

“In the UK, we are aware that there’s poverty in the developing world. In the UK church, we are aware of the Great Commission and that there are loads of unreached people groups around the world. But poverty in our own country? Huge areas and groups of people unreached within our nation? Surely not!

“This book is a HUGE wake up call to the church in the UK. We desperately need to listen to the facts, figures, cultural knowledge and ministry wisdom that Mez has gathered here. Millions of souls, the health of the church, and the glory of Christ are at stake.”

Matt Oliver, Pastor of Hardwick Baptist Church,
Stockton-on-Tees

“Warning: this book may cause you to do something costly for God’s kingdom. Written with the blood, sweat and tears of raw personal and ministry experience. A densely researched analysis of our nation’s class, culture and economic systems that contribute to very real poverty. Providing a biblical framework, cultural insight and spotlight experiences from the trenches. A voice crying in the spiritual wasteland advocates for the poorest communities in our land. How long will the church look away from the poor? Leaving them to die in the devil’s gutter whilst we look on from the safety of the church.”

Fontaine Selway, Women’s Worker for Gracemount
Community Church, Edinburgh

“I suspect that most British evangelicals have little idea what life is like on a council estate; we rarely enter these communities and their people don’t venture into our churches. This book is the insider’s perspective the church needs, revealing what life is like in this hidden world. Mez gives in-depth explanations for the current disparity, and offers realistic solutions. I cannot recommend it highly enough and

pray that it will help the church reach communities that desperately need the Gospel.”

Nathan Young, Pastor of New Life Church, Middlesbrough

“Coming from a very middle-class background, being a part of 20schemes has turned upside-down almost everything I thought about mercy ministry. Many have wondered why we would move our young family into a scheme to plant a local church and this book goes a long way to answer why.

“In this challenging and sometimes hard to swallow read, Mez holds nothing back. He presents a well-researched overview of poverty in the UK, and intertwined with his own personal experiences and that of others, he uses the Bible to show why and how the church should step up and respond in taking the gospel to all people.

“Let this book provoke you for the sake of those neglected, and change you as you heed the call of Christ.”

Lindsey Stewart, Pastor’s wife, Hope Community Church
Barlanark, Glasgow

“It is a great sadness that the UK evangelical church has not been able to effectively reach the UK poor with the good news of Christ crucified — even with generations of well-intentioned believers. We need to sit down and consider why and explore the issue of poverty more deeply. In his usual clear and concise way, Mez and his guest collaborators have gone some way to put an excellent resource in our hands.

“If you want a book that you believe is 100% right on everything, then buy a Bible. Inevitably you will be provoked and challenged as you read this book. But it is a vital voice in an area where we seriously, and collectively, need help. In it we have insight not just

from somebody who comes from a people group we are desperately trying to reach, but from somebody who has spent the past 20+ years as a believer seeking to do the same and seeing fruit. That gives us double the reason to listen. And that's before we get down to the serious research, testimonies and experiences of other gospel workers in deprived areas that make this book a valuable asset in reaching our deprived communities."

Steve Walker, Pastor of Hope Community Church
Middleton, Leeds

"Warning: this book may change you; it's a powerful, thorough, much needed challenge to evangelical church in the UK. Everyone needs to read this. It's easy to read but hard to swallow. With moving testimony and stark research, it helps highlight the disparity and challenges faced in reaching the least, the last and the lost in our society. The schemes, valleys and council estates of our nation need Jesus; they need healthy churches; and they need you to support those churches."

Will Savory, Pastor of Soul Church, Neath

"It is easy to say that we share the ambition of Paul to preach the gospel where Christ is not known. It is far harder to action that ambition when we discover that many of the places where Christ is not known are the poorest communities in the UK. The contributors to this insightful book share the conviction that our Lord Jesus reaches people in communities of all kinds (including those in the poorest areas) through healthy gospel churches. Prepare to be informed and educated; prepare to be reminded of the saving power and wisdom of Christ; prepare to be made to think differently; prepare to be challenged and rebuked; prepare to be driven to prayer and action. This is not a comfortable book to read, but it is a book that needs to be read. It reflects the heart of our Lord Jesus for those often neglected

by others. Spurgeon once said, ‘The joy of Jesus is the joy of saving sinners.’ This book calls us to believe that His joy is saving people who live in every kind of community, including the poorest.”

Jonathan Prime, Associate National Director of FIEC
(Local Ministries)

“I loved this book. Having lived my entire life in needy northern towns so much of it resonated with my experience, both within the church and outside. As someone planting a church in one of these towns, it highlighted almost every issue we’ve encountered as we’ve sought to build a team, find partners, raise support, and reach our community with the gospel. Mez’s call for the UK church to recognise and repent of our historic neglect of forgotten places and people, to reassess where our helping might be hurting, and to renew an active and sacrificial support for those seeking to reach the least, the last, and the lost is exactly what we need right now. I pray the Lord might use it to build his kingdom and bring glory to his name.”

Graham Thompson, Pastor of Spen Valley Church, Cleckheaton

“Working in a scheme, one experience people express repeatedly is the feeling of not being heard by the police, social workers, doctors and teachers. For too many generations in Scotland, the impoverished voice hasn’t been heard in our seminaries, churches and culture. The Least, the Last and the Lost is a significant book, as it steps in the right direction to equip people to listen for that voice. May this book launch many more like it. Mez has assembled a group of contributors, as well as giving you years of his experience and research. This has produced a resource for planters, preachers, and people in Kingdom work to read, process, and practice in the UK church.”

Chris Davidson, Pastor of Merkinch Free Church, Inverness

“As someone who comes from a poor coal mining family in the forgotten South Wales valleys, I’ve worked in dire poverty and also in middle class contexts. I feel like Mez: a class-chameleon! This book resonates with me in a big way. It’s an overdue and honest clarion call to the UK church to wake up to the beautiful harvest on its doorstep that’s so often neglected.

“Mez is doing a great service to the church here: speaking up for the poor and needy, gathering hard data to intelligently argue the cause of the gospel for those who have no voice. We all need to hear these challenges and not close our minds to gracious rebuke. It might sting, but rather than defending our positions, we must do some soul searching and ask ‘What can we do to answer the call of God to the poor and oppressed?’ Take this is opportunity to grow your love for God in loving the unlovely. Don’t miss the blessing!”

Dr Joel Morris, Executive Director of Union School of Theology, Wales

“This is a great book. Insightful, challenging, practical and heartfelt. Mez uses facts, research, personal experience and the Bible to blow apart our common and damaging misconceptions about ministry to the poor. He has done us all a huge favour by refusing to talk about ministry to the poor on the terms set by middle class churches. This book packs a punch because it allows those on our schemes and estates to set the agenda for ministry in their communities. It is packed with good theology and practical wisdom but more than anything it is a cry to the rest of us to wake up to what’s going on in our schemes and estates. Stunning insights, terrible tales, lived experience, and a radical rethinking of ministry to the poor are to be found in these pages. Read this book or shut your mouth.”

Neil MacMillan, Pastor of Cornerstone Free Church;
Moderator of Free Church of Scotland; Director of Church Planting Generation

“In this book, Mez has brought together current data, lived experiences and a pastor’s love and longing for people in a way that will be a loving challenge and encouragement to many. A timely and important work that I know will be used as people plant and revitalise churches and bring the good news of Jesus to the millions living in the lost and forgotten communities of the world. This is a book that all church leaders should read.”

Steve Robinson, Senior Pastor of Cornerstone Church
Liverpool; Director of Cornerstone Collective, Acts29GB

“In The Least, The Last, and The Lost, McConnell shares his razor-sharp analysis of the struggles of those living in poverty and how it has impacted the development of the church in modern Britain. More than just theological, this book charts the history of the church in the UK today. More than just sociological, this book points to a hope that is transcendent. More than just recounting grievances, this book sets out a vision for the spiritual renewal for those living in hard places. I truly believe that were church leaders to take time considering the conclusions of this book, then the result will be many more healthy churches in our poorest communities.”

Dr. Matthew Spandler-Davison, Director of Acts
29; Director of Church in Hard Places; Executive
Director of 20schemes

THE
LEAST

THE
LAST

& THE
LOST

Also by Mez McConnell:

Church in Hard Places

First Steps Series

Is There Anybody Out There?

The Creaking on the Stairs

Preparing for Baptism

MEZ MCCONNELL

THE
LEAST

THE
LAST

& THE
LOST

Understanding Poverty in the UK &
the Responsibility of the Local Church



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First published in Great Britain in 2021

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78397-328-6

Typeset by Pete Barnsley (CreativeHoot.com)

Evangelical Press (EP Books), an imprint of 10Publishing

Unit C, Tomlinson Road, Leyland, PR25 2DY, England

www.epbooks.org

epbooks@10ofthose.com

1 3 5 7 10 8 6 4 2

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FOREWORD

Please don't say that this book is thought provoking. It is – as much as anything I've read – but that is not its purpose.

Please don't say that it's informative. It is – I have learnt huge amounts – but that is not its purpose.

Please don't say that it's emotional. It is – I am not ashamed to say I have cried while reading it – but that is not its purpose.

This book introduces you to a joy that is spoken of throughout the Bible, a joy that has been known in the church for most of its history. But, somewhere along the line, certainly before I was born, Christians have forgotten it.

What is this joy?

It is a joy Paul describes as a fragrant offering in Philippians 4:18. It was an offering that was pleasing to God, but also a mark of the sincerity of the church's love towards him. Paul, speaking to the church at Corinth, said this to them: "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8, ESV). He goes on in verse 9 to say: "As it is written, 'He has distributed freely, *he has given to the poor*; his righteousness endures forever.'"¹

The ministry of this service was not only concerned with supplying the needs of the saints, but with overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. It reminded both the givers and the recipients of the gospel. Paul's aim for every church is that we

would know this joy and blessing in our own giving to the poor.

As a church, we at Mount Pleasant felt that Scripture was clear on this issue. We wanted to partner with a church that was reaching the poor. We weren't sure what it would look like, but we did it initially because the Bible says we should. And so we formed a partnership with Niddrie Community Church in Edinburgh, Scotland.

We gave money because the Bible says we should. We prayed because the Bible says we should. We offered help because the Bible says we should.

Yet, what happened next was extraordinary. We started to *feel invested* in what was happening in Edinburgh. If they were blessed, we were blessed. If a soul was saved, it felt like we were involved. If an addict was doing a Bible study, we felt their excitement. If a new project started, it encouraged us. If they had a struggle, we wrestled in prayer.

In lockdown, we had a joint online prayer meeting. A lot of children from our church came to that prayer meeting and one little girl from a middle-class family sticks in my mind. She saw a young single mum speaking about how Jesus was changing her life and it moved her so much that she prayed for her. This little girl didn't see a charity case but a sister in Jesus – and it blessed both of them.

We have been blessed in so many ways by our partnership. It's not just about money. We have learnt and been challenged. We get more than we give. The partnership is real. One time we even received a financial gift from them, which moved our church. We have learnt about how to deal with people who are struggling. Our church plant in Neath, for example, which is reaching similar people to Niddrie, has felt strengthened by those in a similar spiritual battle.

