



THE ARCHBISHOP  
OF YORK

*The Archbishop wrote in the [Yorkshire Post](#) today at the start of Challenge Poverty Week England and Wales. The article follows in full*

How are your neighbours getting on? Are they keeping well and riding out these challenging times? Or are they struggling and worried as we head towards a second winter with Covid?

I ask because, as you may recall, a newfound neighbourliness was one of the remarkable early by-products of the pandemic. A flurry of polls in those first few weeks revealed that vast numbers of Brits had spoken with their next door neighbours for the first time, or got to know one another better. Perhaps you were among that group. For many, what began as clapping on the doorstep, led to a genuine rapport and regard. Our understanding of who is important expanded to include those who stacked the supermarket shelves, delivery drivers, postal workers and all sorts of essential workers in ways we hadn't thought of before. We looked out for one another, picking up groceries and checking on each other's welfare, and our communities were the better for it. Hopefully many of those new acquaintances are now established friendships.

It is often easy to dwell on what divides us, but as we look beyond the pandemic we should really strive to protect and retain that unity and sense of mutual care that helped us through the first lockdowns.

Doing so will require us to consider some profound questions. What should community look like after the pandemic? How do we tackle the deep-rooted injustices and inequalities that existed before Covid, and which meant communities with the least suffered the most? Who is most at risk of being ignored or marginalised as we rebuild and, crucially, how do we prevent that from happening?

This week, I am reflecting upon those questions myself, as many people and groups take part in [Challenge Poverty Week](#) in England and Wales. The central theme this year is 'community after Covid', and participants are discussing what needs to change so that everyone can thrive as we emerge from the pandemic.

Everyone will have their own answers and ideas, but one thing is clear: the voices of people in poverty need to become more audible and influential in public debate.

Tackling poverty must be one of our key national focuses. Even before the pandemic, the wealth gap had widened and regional inequality was stark. Household wealth in the south east is more than twice as high as in the north east, and poverty is holding back millions of families and children. We must resolve to find ways to redesign our economic systems, to loosen poverty's grip, so everyone can live a full and dignified life. We cannot and must not have a recovery where the wealthy can speed off down the fast lane, while others are left broken down on the hard shoulder.

The Bible teaches us to love our neighbours, and to treat them as we would like to be treated. In the book of James, we are cautioned against

showing hospitality or favouritism to wealthy guests while neglecting poor ones. Too often though, isn't that what some of our ingrained systems do? People with first-hand experience and insight of poverty are left out of key discussions.

There are alternatives. [The Poverty Truth Network](#), which has brought decision makers and people in poverty together through commissions in many communities, is driven by the mantra that "nothing about us without us is for us". Its approach, putting people together in the same room to pool their wisdom and find solutions to poverty, should not be seen as radical. It should be the norm.

Think how many problems, around Universal Credit or school food provision, for instance, could have been averted if people using those systems in their everyday lives were part of the discussion from the outset.

Changing our approach requires a shift in mindset. One of my predecessors as Archbishop of York, William Temple, was an architect of Britain's post-war recovery, which brought us the welfare state and the NHS. Decisions then were shaped by a recognition that all citizens depend on, and have a responsibility to one another. That truth has perhaps become blurred in recent years, but Covid has brought it back into focus. None of us can operate in isolation. Our interests are all interconnected. And I believe, you won't be surprised to hear, that the church has a part to play in rekindling, and articulating that good vision of what a good society might look like, a community of communities where we celebrate our diversity, and our regional identity, and where we work together.

Just as we individuals should continue looking out for our neighbours, so too our national systems should demonstrate our communal concern for one another.

This week, in Challenge Poverty Week, I'll be listening to those of our neighbours who have lived in poverty for too long and who have been ignored for too long, and I will be considering how we can work together to head towards social justice for our whole community.

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