaeus Mark 10.46–52 .

- **What is the crowd's initial reaction to Bartimaeus? What attitudes or beliefs might be behind this response?**
- **What causes the sudden change in attitude?**
- **How does Jesus engage with Bartimaeus?**
- **How does Jesus use his closest followers – the crowd – to meet Bartimaeus' needs?**
- **What might this mean for Jesus' closest followers today?**

At the beginning of the story, Bartimaeus is outside the crowd calling out for recognition and for help. For the crowd following Jesus this is an annoyance and they exercise their power by silencing him.

Jesus uses the crowd – his most enthusiastic supporters – to bring Bartimaeus to the centre, and even though the man's need was obvious, Jesus invites him to say what he wants.

There is a dramatic tension in the story, that getting close to Jesus results in attention going to those who are on the outside. This is a commonplace observation for evangelism. Bartimaeus' problem is not one of spiritual blindness: from the outset he understands who Jesus is and puts his trust in him. Bartimaeus' problem is that his physical blindness excludes him from the rest of society.

This short passage opens up questions about who exercises power, whose voices are heard, and the role that Jesus invites his followers to play.

Interestingly, it was during this trip to Jericho that Luke records Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus.

- **Where do we see power being used to silence others today?**
- **Return to the caricatures produced earlier in the newspaper poetry exercise and come back to the question of how many people like this we know personally?**
- **What might that mean for the church today?**

The truth and lies campaign produced by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Church of Scotland looks at the way people living in poverty have been misrepresented in public debate. Myths – such as the idea that large numbers of people live in poverty because they are unwilling to work, or that the benefits system gives people an easy life – are sustained by politicians and the media by distorted statistics and misleading facts.

Respond

How could churches respond to this locally?

- Write to newspapers and local radio when you see a distorted view of people living in poverty being promoted in the media.
- Write to your MP asking how they will challenge myths about poverty (you can find resources at

www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandlies)

- If you haven't personally experienced poverty, get acquainted with poverty. A first step is to be willing to put ourselves into learn from people who experience poverty and to allow them first to speak about their situation.
- There are a few short stories on the joint public issues website <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truth-and-lies-stories/> and many more at <http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/what-we-do/whatwedo/voicebox/>
- Better still, encourage the group to make connections with people living in poverty. One of the reasons that the lies about poverty can persist is that there is very little contact between people of different economic groups. Most foodbanks note the circumstances of the people they distribute food to. What opportunities could we take advantage of to meet and talk with others?
- Working for justice can take the form of challenging big institutions, the media and government. It can also take the form of quietly challenging the status quo that labels and prevents others from speaking. Be prepared to do this in conversations every day.

Prayer

Loving God,
we pray for people who know what the truth of poverty is,
who struggle with unemployment, ill health, caring responsibilities,
who face the daily strain of putting food on the table and keeping a roof over their head,
who long to fulfil their God-given potential.

We pray for the people with power who are called to be truth-tellers,
For the politicians, the media, the decision-makers, the opinion formers,
Who can reinforce stigma or bring new clarity,
Who know that without truth there cannot be justice.

And we pray for ourselves, struggling or comfortable.
Help us as we try to tell your truths in a complicated world.
Open our eyes to the people around us, people who are made in your image,
that we might love them as we are loved.
Give us strength as we seek to do your will in your world,
And help us to pray: your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

We ask these prayers in the name of your son, who leads us into truth
Amen

Thank you for using this guide. We'd be very interested to know what worked for your group, and what worked less well. Please drop us an email with comments or ideas to enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk
Thank you.

Benefits. Housing. Scandal. Work.

Benefits housing scandal work

Britain overpaid welfare claim families

Cameron vow workers workshy Britons

Spongers bill £100m million contempt

Immigrants heads broken

Migrants increase bonanza

Brown's tourism lose court prove blew rules

Single clawed disasters hit government taxpayer

Unacceptable lottery fat £1m bleeds ambush pay

Scrap sex system

Voters scrounge

Handed prisoners women

Time failure mums incapacity hunter fraud

Soak-the-rich foreigners cost ceiling

Heaven told high nations upped roll aiding strikes

Cheats burden reveals job handouts £300m

Call!

All-time shake-up

Foreign dry deplorable dole drugs hits fury £1.85bn paradise

Fit!

New invasion wake-up cash rule policy

Parent holds broke jobs

Taxpayers £20.8bn well-off £8bn

Euro Tories thug Labour's websites

Two-year weak swindlers pick ill

Labour exposes ten children.

This text is based on the most common words in a random sample of articles about social security appearing in the Daily Express between 2008 and 2011. The text was automatically generated with the word-order strictly following the frequency with which the words occurred (in descending order of frequency). The only interventions were to break the resulting sequence of words into three-line groupings, with the first four words forming the title and the last four a final free-standing line: and to add seven punctuation marks.

Because of the limited and simple vocabulary used in this type of tabloid story, it's perhaps not surprising that the automatic procedure generates what may appear to be coherent phrases. And because of the nature of that vocabulary, these phrases are rather ugly.

From l'artsocial.org

Curious to know how “heaven” and “paradise” came to be included in the list? Here's a clue...

Why Britain is spongers' heaven

MEDDLING EU judges sparked outrage last night after giving scrounging foreigners the green light to sponge thousands of pounds from British taxpayers.

In a blow to millions of hard-working Britons, immigrants will now be entitled to claim rent, income support, council tax and a host of other benefits simply if their children go to school in the UK...