When Mez came and preached, a large number of people in our church who are from council estates were just so

thrilled one of “their own” was preaching. At first, I was frustrated by this. After all, I had been a church planter in one of the estates. But then a teenager who was in care sat at the back of the church listening. She’d been coming along for a while and every week I had tried to talk to her. Sometimes she would respond and often she wouldn’t. It was a real struggle. But, after listening to Mez speak that day, she was friendly and chatty. I think it changed the way she saw our church. I remember feeling so happy at her laughing away with others after the service that I thought my heart was going to explode out of my chest.

I am so glad we are partners with Niddrie Community Church. I believe that our relationship blesses both churches in a way that is thoroughly biblical.

As you travel through Wales, you will see chapels of every theological stripe in many of our poorest communities. These buildings remind us of what Christians in the past felt about the poor. Their highest priority was to make sure these people had access to the gospel. Read your church history. William Tyndale, John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon. All had a love for the poor. Wesley says,

We came to Newcastle about six; and, after a short refreshment, walked into the town. I was surprised: so much drunkenness, cursing and swearing, (even from the mouths of little children,) do I never remember to have seen or heard before, in so small a compass of time. Surely this place is ripe for Him who “came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”²

Our Christian forebears put their money where their mouth was. Where is the modern church in the UK putting its money? I believe a terrible sin has occurred in the UK church and nobody has noticed. When I worked in a church plant in a

poor community, we had no money, and nobody asked us for any. Yet, when I went to a more affluent city-centre church, I was shocked by endless para-church groups expecting money from us. I regularly received begging letters from a host of spurious organisations. Why are local churches footing the bill for Christian agencies who claim to be helping the poorest members of our society? In my experience, some of these organisations are totally deceitful. Some of them get offended when I refuse their request to come and speak at our church. Some have even been known to turn up at our services to hand out leaflets or “prayer letters” encouraging members to set up direct debits. Even people who beg are never this rude. This is stealing from the church, from God and from the poor. It is as Campbell Morgan once observed: “One cannot help the conviction that many of our organizations are fungus growths, sapping the Church’s life and contributing nothing to her fruitfulness.”³

As you read this book, I would ask you to look at your direct debits and ask yourself if this is why God has given you money. Are we stealing from the poor to finance Christian para-church organisations? Pastors should look at their church budgets and honestly assess if their giving actually helps the least, the last and the lost.

How much of our giving is, in reality, stealing from the poor?

God has provided His people with enough money to help the poor and those serving in poor communities. Millions are going to hell in our poorest communities and, in some case, we are giving our money to nonsense.

The great commission is for *churches*. For 2,000 years, baptism has been done in *local churches*, regardless of denomination. Our giving should likewise be done through *local churches*. And our poorest communities are ripe for Him who “came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”.⁴

If we love God and if we love the least, the last and the lost, then we must demonstrate it with the money that God has given to us.

This book is written in a very easy style. It slowly but surely untangles the lies people believe about the poor. It is moving but not patronising. It is rigorous but still interesting. It creates sympathy, but at the same time it is brutally honest. It speaks from Scripture about the issue. Don't respond to it by being a hearer only. Be a doer.

We read in almost every page of the New Testament about God's concern for the poor. When the New Testament talks about giving, it talks of the rich church helping the poor church.

If you want to know the joy of God in your life, maybe it's time to think about the way you give, and to whom you give.

I pray that this book will encourage you to do that.

Steve Levy

Pastor, Mount Pleasant Church, Swansea, Wales

PREFACE

Before you scan the contents page of this book and then put it back on the shelf, can I just have your attention for a few moments?

It would be easy to look at a book like this and think to yourself: *This is just for pastors or missionaries or Christians in full-time vocational service.*

But you would be wrong to think that.

This book is the product of over 20 years of thought and thousands of hours of research. This book is for any and every Christian who has an interest in the poor and the oppressed.

I am hoping that includes you.

At heart, this is a book about how to love God better by loving the least, the last and the lost.

So, don't put it back. Take it to the counter. Pay for it. Take it home. Read it.

Ask the Lord to change your heart.

Who knows, maybe this book will inspire you to change the direction of your life to the glory of God.

Mez McConnell

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who contributed to this book (not least, those who have written the Spotlight sections) and the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) for financing the research behind the book. Every person who buys the book will have access to all of our data regarding poverty in the UK. They will also have access to details on the FIEC and where they are in relation to the least, the last and the lost. Particular thanks must go to Timothy Hein for his hundreds of hours of dedicated research. Without him, I wouldn't have a book. The real fruit of his labours can be found in that online resource.

Just a small disclaimer: some of the contributors to this book may not necessarily agree with me on every issue, just as I might disagree with them on some things. I was looking less for agreement in this book, and more for opening up a dialogue. To be clear, the FIEC funded the research, but they don't necessarily endorse every opinion expressed within these pages.

I would like to thank my wife, Miriam, and my girls, Lydia and Keziah.

Thanks also to my church and to those behind the scenes who have helped to make this book become a reality.

I thank Jesus most of all for my salvation because, without Him in my life, this work would not be now in your hands.

INTRODUCTION:

WHY HAVE I WRITTEN THIS BOOK?

When I pick up a book, several questions run through my mind. *Why has the author written it? What's the point of it? What does the author expect from me at the end of it?* They are reasonable questions, and I wouldn't expect any different as you now hold this book in your hands.

To fully appreciate my motives and objectives in writing this book, I want to take the time to share some of my life story with you. I'm hopeful that this will help answer the *why* question. As to the *what* questions, I pray that the answer to those will become more evident as the book unfolds.

A CLASS CHAMELEON

As I type these words on an expensive laptop, I am sitting in a nice house. What's even better is that it's my own house. I have been married for over 20 years to Miriam, I have two teenage daughters, three foster children and two dogs. My wife and children love *Downton Abbey* and correcting my grammar. My wife screws her face up in disgust when I say "bog" instead of "bathroom". My girls get annoyed when I ask what's for tea instead of what's for dinner. Both of my girls aspire to university degrees, with one hoping to be a teacher and the other a scientist.

So far, so typically middle class. At least, that is how it would appear from a material perspective. But my family and I live in a scheme (or council estate) on the east side of Edinburgh. We live and work within a community – Niddrie – which is designated “deprived” by the UK government (more on this later). Therefore, from a geographical perspective, we are anything but middle class.

I live and move, somewhat uneasily, between these two worlds. I feel most comfortable socially within the scheme culture, but I have learned to navigate, and even appropriate, some of the cultural sensitivities of the middle class. So, I like a chippie, a beer and watching the boxing with my pals on the one hand, but I also like reading all kinds of literature and have high educational hopes for my girls, on the other. This has left me as somewhat of a “class chameleon”. I have no impulse towards upward social mobility (which sounds odd to the middle class), yet I have no problem if my girls want to leave the scheme and pursue their ambitions (which is seen as defecting to the enemy by the benefits/working class).

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

It was all so much easier when I was younger. A quarter of a century ago, I was shivering in the cold outside Victoria train station in London. I was high. I was hungry. I was scared. I was so very angry at the world. I was full of rage but, had you asked me, I would have had no clue against whom, specifically, this fury burned.

I was paranoid and tired from trying to ward off the advances of a procession of male predators who wanted to have sex with me. Within weeks I would be doing 15 months in a Category A prison where I would grow angrier still, forced into terrible acts of violence out of fear and self-preservation. Always on edge. Jittery. Untrusting. Guarded. Instead of rehabilitating

me, prison hardened me, and with unfettered access to every kind of drug, my habits spiralled out of control. I left prison far angrier than I'd entered it.

I was furious at the world, the system (whatever that was), and anybody who I thought had it better than me. I had been forced from my home in Ireland into a children's home in England, passed from foster carer to foster carer, separated from my only sister, beaten, ignored and, finally, spat out into the world at 16 years old – violent, vengeful and left to my own devices. My social workers and counsellors did me no favours either. I entered adulthood in a complete mess. I was a victim. Nothing was my fault. It was “my circumstances”. It was the Conservative Party. They stole our milk in the 1970s and 1980s and we never got over it. Imagine the man I could have been if I'd just had milk! They killed the miners. They killed the manufacturing industry. They wreaked havoc across the northern working-class heartlands. All of it churning about in my head, driving my impulses and emotions.

Homelessness followed soon after. Park benches, disused houses, on friends' floors –wherever I could get my head down. All of it blotted out by more and more drugs. Dealing, stealing, burglary, violence, lying; whatever it took to get me what I wanted. Meaningless, monotonous jobs: putting lids on yoghurt tops, making nails, making cardboard boxes, making hairspray, labouring, cleaning toilets, and my personal favourite – putting Ghostbuster badges on birthday cards. Hating my life. Hating my existence. Making bad choice after bad choice. None of it my fault. All of it everybody else's. This is what society had made me. That's what I told myself. No one cared about me, so why would I care about them?

BROKEN BY THE GOSPEL

Then, one day I met with Christ in a violent and uncompromising way. I found a Matthew Henry commentary in the house I was staying in and came across the book of Romans. The book of Romans brutalised me far more effectively than my vicious stepmother ever did! The Apostle Paul forced me to confront my sin. My selfish choices. My self-righteous, self-absorbed, vicious cycle of sinful rebellion. I hated the book of Romans with all of my heart. If I could have, I would have beaten the Apostle Paul to death with a bat.

I wanted my social workers back. I wanted the kind-hearted old lady at the soup kitchen who was sympathetic to my problems and told me I was a good boy who just hadn't had the right breaks. I wanted to be told that I wasn't a bad person. That I was just damaged by a bad start in life. Yet, the Bible destroyed every barrier and excuse I had ever constructed over the years to justify my way of life. The Bible tore a hole through every argument I had for all the pain and misery I had caused to others. The Bible wouldn't let me off the hook. The Bible didn't want to hear that it wasn't my fault. God Himself, through the pages of Scripture, grabbed my head with both hands and forced me to look into a spiritual mirror to see what I really was and what I'd truly become.

I was a sinner. A rebel against God, His Word and His people.

Looking at my true self in that spiritual mirror was the worst experience of my life. Worse than a maximum-security prison cell. Worse than prolonged punches to the kidneys by playground bullies. I was crushed by the realisation of my sin. I fought with all my might to look away from my reflection. But God, in His mercy, forced me to keep looking, long and hard. Then, just as I was about to sink into total despair, He granted me salvation. That's when I first discovered what love really

was. I had been told by a few people in my childhood that Jesus loved me, but I never understood it. *Why would Jesus love me? My own mother didn't even love me. Those placed in authority over me didn't love me. I didn't even love me.* It was only when I saw the true depth of my sinful heart, and the great mercy of a forgiving God, that I began to understand love.

Looking into that mirror, with no excuses left, I sank to my knees and begged for God's forgiveness. I begged to escape His just wrath. I threw myself on the mercy of Jesus. I confessed my sinful, proud rebellion against my Holy Creator. I threw my whole weight behind the Lord Jesus to save me, not only from myself, but from the sin that had separated me from God.

Against my wishes, I had become a Christian.

COUNTING THE COST

Usually, at this part of a testimony we get to the good stuff that God does next. I talk about how my life changed for the better, *blah de blah de blah*. Of course, my life has changed for the better in many ways, and I praise God for that. But I had to go through a bloody culture war first, something that very few people back then understood, and nobody had warned me about. It turns out that there really is a great cost to following Jesus.

By the time we get to Luke 14, large crowds are following Jesus. He has become something of a Middle Eastern superstar. Everybody wanted a piece of Him. Doubtless, His closest disciples were loving the buzz of being around Him. So, Luke records these words of Jesus to them at that time.

*Large crowds were travelling with Jesus and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."*⁵

Jesus is clear that He requires absolute devotion from all who claim the name “Christian”. That’s exactly what He goes on to tell them: Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.⁶ In other words, don’t put your name to His if you are not all in.

This is a pretty straightforward set of verses in the Bible. They’re not complicated in any way. But I soon discovered that different social classes interpret them in very different ways. I took Jesus’s words to heart and immediately began to review everything in my life, including lifelong friends and family members, in order to discover who and what would hold me back from getting serious with Jesus. My new middle-class friends applauded me for my commitment. They encouraged me to leave behind all of my friends and family members who were criminals or drug dealers and/or users (not that they all were, you understand).

Don’t get me wrong, there was no malicious intent. But what they were doing, inadvertently I’m sure, was asking me to leave my entire life and culture behind in order to assimilate to theirs. The issue was black and white in their minds. My culture was bad and theirs was good. My culture needed to be discarded and their culture was the one to which I should aspire. Of course, I lapped it up. *Why wouldn’t I?* I wanted to get as far away from my old life as I possibly could. I was desperate to fit into this new Christian world, and so I walked away from it all – my family, my friends and my whole way of life.

As soon as I made this decision, a spiritual war broke out on two fronts simultaneously.

WARRING WITH THE CHURCH

Firstly, I discovered that a person can’t just follow Jesus on their own. They have to be part of a thing called “the church”. Or, more particularly, a local church. I thought churches were

just places people went for religious ceremonies: baptisms, weddings, funerals and the like. I had no idea that Christians met together twice on Sundays and again during the midweek.

Then, on top of that, there was all the socialising and drinking copious amounts of Schloer.⁷ I wasn't prepared for the cultural idiosyncrasies of the Christian world. It was intense. The problem was that I had no category for Christians. They were as foreign to me as an Amazonian tribe. I had never in my life met a working-class Christian. I had no idea what went on inside a church any more than I knew what went on inside a mosque or a synagogue. Despite the kindness of many church members, the cold reality is that, in the early days of my faith, I felt far safer, and more comfortable, inside a maximum-security prison yard than I ever did attending a Sunday morning service.

Let me reiterate, nobody was mean to me. In fact, far from it. I was saved into a congregation that was full, in the main, of some of the kindest people I had ever met. They were patient, godly saints, many of whom have prayed for me faithfully over the years (and still do). They weren't unlikeable or judgemental. Actually, the opposite was true.

Some people went out of their way to embrace me, and a godly couple even took me into their home for a time. They invited me to eat with them and welcomed me into their family. But it was pretty clear that in this Authorised Version-only, organ-only, predominantly suit-and-tie-wearing-congregation (as it was at that time), I was the odd one out. Even my attempts to fit in by wearing a shirt and tie in the early months of my conversion only heightened the difference and made me feel even more uncomfortable. It was clear by how I talked, how I walked and how I thought that I was very different to them.

The nicer these Christians were to me and the more I began to enjoy church life, the more anxious I became. I wanted to

love these people. I wanted to be a part of the family of God. I wanted to sit around dinner tables with church members and laugh about my day. But I just couldn't face it. I felt dirty. I felt unworthy. I felt fake. I just wanted to be alone. I was fearful and anxious that these people would find out what I was really like, and then reject me as so many had before. I wanted to be accepted so much that I hated myself for being so weak.

Almost overnight, I became something of a local celebrity among Christians in the town. Everybody knew who I was. I was a novelty item. "A brand plucked from the fire" is how someone once described me. Soon, I became a man in demand. Everybody wanted to hear my story. They said, "Tell us how Jesus saved you" – but what they really meant was, "Tell us all the gory, heart-rending details of your past. Recount your time in prison. Tell us about your childhood abuse and your homelessness. Oh, and tell us about Jesus too."

They didn't ever put it quite that starkly, but I knew what was expected. They were an easy crowd to please, these Christians, and I was desperate for their acceptance. I wanted to belong. I wanted to be special. I wanted the attention. I was a willing participant. Their applause gave me meaning and made me feel significant. Their awe at my testimony gave me a special kind of pride. It made me feel like I was somebody important. It made me feel admired in a culture that, at worst, despised my friends and, at best, feared them. I enjoyed the acclaim. But, while I was fighting for acceptance within this new world, I was also fighting a war on another front.

WARRING WITH MY OLD LIFE

As soon as I professed my faith in Jesus, the dynamic of the relationship between my old friends and family members changed dramatically. Becoming a Christian on a council estate is akin to becoming a Conservative voter (back when northern

towns exclusively voted Labour!) It was to deny your roots. It was to deny your own kind. It was to defect to the other side. I had committed the cardinal sin of appearing like I was trying to better myself. *How dare I deny my working-class roots? How dare I even think of getting out of my chaotic, abusive, self-destructive life?*

Many things could be forgiven within my culture. Finding myself in trouble with the police? Easily explained away – *youthful exuberance and, anyway, we all know the police are corrupt.* Experimenting with drugs? Easily explained away – *everybody does it, right? It's almost a rite of passage and, anyway, who doesn't like a little fun at the weekends?* Being sentenced to spend time in prison? Easily explained away – *maybe a disappointment to some, but to the majority it was a badge of honour. Certainly nothing to be ashamed about.* Becoming a Christian? Silence. *What? Hang on a minute. That's not right. What's that about? Why would anyone do that, let alone somebody from our walk of life? That's not just disappointing, it's bloody embarrassing.*

Indeed, you would have been hard pressed to find a single family member or close friend of mine who was not confused, bemused or downright angry at this step I had taken in my life. Discussions about Mez “turning Christian” were almost funereal in some circles. Finding God was pretty much equated with a mental illness, or something lifers and sex offenders did to ease their guilty consciences. I remember reading about the experiences of teenage girls getting pregnant in the 1950s and people whispering about them behind their backs. It was a cultural taboo. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of the British population were disdainful of relationships between people of mixed races. Becoming a born-again Christian was on a par with those things, certainly in the 1990s. I’m convinced that if I had come out as gay, I wouldn’t have elicited such widespread hostility and profound disapproval. It was a very, very painful time in my life.

The upshot of these pressures was that I found myself walking the tightrope of trying to fit in with Christians, while trying to maintain relationships from my old life. I felt like John the Baptist, with one foot in the old world and one foot in the new. The pressure was further compounded because I had nobody with whom I could share my experiences, troubles, fears and anxieties. Most of the people in the church had come from a long-established Christian heritage that went back decades, often even longer. That meant that, while some Christian confidants could sympathise with me, I faced these spiritual battles on my own. I was always defensive and on edge. Because of my stunted emotions, and my unspoken fears and doubts – like Israel in the wilderness – I began to pine for my old life on the streets. I romanticised it. I conveniently forgot about all the reasons I had been desperate to leave it behind. I even began to seriously worry whether I was on the verge of losing my mind.

I remember the exact moment when all my emotions came to a head. I was on my own at the bottom of the garden in a house where I was lodging. This house sat on the top of a hill, overlooking the town below. As I sat on that garden wall smoking my roll-up, my mind was a mess. I knew it was either flight or fight. It was crunch time. Stay and take the risk on the Christian life that I could see spreading out before me, or run back to the cold, vomit-strewn doorways – a life that I at least understood. I had the devil whispering in my ear, coaxing me to run back to the life I knew. At the same time the Holy Spirit was urging me to stay and hold fast to my new life with Jesus. The constant mental to-ing and fro-ing was wearing me down. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit won out that day. The love of Christian strangers won out over the perverse allure of street culture, the devil and my own sinful desires.

The exact moment I made that decision to stay and fight for this new life was the day that everything began to change for me. I began to devour the Bible. I began to grow in my knowledge of and love for Jesus. I slowly grew more accustomed to the strange culture of the church. Most importantly of all, I began to question everything and everyone around me about all things biblical.

That's when my problems really began.

BITING THE HAND THAT DIDN'T ACTUALLY FEED ME!

I don't recall the exact day that the celebrity shine started to wear off for me. It was a gradual thing. Firstly, I began to grow in my knowledge of the Bible. Then, I began to grow in the knowledge of myself. As time wore on, instead of pride in my past, I began to feel shame. I wanted to run from my past. I wanted to leave it far behind. I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I felt like every testimony I gave kept me in bondage to the sin from which I was trying so hard to escape.

But, in church circles, everybody wanted me to keep regurgitating it. I began to feel that perhaps I should be doing more than just continuously telling my horror story for the entertainment of the (mainly) middle-class masses. So, I began to try to distance myself from my testimony. I said "no" to speaking engagements. I offered to teach the Bible instead. Invariably, this suggestion was met with bewilderment and, in some cases, open amusement. I was the church's testimony guy, not the preacher guy.

That's when I began to feel a distancing from the church. Subtly, you understand. Not mean spirited, but there, nonetheless. The invitations to speak dried up. It seemed as if the more I wanted to distance myself from my old life, the more the church kept me at arm's-length for anything else. These feelings were exacerbated further as I began to study

some of the deep doctrines of the faith. To the surprise of many, I read book after book on a variety of biblical subjects. I remember when I first stumbled upon the wonderful doctrines of grace; it was like pouring petrol on the smouldering embers of my soul. My spirit burst into flame with the realisation of the absolute sovereignty of God over all things. So, of course, I wanted to talk about these things. But it wouldn't be long before somebody in the church would throw cold water over those fires. As one leader told me when I enquired about seminary: "Bible college isn't for guys like you, Mez. Just stick to loving Jesus and you will be okay."

The unspoken assumption seemed to be that guys "like me" didn't need to know the Bible that deeply. After all, it's not like we would become pastors, right? I told myself I was just being paranoid, yet everything I saw in the evangelical world confirmed my suspicions. For example, I never met a pastor from a council estate. In fact, I met very few pastors working in council estates. Also, I never heard a voice like mine, or met a person from my background in church, except if there was a testimony night somewhere. The Christian conferences I attended were the same. When I finally did go to seminary, I discovered the same thing there. When I brought the issue up, I was shushed. *What are you talking about? It's not true. It's just your imagination.* I noted the irritation whenever I spoke about it. It was made clear to me that if I wanted to progress into Christian ministry then I had better not upset the apple cart. "After all," one friend told me, "where's the wisdom in biting the hand that feeds you?" To my shame, I stopped talking about it. Not out of wisdom, but out of fear. The fear that I would be excluded from the middle-class club. I couldn't go back to my old life, that much was clear. So, I reasoned, *if I wanted acceptance in this new life, then I had better toe the line.*

STREET GANGS AND STRIPPERS

Despite my private frustrations and a recognition of my powerlessness within the evangelical world, I left seminary and went into full-time Christian ministry in 1999. My family and I would be working with street gangs in Brazil by 2003, and so I felt fulfilled in the work that the Lord had given me to do. *After all, what did I have to complain about?* I had a wonderful family and a successful ministry. I had come a long way from the pitiful figure sleeping in bus shelters and smoking discarded cigarette butts that I found on street corners or picked out of rubbish bins.

But, two phone calls, an off-the-cuff comment, a surprise party and a stripper changed the direction of my life – yet again – and reawakened all of the misgivings I had suppressed for so long. The first phone call was with my father, who I rang at least once a month while living in Brazil. There was nothing unusual about the call and I guarantee that he probably has no recollection of it whatsoever. Once the customary football chat was out of the way, I remember him asking me how things were going. I explained what Miriam and I were doing and, in a rare moment of emotional depth, he announced that he was proud of me. “It’s all Jesus”, I assured him. He grunted, the way he always does when I say things like that. I asked him, “Why don’t you get yourself along to a church this Sunday, dad?” He simply replied, “I don’t think so, son. I haven’t got the bottle to do that.” That was it. That’s all that was said. Completely off the cuff. Nothing profound. The moment passed, and I hung up with the promise to call him the following month.

However, try as I might, I couldn’t get his words out of my mind. My dad has been a builder for 50 years and has seen the rough end of life. He socialises in Miners’ Clubs and is well

used to being in bars and going to parties which, more often than not, end in violence and multiple arrests. To be clear, he is not a criminal, nor a violent man. My point is that he doesn't even blink in those situations, and yet here he was admitting to me that he was scared to go into a church! But, when I thought back to my own experiences of church in the early days, I began to appreciate what he meant.

Several months later, our little family returned from Brazil on furlough. We were tired, but extremely encouraged by the work we had established there. The ministry was blossoming, and all was well. That's when I received the second phone call. This time it was from a family member inviting me to a surprise birthday party for my dad. "Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked. "Oh yes," came the reply. "You can pay for the stripper." I laughed, but they were deadly serious. "I'm not paying for a stripper!" I said, "I will pay for the DJ." "Okay," was the reply as they hung up.

Of course, this now left me with a new dilemma. Do I go to my dad's party or not? I hadn't seen him for a couple of years at this point, and so I was leaning towards going. But now that I knew there was going to be a stripper, where did that leave me as a Christian? Every Christian friend I asked counselled me not to go, citing a bad witness as the reason. Fellow pastors offered the same advice. But, after praying about it, and talking to my wife who would ultimately accompany me to the party, I decided that I would go and just leave the room when the stripper made her appearance.

The day of the party came and, as expected, the pub was packed to the rafters with family and friends I had not seen for years. It was loud, it was raucous, and it was (mostly) fun. It didn't take me long to spot the drugs being handed out in one corner, or the shady deals being made in another. The karaoke machine was being well used and, bang on time, the

stripper made her entrance. As Miriam and I got up to leave the whole place started howling abuse and making fun of us. But we moved into the other bar and waited for the show to be over. When we returned, we received more than our fair share of scowls and snarky comments from people who thought our actions somehow communicated that we were better than them. Miriam and I retreated to a quiet corner with our drinks, planning to stay a couple of hours more so as not to appear rude.

Then, over the course of the evening, a strange thing happened. One by one, people who had been mocking my faith earlier in the evening came to sit at our table. Every person asked me about my faith and every single one regaled me with stories of their own broken lives and how empty they felt. By the end of the evening, there was a crowd around our table as people sat, some nursing their drinks, some smoking their joints, listening as I explained the gospel to them. A few made snarky, sarcastic comments, playing to the crowds, but the majority were taking in what I was saying. Instead of leaving early, we ended up being the last to leave. Of course, I was exhilarated by what had happened. I spent the next couple of days on a spiritual high. But that wouldn't last long.

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Miriam and I were touring the country at this time as we visited churches to raise the profile of our work back in Brazil. Life was so busy that I had little time to think. But, in my few quiet moments, usually on the long car journeys, my mind drifted back to my family and friends at that party. *Did any of them come to faith?* Not to my knowledge. That wasn't what was troubling me. *What if one or more of them had come to faith? Where would they go to church? How would the church cope with them, and they with the church?* The churches I had been

in struggled with one or two people from my background, so what would they do if multiple people came to faith? Then I thought about the party as a whole. *How many of those who were in attendance would ever come into contact with a Christian in their daily lives?* These were dustbin men, hairdressers, builders, scrap merchants, painters and decorators, electricians, plumbers and labourers. Never mind the criminal element, who were a whole other ball game. *When would any of them have an opportunity to hear the gospel proclaimed?* I knew the answers to these questions, and it depressed me. There was very little gospel light in my home town in Yorkshire (there still isn't) and, even if it did exist, it was not easily accessible by people from my cultural background.

It was then that I began to question whether I should return to Brazil. In the town where I worked, there were at least 10 solid gospel churches along a three-mile stretch of road near my home. One of these churches had 15,000 members! On the other hand, I reasoned (with myself), none of them were reaching the street gangs and local favelas. Yet, what they had in Brazil was far more than those living in the council estates and schemes of the UK. So, I asked myself, *why travel thousands of miles to bring Christ there, when my own people were toppling headfirst into a lost eternity right on my doorstep?* After much prayer and soul searching, Miriam and I made the difficult decision to leave our burgeoning ministry in Brazil and return to the UK to plant a church on a housing estate. At that point we had no idea where, we just knew that this was what we should do. Not long after that, a providential turn of events took us to Niddrie Community Church, on a housing scheme in Edinburgh where, in 2007, I became the pastor of a small congregation in need of revitalisation.

SPIRITUAL WASTELANDS?

Shortly before leaving for Scotland, one old saint took me aside and said, “It won’t be like Brazil, son. Scotland is a spiritual wasteland and the people are hard to the gospel up there.” I don’t think he was trying to discourage me, rather to prepare me for the hard work ahead. Yet, when I got there, I found that the people were not hard to the gospel (although many were and are), they had just never heard it before, and certainly not from someone from their own background.

It wasn’t long before we started to see conversions, and our church slowly grew. Instead of being a building full of outsiders, who were subject to the taunts and assaults of local youths, we became an intrinsic part of the community again. God was at work in Niddrie, and He still is. Not long after this, 20schemes was born.⁸ Our idea was simply to revitalise or plant 20 gospel-preaching churches in 20 schemes across Scotland over 10 years. Despite lots of cynicism, opposition, ambivalence and a lack of support from the UK Christian church, our ministry flourished and continues to do so thanks to God’s mercy and kindness. In one sense, the old saint was right when he said that Scotland is a spiritual wasteland. I would be even more specific by stating that Scotland’s *schemes* are a spiritual wasteland. Not because of a lack of gospel opportunities, rather a lack of healthy, gospel-preaching local churches.

STAND UP AND SPEAK OUT

Once again, I had found my voice to speak up for the millions in our country who live, work and die in council estates and housing schemes. As I began to write and speak about these concerns, I was quickly denounced as causing trouble or, more popularly, of having a chip on my shoulder. I have prayed, cried, shouted, fought, studied, sacrificed my health and spent

all my energy over two decades so that believers from council estates and housing schemes can have a voice in the reformed evangelical wing of the UK church. I've had to scrap my way through the system, as well as jump through all the hoops and barriers put in my way, in order to be accepted as credible in the UK church.

There is quite clearly a fault line in the UK evangelical world. All men and women are not equal when it comes to having access to the gospel and discipleship-oriented resources. I've seen it in everything from the heavy emphasis on student ministry, the speakers at conferences, internships offered at local churches, theological publications, books (specifically evangelistic material), and theological education. Let me be clear, the failing does not lie with para-church organisations or theological institutions and book publishers. They are only catering to, and for, the markets they have access to. The failing lies at the local church level. It lies with pastors and church leaders who, quite obviously, do not see gospel ministry to council estates and schemes as a priority in their towns, villages and cities.

Thankfully, it is not all doom and gloom. The FIEC, for example, have prioritised our communities in recent years, and have released a lot of money towards work in deprived communities across the country.⁹ They continue to hold discussions with us, even if they often feel our approaches are somewhat "bull in a China shop"! Likewise, 10ofThose have proved a valuable ally to us and, along with Christian Focus Publications, they have enabled us to get our resources out to a wider audience.¹⁰ Union School of Theology have sought to work in genuine partnership with us whereas, historically, other institutions have sought to control us.¹¹ In other words, there are slivers of light on the horizon, but every square inch we move forward is hard fought.

Some feel that there is altogether far too much talk concerning deprived communities in the UK right now – yet it's been 38 years since Roy Joslin wrote *Urban Harvest*.¹² His worry for the UK church back then was that it was leaving behind the working classes. Bearing in mind this was almost four decades ago, he writes: "Christianity in this country has become a middle-class movement."¹³ In the intervening years, since those words were written, the church has become *more* middle class, not less, and the gap between the evangelical church and those living and dying in housing schemes and council estates is as vast as it has ever been. One theologically-minded book in nearly four decades hardly constitutes a massive swing in our direction!

Quite simply, if the church in the UK is not willing to listen to our pleas, then we will plant new churches and revitalise dying ones ourselves. It will take longer, and be more difficult, but we will do it. It is what we have had to do with 20schemes, and it is what is happening through Church in Hard Places in over 30 countries around the world.¹⁴

Why are those involved in planting, pastoring and revitalising churches in deprived communities finding it so hard for our voices to be both heard and taken seriously? Darren McGarvey, in his brilliantly provocative book, *Poverty Safari* gets to the nub of the issue:

In Scotland, poverty is dominated by a left-leaning, liberal, middle class. Because this specialist class is so genuinely well-intentioned when it comes to the interests of people in deprived communities, they get a bit confused, upset and offended when those very people start expressing their anger towards them. It never occurs to them, because they see themselves as the good guys, that the people they purport to serve may, in fact, perceive them as chancers, careerists or charlatans.

*They regard themselves as champions of the underclass and therefore, should any poor folk begin to get their own ideas, or, god forbid, rebel against the poverty experts, the blame is laid at the door of the complainants for misunderstanding what is going on.*¹⁵

Swap the well-meaning liberal left with the well-meaning middle-class Christian and we get to the heart of the problem. I could stand up in almost any church and conference in the UK, state that there is a problem with how the church is doing outreach and discipleship to people from deprived communities, and I will be ignored or castigated for being reactionary and divisive. God forbid that I say anything negative about the golden calf of UK Christianity – food banks! This, after all, seems to be the tool by which most middle-class churches gauge their love of the poor and the needy. Despite the fact that they are mainly disastrous (more on this later) and may, in fact, contribute towards poverty rather than alleviate it, most churches and leaders bury their heads in the sand when it comes to any kind of critique of their so-called “mercy ministries”.

“IF YOU ALWAYS DO WHAT YOU’VE ALWAYS DONE, YOU ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU’VE ALWAYS GOTTEN”¹⁶

I will state, once again, what Roy Joslin pointed out in 1982 and what I have been claiming for the last decade or more. There is a problem in the UK church in how it does outreach into council estates and housing schemes. Do movement leaders, parachurch leaders and theological institutions have the courage to call a moratorium on soup kitchens, food banks and any other poverty-related initiatives in order to produce a biblically thought through, and practical way forward, that will help us to reach and disciple those living in deprived communities

more effectively? Can we just admit that being busy isn't the same as being effective? Your soup kitchen ministry may well be feeding 100 people per week, but that is clearly a sign of need, not necessarily proof that the ministry itself is effective for the kingdom in evangelising and growing disciples.

Pastors, how much of our energy and resources are we expending on reaching trainee electricians, hairdressers or builders in relation to the amount spent on evangelising students in our churches? How much money have we been earmarking specifically for church planting and revitalisation in the most deprived communities on our doorsteps? They're not hard to find. They are all around us.

Don't farm out evangelism among the poor in your community to para-church organisations. They may well do good work, but four decades of this has not seen the establishment of very many gospel-preaching churches in these communities. We need to pray for the courage to take the harder, longer, more expensive and self-sacrificial route of church planting and revitalisation. Local children need a healthy local church in their communities far more than they need our yearly holiday Bible clubs or weekly drop-ins.¹⁷ If the evangelical church, and her institutions and systems, don't change, then what will close the spiritual and cultural gap between middle-class Christianity and the rest of the country? If we continue to do what we've always done, then we will continue to get what we have always gotten.

Nothing of substance.

Christian, as you read this book, please do so with an open mind and heart. If you're involved in mercy ministry and in the lives of the neediest souls in our towns, cities and villages then, trust me, I have no desire to crush you or to belittle your work. In fact, my intention is the exact opposite. I know all about the hard, often thankless, work that you do. I know how

many of you have been battling away for years, bringing Christ to the fringes of society, and trying, often unsuccessfully, to incorporate them into the life of your churches. As one who was on the streets for six years, I thank you deeply for your kindness and self-sacrifice. My aim in writing this book is to encourage you to help your churches think more broadly, and more biblically, about your vital work.

If you are a church leader, or someone thinking about planting or revitalising a church, then I would urge you to use the statistics and stories within this book and on our website to help you to think more strategically for the kingdom. Think about that housing estate near you, or that community that seems cut off in your town or village. Review your church's ministry to the poor. *How effective is it in evangelising lost souls? How effective are you in keeping the saved, discipling them and then integrating them fully into the life of your church? How many men and women from council estates or schemes has your church trained for future ministry, whether vocational or not? How are you celebrating and encouraging those in your congregation who are battling on the front lines in deprived communities?* It's not an exhaustive list of questions, but it's a start.

Change is required. But we cannot change a system with which we are happy and comfortable. Therefore, we are going to have to think seriously, from the ground up, if we want to make a difference in the lives of millions of people in our country who will be born, live, love, work and die without any access to the gospel. Their only crime? They're not middle class and university educated. They live in our council estates and housing schemes. They live in the high-rise flats most of us pass on our way to work every day. They live in our picture-perfect country towns and villages. They empty our dustbins. They deliver our mail. They clean our office blocks. They mop the toilets of our favourite supermarkets. They cut our hair. They

deliver our shopping and our takeaways. They cut our grass and paint our fences. They wash our windows and clean our gutters. They sweep our roads and labour on our building sites. They're everywhere we look, and yet they are hardly anywhere to be seen in our churches.

These are the reasons behind *why* I have written this book.

As to my *what* questions, the answers to those are much simpler and more straightforward.

What you have in your hand is the product of over 1,000 hours of dedicated research and over 21 years of ministry to the poor and/or marginalised in various contexts around the world. I was going to include a statistical breakdown of the whole of the UK, plus London (which is pretty much a country of its own in terms of population). However, I decided that this would make an already lengthy book even longer. So, in Appendix 1, there is a code which will lead you to a website. There you will be able to click on any country in the UK and have all the statistical research at your fingertips. We have also included a section detailing any and all FIEC churches that operate within, or close to, areas of deprivation.

When it comes to the statistical data, I have sought to be as independent as possible, so as to avoid any appearance of confirmation bias. I did that by hiring an American PhD student, who had no prior understanding of scheme or council estate life. In fact, he didn't even know what those terms meant! I gave him a simple objective: in each country, research the communities regarded by their respective governments as "most deprived". Understanding that even that term is loaded, I played no part in any of his research and did not interfere with his findings. He would send me regular reports of his progress, but I never made any comment or gave him any feedback. I wanted the information to arrive on my desk

completely unvarnished. As a result, some of his findings were of great surprise to me, although much of it confirmed what I already knew.

Once that was done, he also attempted to map out where FIEC churches were to be found in relation to these communities. This research proved to be the most difficult to carry out. We sent out questionnaires to various churches. We surveyed church leaders at the FIEC Leaders' Conference in 2019. We talked to pastors working in deprived communities and to a host of others operating on the fringes. The results were complicated by a number of factors.

- Some pastors were unwilling to share any data with us regarding the cultural mix of their congregations.
- Some churches never responded to our requests for information and/or interviews.
- Some deprived communities, on paper, look like they are well served by a local FIEC church, when the reality is that the congregation is either dying, ageing and/or almost exclusively attended by people from outside the community in which their building is situated.

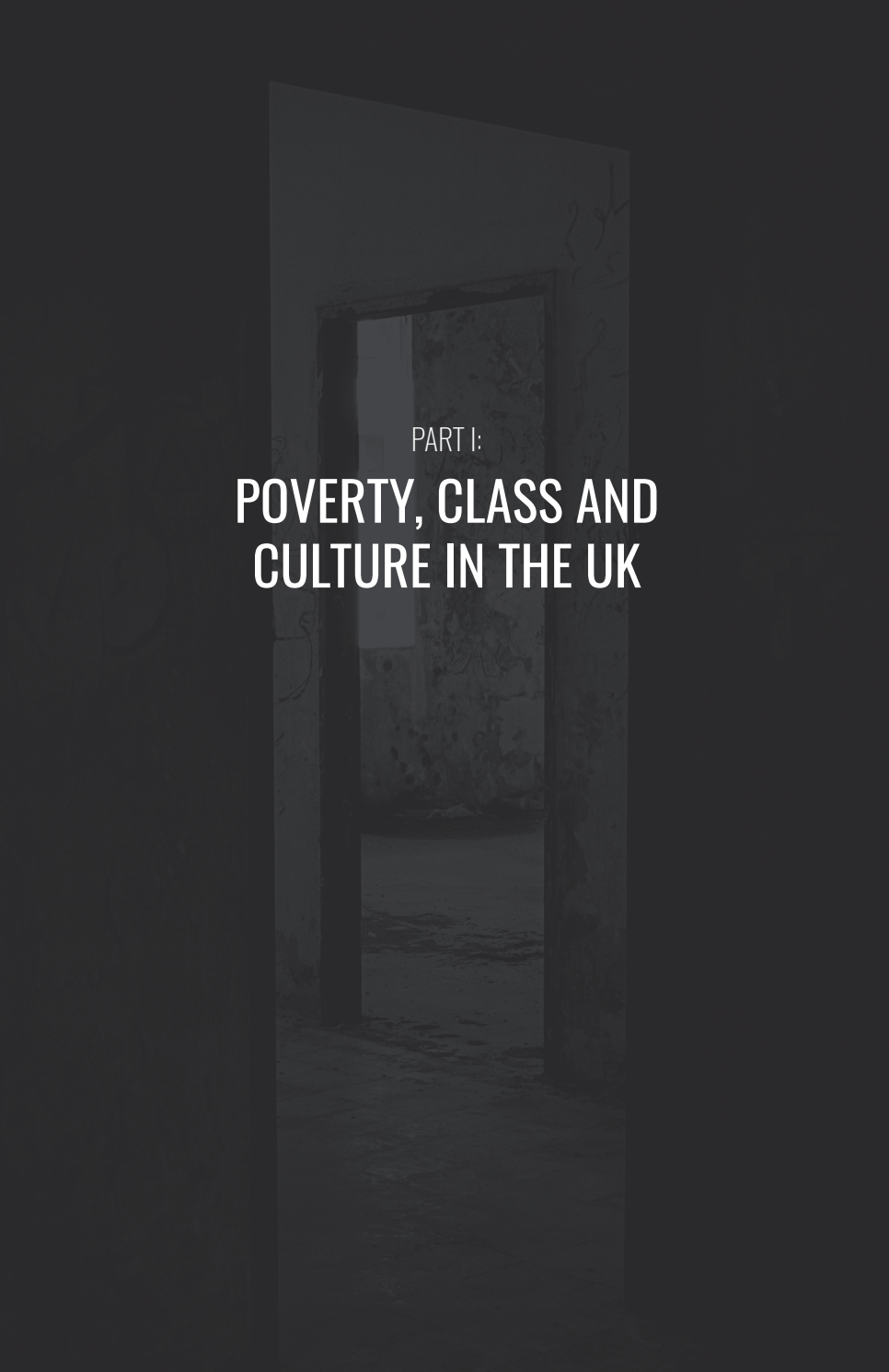
As you can imagine, the data gathered in each country was highly complex, multi-layered, and produced different results depending upon multiple factors, including the size of a particular community, the ethnic make-up of different areas and a host of other things. The reality is that I could have written a book on each country, plus London, with the information that was gathered. Such is the depth of our research that we have could have easily produced an academic textbook. But my aim has always been to produce a work that is both statistically rigorous, but also popularly accessible.

While recognising that the resulting discussions will be complex and nuanced, my aims are simple. Broadly, this book aims:

- To produce an informed and rigorous survey detailing the most deprived council estates and housing schemes across the UK.
- To seek to understand where evangelical churches (specifically FIEC) are to be found in relation to these communities.¹⁸
- To try to understand some of the issues facing people in these communities.
- To help the church understand the cultural and social make-up of these communities.
- To help the church to understand how people from these communities view the world and their place in it.
- To help the church to think through what effective evangelism and discipleship look like in these communities.
- To look at some of the failings of the UK church and the many para-church organisations who work with the most deprived people in our nation.
- To seek to galvanise a new generation of church leaders and women's workers who can take the gospel out to the least and the lost in the UK.
- To encourage the revitalisation and planting of gospel-centred churches in these communities by offering reliable research as to the geographical locations of some of the UK's least reached people.

- To help the wider Christian community understand the needs of gospel workers and/or churches already working in these areas or attempting to establish works.
- To provoke debate and to think about possible solutions to the current crisis of effective gospel outreach, meaningful discipleship and leadership training available and accessible to those from deprived communities.
- Finally, and most importantly, even if it does nothing else, I pray that it brings glory to our Triune God.

This book is the culmination of 25 years of thinking about, failing at and experimenting in what we, as Great Commission Christians, could do better to effectively reach and disciple the least, the last and the lost in our country (and beyond).

A dark, grainy photograph of a doorway or window frame, with the text overlaid. The image is very dark, with the doorway acting as a focal point where light is slightly brighter. The walls and floor appear textured and worn.

PART I:

POVERTY, CLASS AND CULTURE IN THE UK

CHAPTER 1:

WHERE DID OUR COUNCIL ESTATES AND SCHEMES COME FROM?

We all have particular places in our towns and cities and villages that we regard as “rough”. Some are more populous than others and some are harder to spot. Very often, we drive past these places on our way to work and we teach our children to avoid these places – and certainly to be nowhere near them after dark. In most of the UK, they are known as *council estates* simply because most of the people who live there rent their home from their local council. In Scotland, they are called *schemes* and they have a reputation for housing society’s undesirables. They are not *slums* as we would see in India, for instance (and in pre-industrialised Britain). Nor are they favelas as we would see in South America (both terms may seem similar to the Western eye, but I can assure you that a favela-dweller would take unkindly to you calling where they live a slum!).

But what is the history behind council estates? Whose idea was it to mass produce low-cost housing for the poor in the first place? To understand a people, we need to understand their history.

“HOMES FIT FOR HEROES”

This phrase – “homes fit for heroes” – was first coined by David Lloyd George, shortly after the end of World War I. He said,

*What is our task? To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in. There are millions of men who will come back. Let us make this a land fit for such men to live in. There is no time to lose.*¹⁹

Of course, these were not the only factors at play in the rise of housing development in the years immediately after WWI. Safe, affordable housing was certainly needed for our returning war heroes, but this was coupled with a fear of the rise of Bolshevism among the poor and working class. Far too many in the UK were living in substandard, slum conditions, evidenced by the fact that over 10% of conscripts in the war were rejected on health grounds as a direct result of squalid living conditions.²⁰

Historians tell us that, prior to WWI, it was private builders who supplied virtually all the new housing in towns and cities.²¹ All of this building activity came to a virtual standstill while the country was at war. By the time of the 1918 General Election, it was apparent that the country faced an acute housing shortage and that there were many slum areas that were not fit for habitation.

The problem, post-WWI, was that demand far outweighed the private sector's ability to produce good quality, affordable housing on a mass scale. The Addison Act, passed in 1919, sought to remedy this by charging local authorities to ensure adequate housing for the “working class”. Lloyd George had a dream to build half a million homes in three years, but it was both unrealistic and unattainable. However, the number

of people securing council homes began to increase year on year. In fact, before WWI, 1% of the population lived in council houses, but by 1938, that figure had risen to 10%.²² By the late 1970s, it would rise to 50%.

The Addison Act soon gave way to Neville Chamberlain's Housing Act of 1923. A year later, it was replaced by The Wheatley Act. Half a million homes were built, but it took 16 years, not three, to achieve this figure. Great achievement though this was, there still remained two perennial problems:

1. Demand was constantly high and so builders couldn't construct quickly enough to cope with the demand.
2. The problems of inner-city slums were still very evident, even into the 1930s. Tenements (run down, overcrowded apartment-style houses occupied by multiple families sharing basic facilities), particularly in Scotland, were a blight on society and greedy landlords continued getting rich off the very poor by providing horrific living conditions at unreasonable rents.

The Greenwood Housing Act of 1930 was designed to address these specific problems. However, a worldwide economic slump meant that slums were not knocked down and replaced with quality homes quickly enough. Although an estimated quarter of a million slum houses and tenements had been cleared by 1939, there were still at least half a million slum houses in urgent need of demolition. Indeed, I personally remember still having to use an outside toilet as a child in the mid to late 1970s. Our houses were poorly built, mouldy, draughty and had asbestos roofs. Asbestos was still used in the building trade as recently as 1999.²³

Despite the upside to these “homes fit for heroes” being built, it unsurprisingly caused a great deal of social upheaval. The ruling class and the rich were, obviously, largely unaffected – but not so the working class and the poor. They were uprooted from their homes – however slum-like – and shipped out (in their millions) to new council estates/schemes, which were usually on the outskirts of the city/town centres. Social surveys carried out during the inter-war period suggested that although tenants wanted new homes, many were reluctant to leave their communities where they felt secure amid the established family and neighbourhood networks, and where they could easily walk to work. Moving people to new estates involved the destruction of existing communities, created a sense of dislocation and isolation, as well as placing greater pressure on the family budget because of increased travel costs. Basically, as the cost of living went up, wages remained the same.

Many people were forced to move against their will. Although, it has to be stated that they were, in the main, relocated to far larger and more superior homes in cleaner, safer areas (though this point is arguable). Another positive was that many people had now escaped the clutches of tyrannical private landlords and were treated with more fairness, had greater legal rights, and had recourse to grievances being heard and acted upon by their local authority or council. Eventually, the political furore died down, people settled, and the future looked bright – bright, that is, until the intervention of war in 1939.

1945 AND ONWARDS: SOCIAL HOUSING

Despite all the policy changes and some great progress in the inter-war years, slum housing still remained a problem throughout the UK at the outbreak of WWII. The end of WWII brought with it a chronic housing problem due to widescale bombing and damage of many cities (over 25% of

British homes were destroyed). The government's so-called *temporary solution* at the time was to build factory-made, prefabricated houses to try to cope with the ever-increasing demand. However, many of these (often substandard) houses remained in use right up until the 1980s.

The New Towns Act was passed in 1946 and was meant to deal with the problem of slum housing and city centre overcrowding. In the UK, 14 new towns were planned in the 1940s and another 14 built in the 1960s. The new towns contained a variety of house types, shops, schools and leisure facilities – all within easy reach. New towns were built in Scotland at Cumbernauld, Glenrothes, Livingston, East Kilbride and Irvine.

The 1950s and 1960s saw wholesale changes to the British housing landscape as council after council demolished their stock of old, terraced houses and replaced them with high-rise flats (or tenements/apartments/“stairs”). In fact, they went on to become a central feature in most of the UK's council estates and schemes. Once again, community living took a back seat to social policy and many hundreds of thousands of people were left lonely and isolated in these buildings, even if they did live in far better conditions. Then, in the late 1970s and 1980s, the UK government introduced a “right to buy” initiative for many of the schemes, as well as seeking to redevelop these places through private housing associations and building contractors.

However, for most of the twentieth century, the responsibility for most social housing projects lay with central government and local authorities. From the inter-war period until the 1980s, social housing effectively meant local authority built, owned and managed housing. Of course, originally, these places were bastions of respectability for the working-class man and his family. They were marked by perfectly trimmed lawns and net curtains hanging from the windows.

URBAN BLIGHT²⁴

Problems soon became apparent as houses were left to crumble because of a lack of local authority funding, unscrupulous landlords and feckless tenants. Urban blight set in and many of these communities and homes were left to decay and rot over a period of decades. Abandoned buildings became a feature, and I remember that at one point in my street, there were only two homes not boarded up and condemned. Council estates and schemes began to be marked by rising crime, violence, the explosion of the drug scene, gang culture and a lack of economic stimulation. This led to many empty properties becoming “squats” and places in which to buy, sell or take drugs.²⁵ The state’s answer to these concerns was found in “gentrification”.

GENTRIFICATION²⁶

Gentrification is a phenomenon that is occurring in council estates and schemes all over the UK. It is a word that was brought to the fore in the early 1960s by a sociologist, Ruth Glass, who observed how middle-class people moving into traditional working-class areas often displaced the very poor. She writes:

*One by one, many of the working-class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes – upper and lower. Once this process of “gentrification” starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.*²⁷

That quote sounds as if it has come out of a modern book when, in fact, it was written in 1964! Here we are, over five decades later, still seeing its effects being felt nationwide. The word actually has its origins in the old English word, “gentry” –

the land-owning social class of the UK. They were people who usually rented their land to farmers and thus enjoyed a generous income without having to do manual work themselves. They were regarded as high born and noble, but they were not aristocratic. They were respectable, but not within the upper echelons of polite society.

Gentrification is deeply divisive, but regardless of opinion, it almost always signifies profound changes in the social make-up of the communities in which it occurs. Usually, the first thing to be demolished is low-income housing, and the first people forced to move are the poor. Those who were living in homes earmarked for refurbishment would be temporarily moved out of the area and, if they were lucky, they would be allowed to move back into their newly refurbished property quickly (which meant within one or two years). The majority were not so lucky. Most people who were forced from their homes never came back. Whichever the outcome, gentrification always signals one of two things in council estates/schemes.

1. A rise in rents because of modernisation
2. A rise in private landlords

Whereas the gentrification of Glass's day was almost always the refurbishment of existing properties, modern gentrification is concerned with the destruction of buildings *en masse* and the redevelopment of previously booming industrial estates into flats.

Both higher rents and an increase in the number of private landlords are bad for the poorest people because they are forced to give way to wealthier residents who begin to move into the neighbourhood. The "problem people" – in other words, the tenants who fail to pay their bills and fail to maintain

their properties – are then relocated, usually to another estate / scheme somewhere else in the city.²⁸ On the positive side, there is often widespread building work and community regeneration of shops, businesses and parks. All of the above is happening and has happened to communities the length and breadth of the UK over the last few decades. However, it would seem that the south of England is being regenerated and gentrified at a far quicker rate than the North.

There is little doubt that the vast majority of middle-class people, small business owners, and the local authorities view the process as a good and healthy thing. It is often associated with “weeding out” the inherent social problems and “lifting up” the area in which it occurs. For all the good it brings to an area (rising home valuations for owners, new consumers for local shops, removal of drug houses, etc.), it also causes its fair share of problems.

Rising rents cause trouble for those struggling to pay existing ones. The rise of the local housing market also pushes out those not able to afford a mortgage. The real losers are the poorest, who find themselves compulsorily rehoused and moved to a new estate somewhere else and are often separated from decades-old roots and proximity to family members. Ultimately, gentrification ends up being good news for the “haves” and bad news for the “have-nots”.

Some questions arise: *Has selling off council stock helped the poorest in society? Has it helped the neighbourhood being gentrified? Is it uniting communities or destroying them?* Depending on your point of view, the results are mixed at best.

THE PRIVATISATION OF SOCIAL HOUSING

Further complicating our efforts to locate the most deprived communities is the continued privatisation of council housing stock across England. Instead of each local authority being the

landlords to their own particular stock, many have now, largely, sold them to private landlords, who could be any one of the following three groups:

- Private individuals
- Corporations
- Housing associations

This process has proved detrimental to many tenants, who have been pressured to leave and forced to transfer their tenancies to other areas. Regardless, far from saving local authorities money, these changes have ended up being prohibitively expensive. Reflecting on the National Audit Office's (NAO) examination of the financial costs and benefits of retaining a council housing property, versus transferring to housing associations, Norman Ginsburg writes:

[The National Audit Office] calculated that transfer was considerably more expensive for the taxpayer than retention and renovation by councils, possibly as much as 30 per cent more expensive. The NAO calculated that a renovation programme for one million council homes would cost £1.3 billion more if it were done through stock transfer rather than allowing the councils to do it. However, the NAO considered that the benefits outweigh the extra costs citing such benefits as "the transfer of risk, the accelerated achievement of improvements, the greater tenant participation" (NAO, 2003:32) associated with transfer. There is no question that improvements have been accelerated by transfer, but that is only because local authorities were prevented from doing them. There is undoubtedly increased tenant participation in the form of involvement in management boards, but whether

tenants exert any more collective influence than they did within local electoral politics is highly debatable. The notion of “risk transfer” as a benefit involves taking a very narrow point of view on behalf of the taxpayer. It appears to be celebrating the loss of a public responsibility for meeting basic needs, and the transfer of risk to RSLs [Registered Social Landlords] and, implicitly, tenants.²⁹

While the National Audit Office report focused on the prohibitive cost of privatising social housing and the failure to take public responsibility for meeting basic social needs, the British Housing Report findings highlighted some unexpected consequences of privatisation:

Outperformance of original transfer expectations seems to have been most marked in relation to regeneration. One measure of this is the extent to which – in many instances – demolition and replacement of substandard housing has turned out to be significantly more extensive than initially anticipated.³⁰

THE GROWTH OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS (HAs)

Large-scale ownership transfers are transforming social housing throughout Britain, with over 180 new housing associations being created since 1989.³¹ The upshot is that the move away from council-owned social housing has spawned, what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)³² calls “a new class of social landlord”.³³ Furthermore, such is the success of these HAs, it is thought that “associations now manage over a third of all social sector dwellings – a threefold increase on the percentage in 1991”.³⁴ According to the JRF report:

Since the transfer process began in earnest in the late 1980s,

more than 870,000 (tenanted) homes have been passed from state ownership (local authorities, new town development corporations or Scottish Homes) to housing associations (and, in a few cases, non-registered housing companies). By early 2003, 111 local authorities in England had transferred all their stock to housing associations. In addition, over forty authorities (twenty-three in England and nineteen in Scotland) have carried out “partial stock transfers”, where a council disposes of a package of tenanted housing whilst also retaining stock in its ownership.³⁵

Typically, in England, the governing boards on the new HAs tend to be a mixture of tenants, local councillors and the prerequisite “independents”. There is little doubt that lots of old council stock has, at worst, received extensive modernisation or, at best, been completely rebuilt. This is good for the tenants, but it almost invariably comes with an increase in rental costs. Perhaps more concerning is that transfers to HAs are often the prelude to gentrification. Tragically, those who are materially deprived in the neighbourhood are often the ones pushed out by a system that was meant for their benefit in the first place!

CONCLUSION

Opinions on housing schemes and council estates differ depending on your life history and your experience of them. I was dragged up through the gutter, so my view is somewhat coloured compared to a person who grew up in a “respectable” household (i.e. had a job and both parents) on the same estate.

Of course, there are great differences between a scheme in Edinburgh and a Catholic housing estate in Belfast. There are great differences between the old council estates that dominate the valleys of Wales and those in London. To some, our estates and schemes are places of horror; to some, places of terror;

to some, places of hopelessness – but, to many millions more, they are “home”.

In fact, they are home to some of the poorest people in the UK. This begs the question: *Does poverty in the UK really exist, and if it does, what does it look like?*

CHAPTER 2:

HOW IS POVERTY DEFINED IN THE UK?

*“Blessed are the poor; for they alone have not the poor always
with them. The honest poor can sometimes forget poverty.
The honest rich can never forget it.”*

G.K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered*

DEFINING POVERTY

This is a fundamental question for which, frustratingly, there is no simple answer. It is practically impossible to come up with a standardised definition that all interested charities and institutions agree on. That’s before we even get to the biblical definition! Yet, we have to try to get beneath the surface if we are going to have a serious and sensible conversation about the issue.

The Labour Party made a pledge to the electorate in the 2019 General Election: “The next Labour government will wage war on poverty in all its forms, eliminating in-work poverty, ending austerity and raising living standards across the country.”³⁶ The only problem with this grandiose promise was that they forgot to specifically define the poverty they

promised to end. We shouldn't be too harsh on them, however, because formulating a clear and concise definition of poverty still eludes us today.

Poverty is so supremely complex and nuanced, that it has rejected all attempts to snare or tame it. The *Cambridge Dictionary* calls it, "A noun. The condition of being extremely poor."³⁷ The *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* calls it, "A noun. The state of being poor."³⁸ The *Collins Dictionary* informs us that synonyms of poverty are, "Scarcity, lack, absence, want."³⁹ But scarcity, lack, absence and want of what exactly? Money? Possessions? Home? Job? We do not know because the dictionaries go no further, other than to place the word in a few nebulous sentences.

Yet, the word is thrown around with such regularity that it has to mean something, right? Maybe, it's related in some way to the word "deprived" because they often turn up together at the same family gatherings. The *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* seems to think so. It defines "deprived" as, "An adjective. Without enough food, education, and all the things that are necessary for people to live a happy and comfortable life."⁴⁰ It even lists the word's solitary synonym as, "Poor".⁴¹

I know, from looking at the bookshelves in my office, that many before me have, with varying degrees of success, tried to tackle the themes of poverty and deprivation. I have books on worldwide urban crises, helping the poor, capitalism, socialism, social justice, cultural anthropology, abortion, charity, mercy ministries, theological frameworks for understanding poverty (more on this later), social class and poverty, giving, chavs, poverty and dependence, geography and poverty (fascinating subject), working-class worldview, race, and poverty and reconciliation.

How we define poverty (or "material deprivation") is vital to how we measure poverty. Again, it is notoriously difficult to get a cohesive and agreed definition of poverty and deprivation,

simply because the institutions at the forefront of monitoring these issues in the UK tend to have their own definitions. The Central Government, for example, has a poverty threshold, that includes anyone who *falls below the UK's 60% median income*.⁴² The Social Metrics Commission's (SMC) threshold is based upon what *a family financially needs to live reasonably*.⁴³ The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) poverty threshold seeks to identify those persons, or areas, in the *lower 30% (Decile 3)* as "deprived".⁴⁴ This is in contrast to the European Union, which broadly defines poverty based on the possession of basic necessities required for living, like two sets of clothes and access to running water, etc.⁴⁵

In effect, groups and institutions tend to define poverty in ways which suit their own ends. Not that this is necessarily bad or dishonest. End Child Poverty (ECP), for example, is obviously going to define poverty as it relates to children.⁴⁶ The IMD defines it in much broader terms.⁴⁷ Both groups have access to the same material sources, they will just highlight data specific to their goals and, sometimes, arrive at different – although not necessarily conflicting – conclusions about how to deal with the information.

DEFINING DEPRIVATION

"Deprivation", as with poverty, is not an easy term to explain and measure. "Poverty" has a wide-ranging impact on society, "creating problems of social isolation: low educational attainment: unemployment: impacting on mental and physical health and social interaction".⁴⁸ "Deprivation", on the other hand, "can be defined as the consequence of a lack of income and other resources, which cumulatively can be seen as living in poverty".⁴⁹

Several factors are at work when attempting to define material deprivation. First, we must factor in *a nation's wealth*:

their overall global and local economic status, GDP, income, living expenses, and opportunities for growth, etc. Yet, we must be careful with this data, because the prosperity of a nation does not necessarily mean that every citizen within it experiences or possesses that same level of wealth. Being jobless or sleeping rough is bad anywhere, no less so in the UK than in any other country. Indeed, a rough sleeper in Edinburgh, Scotland, who is out on a freezing November night is far worse off (in one sense) than a homeless person on the streets of Rio, during their summer months.

Secondly, and crucially, we must factor in *the national structures and infrastructures* that allow or prohibit a prosperous life. Factors such as the stability of government and economy, reliable and accessible healthcare, affordable and safe housing, effective transportation, crime controls, etc.

Thirdly, the way a nation *measures poverty* is significant. A nation may measure poverty in their country by measuring it in terms of the median income of the whole – but that doesn't necessarily mean that people who earn more than that number are not poor. So, for example, let us take a family in the UK whose household income is £50,000. That is a lot of money if you live in Middlesbrough, in the north-east of England. That's more than enough to pay the average rent on a three-bedroomed home, pay the bills, clothe and feed the children, and still save up for a family holiday. Take that same £50,000 income and give it to a family in Central London, and they will be struggling to pay the bills and survive day-to-day.

The point is that in the world of material statistics, all that is seen is the amount of income and therefore, wrongly, some people will be defined as living above the poverty line, even though their personal experience is to live well below it. In other words, solely measuring income as an indicator of material deprivation is flawed. That is why, fourthly, it is actually *the cost*

of living that is the greatest help in comparing and evaluating who lives in material poverty and who does not.

Fifthly, *opportunity for change* tends to be a greater factor than often considered, though it is more difficult to define. Let's consider Bob in Southend, England, and Josef in Mumbai, India. Both live within the 10% most deprived demographic in their respective countries, with regard to education, healthcare, employment, housing and crime/safety, etc. Josef lives in a small hut on the edge of a massive slum. The area has no real infrastructure and he has limited access to the few resources that are available to him. There is very little opportunity for Josef to escape his situation in order to build a better life for himself.

England, on the other hand, has a very well developed infrastructure. However, Bob still finds himself in a similar situation to Josef. He struggles to pay the rent on his one-bedroom flat. In comparison to Josef's accommodation, it is luxurious, but this hardly matters because the electricity has been off for weeks because of non-payment. Bob's benefits have been delayed for unexplained administrative reasons, and he has gone a month now without any financial assistance to which he has full rights. He is unemployed and disabled, and his deep fear is that he will be evicted long before the benefits agency corrects this administrative mess.

In effect, though living in a so-called first-world country (England), Bob's experience of poverty is not all that different from Josef's experiences in Mumbai. *How* they experience deprivation may differ, but the net result is the same: powerlessness, frustration, hunger, fear and financial difficulties. The point is simple: a person can be materially deprived in any nation on earth. Regardless of which country it is, material deprivation is neither desirable, nor commendable – much less humane or even bearable – for a long period of time.

Lastly, it must be said that defining, quantifying and locating material deprivation is a massively complex issue. A common reaction is to see poverty as a “simple problem” or to minimise the impact it has on people’s lives or to minimise the number of people. No report can produce data on the living conditions of every single member of the UK. Countless thousands – tens of thousands – may not have a place to sleep tonight or have had a proper meal today. Many thousands cannot get a job because of a criminal record. Many others care for a family member with a disability. Many thousands of children will be moving for the third time this school year or have parent(s) who do not care if they attend school and care even less about whether they do their homework.

And yet, none of them will be found on any report at all.

HISTORY, CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY

As with many other words and concepts within the English language, the meaning of “poverty” and “deprivation” has changed over the past century. Even the basic tools for measuring poverty have shifted, first with the industrial revolution and, latterly, with the technological revolution. Both are defined and measured very differently in twenty-first-century Britain from how they were defined at the front end of the twentieth century. For example, as Danny Dorling notes:

In 1899 a young adult was seen as poor if he could not afford to buy a postage stamp to send a letter to a loved one. In 2009 a young adult was seen as poor if she could not afford a top-up to send a text to a loved one. It was The Young Foundation, in their major study of contemporary needs, which discovered that some of our poorest teenagers now often go without food in order to keep their phones working.⁵⁰

But are we really suggesting that poverty in the UK is when a young person cannot top up their phones unless they skip a meal? I am assuming they at least have the luxury of making that choice. How does that square up to a child in India forced to scabble around in raw sewage and rubbish in order to find food? I remember speaking at a conference on poverty at a church in Northern Brazil, and the whole room burst into laughter when I showed them the pictures of brick houses in Niddrie (a scheme in Edinburgh where I live and pastor) and told them that this was a community designated “deprived” by the British government.

Assisting the poor is an important requirement of Christian belief and action. To do so, the poor need to be identified, a task that is probably easier in developing nations than in developed ones. Malnutrition, starvation, and proneness to disease are obvious signs of poverty in the developing world, but these qualities are less prevalent and are manifested less in the developed world. Disagreement has recently arisen among Christians about who the poor are in developed nations. Some Christians argue that material poverty and inequality are no longer problems because of the high degree of affluence in the West.⁵¹

It does seem more than faintly ridiculous, at first glance, to suggest that poverty really exists in the UK in a world where:

- Three billion people live on less than \$2.50 a day.⁵²
- One billion children live in poverty, and 22,000 children die each day from hunger.⁵³
- 750 million people do not have access to clean water.⁵⁴
- Hunger kills more people worldwide every year than HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.⁵⁵

Little wonder that a room full of Brazilian favela dwellers laughed at my photographs of what we, in the UK, consider deprivation. However, the issue is not as straightforward as we might think. Darren McGarvey puts it succinctly: “Yes, it’s certainly true that a Western child has less chance of dying of hunger, dysentery or malaria than a child in Rwanda, but that is little consolation when you are being verbally abused, beaten or sexually assaulted in an alcoholic home.”⁵⁶ In other words, try telling a child from a Northern Irish council estate whose drunken, drug-addled stepfather beats his mother unconscious every night that he has it better than a child living in a shack in Brazil with two loving parents trying their best to provide for him. Try telling the child on a Welsh housing estate that he’s not really poor when he’s not had a hot meal for a week and been living off mouldy Rice Krispies and gone-off milk.

The issue of poverty is far more complicated than most of us can possibly imagine. The poor and deprived in the UK might well live within brick houses and modern council flats, but that does not negate the desperate struggles many are battling with behind their double-glazed windows.

HOW ARE STATISTICIANS DEFINING POVERTY AND DEPRIVATION?

For the Index of Multiple Deprivation, a person, household and/or community is suffering from poverty and/or deprivation if they fall below the standard minimum government parameters in each of the following seven areas:

- Income (22.5%)
- Employment (22.5%)
- Education, skills and training (13.5%)

- Health deprivation and disability (13.5%)
- Crime (9.3%)
- Barriers to housing and services (9.3%)
- Living environment (9.3%)⁵⁷

Each factor is given a particular “weight” – hence the percentage figures – towards building a multi-layered deprivation consensus. According to the UK government: “The weights were derived from consideration of the academic literature on poverty and deprivation, as well as the levels of robustness of the indicators.”⁵⁸ In effect, the domains reflect key areas of impact, and the weights help quantify the impact of those domains. Therefore, when we speak of poverty and deprivation, at least within the research part of this book, we will be using these same seven weights as our baseline.⁵⁹ We are not claiming that this is all there is to say about poverty, nor are we asserting that this is an exhaustive list of measurements. However, each of these weights is the product of multi-agency, up-to-date research and are, in our opinion, as reliable as is possible. It is because of this reliability that the IMD’s findings are the main statistical source for almost every other agency in the UK when it comes to measuring poverty.

By using these seven domains, researchers can account for one factor’s impact on the poor in relation to the others in various combinations: if a family lives in a community with a positive living environment but low employment opportunities or low education, are they more or less likely to experience poverty? This may well be a commuter neighbourhood, where people travel one hour to work and all have college degrees, or it could be a neighbourhood where living conditions are declining. These domains help sort such factors.

By weighting these domains, the research data keeps these domains in perspective, in reasonable relationship to each other. Notice that, “Income” and “Employment” are significant factors that can help someone keep out of poverty, but poor health or disability can easily find one unemployed or otherwise and therefore unable to make ends meet. If someone bought a “fixer-upper”, or if the community is in a gentrification process, their “Living Environment” score is inevitably going to be low. But a high score in that alone does not signify that there is a problem, nor is it an indication that the neighbourhood is “poor”.

Conversely, it is worth repeating that the IMD weighting system reveals a significant bias towards income and employment. Obviously, income and employment are two of the most significant factors contributing to poverty: no job or no money usually leads to financial poverty. However, education and health are essential for being able to work. So, too, is a home to come back to. This is why some are sceptical of what they see as an imbalance in the weighting system. This being said, we feel, given the use we make of other reports from a number of different agencies, that our research has righted any imbalance people feel may exist with the IMD’s.

That being said, the IMDs of each country in the UK do not look into the reasons behind poverty, or its effects on different nations, communities and individuals. Indeed, even *how* poverty is experienced will differ according to the specific contexts and situations people find themselves in. In much the same way we view mental health issues on a sliding scale, poverty can be measured and experienced along its own scale, depending on the type of poverty being experienced.

HOMELESSNESS AND SQUATTING

Interestingly, while the IMD reports do single out housing as a factor, *homelessness* and *squatters* are categories of material

poverty unto themselves. We must remember that when it comes to measuring these two groups, the statistics are estimates at best, because it is difficult to find and count how many people are homeless, how many are “squatters” and how many “couch surf”.⁶⁰ Oftentimes young people, particularly, do not have a home and so “spend the night” – although it is often much longer than this – on couches with family, friends or otherwise. A lot of these people purposely stay off the grid and are only registered in the case of a medical emergency, a police report or if they register at a homeless shelter.

Further complicating matters is the declining use of the term “council estate(s)” and the declining use of council housing itself – with the government opting for a housing association model of government supported housing, as previously discussed.⁶¹ This has meant that the government is only registering people who make use of their approved HAs – and that leaves countless thousands outside of the reach of our research and statistical analysis.

The central point is that locating the UK’s most deprived is fraught with complications because of these issues. Relying on the available research, we press on to locate the UK’s poorest by using the most reliable data that can be found by the IMD. Where helpful, that data is then corroborated with other reports.

CONCLUSION

Poverty cannot not simply be boiled down to statistics on a piece of paper. Nor can it be accurately measured solely by the results of surveys concerning income and expenditure. There are real people behind these numbers living in, and often with, distressing personal circumstances. To quote the World Bank:

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access

*to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.*⁶²

To be sure, poverty is about a lot more than these things, at least from a spiritual perspective. But neither is it less than those things, as we shall go on to see.

CHAPTER 3

HOW ARE PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY IN THE UK?⁶³

We've all seen the pictures of starving children in Africa and the horrors of mass immigration camps in Syria and other war-torn regions. I have personally visited and continue to mentor men in some of the poorest nations on the planet – people without any running water, electricity or access to a regular meal. Poverty is easy *to see* in these places. We don't have to quibble about the meaning behind, and the definitions of, words when standing in the middle of an immigration camp in Africa.

The UK, on the other hand, is a member of both the G7 and G20 and is rated seventh in world output by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁶⁴ Yet, according to Daniel Dorling and Bethan Thomas, in their book, *Bankrupt Britain: An Atlas of Social Change*, “It is well known that of all the countries of Western Europe, the UK has among the highest rates of child poverty and by far the highest rate given the wealth of the country.”⁶⁵ It seems scarcely believable, but they remain convinced that, “Income inequalities in Britain are among the widest in the affluent world. The largest group of poor households living in Western Europe live in Britain.”⁶⁶ They

go even further in their damning indictment of poverty in the UK, by saying:

*In no other large European country is housing as badly distributed as in Britain. In no other similarly affluent country do people live in such cramped and crowded conditions, with so little floor space for most people and so many children sharing a room with a sibling of the opposite sex in their teenage years. Housing in Britain is shamefully poorly used, badly repaired, seen as yet another way to get rich rather than as the means of satisfying everyone's need for a home.*⁶⁷

According to Eric Jensen's study, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, there are six main types of poverty in the UK.⁶⁸ They are outlined below:

SITUATIONAL POVERTY

This kind of poverty occurs with the onset of a sudden crisis, outside an individual's control. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 would be such an example, in that it led to the bankruptcy of many businesses and jobs worldwide.⁶⁹ Other events could be chronic health issues, environmental disasters and familial breakdowns. On the plus side, this type of poverty is often only temporary and those with savings and assets – typically financially secure, middle-class families – are able to ride out the storm and come out the other side. The less fortunate – those already suffering from a permanently low income – are described as having, “a precarious well-being”.⁷⁰ The majority of people suffering from situational poverty do so in the knowledge that their situation is temporary at worst. In other words, they can see light at the end of the tunnel. Their situation is not completely hopeless and may well be reversible.

GENERATIONAL POVERTY

Generational poverty is a different beast altogether. It occurs in families where at least two generations have been born into poverty.⁷¹ This poverty is not just financial. According to one report, “Families dealing with generational poverty are also challenged with three other forms of poverty: educational poverty, parental poverty and spiritual poverty.”⁷² Whereas those suffering with situational poverty at least have hope, those suffering with generational poverty are left only with a sense of hopelessness. “Without hope and the belief that life can be better, the motivation and energy needed to break the cycle are very low.”⁷³ Families living in this type of poverty are just not equipped with the tools to move out of their situations.

Dr. Debra Kidd writes:

*There are working-class children whose parents have aspirations for them, and there are working-class children whose parents are not even aware of what possibilities exist, and if they are, have no idea how to help their child to achieve them. The difference between situational poverty, where you’ve experienced something and aim to get back there, and generational poverty, where there has been nothing but poverty, create very different mindsets and circumstances.*⁷⁴

I come from a third, even more perverse, brand of parenting that despised education and belittled any attempts that were made to study or better yourself. It was termed, “trying to get above your station” or “making out you’re better than everybody else”. So, even when I wanted to study, adult pressures and the prevailing culture of despair forced me to act up and perform poorly at school, despite the fact that I found the work both interesting and easy. Doing badly was celebrated

as “sticking it to the man”, whereas doing well was frowned upon as “sucking up to the establishment”.

RELATIVE POVERTY

This refers to, “the economic status of a family whose income is insufficient to meet its society’s average standard of living”.⁷⁵ Habitat for Humanity define relative poverty in the following way:

*Relative poverty is sometimes described as “relative deprivation” because the people falling under this category are not living in total poverty, but they are not enjoying the same standard of life as everyone else in the country. It can be TV, internet, clean clothes, a safe home (a healthy environment, free from abuse or neglect), or even education.*⁷⁶

The UK government’s measure of relative poverty “compares the households with the lowest incomes against the rest of the population *in that year*”.⁷⁷ The term, “relative poverty” is often misunderstood or tossed about carelessly, particularly within the world of research. There is a widespread belief in the Western world that it is better to be *materially poor* in the so-called “developed” world, than in, let’s say, the two-thirds world. The logic being that it is surely far better to be poor in the UK than in the slums of India. Yet, as we saw with Bob and Josef, people can still suffer from the effects of material deprivation in both countries, even though their experience of it is markedly different.

ABSOLUTE POVERTY

The Declaration of Copenhagen defines absolute poverty as: “A condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation

facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but on access to social services.”⁷⁸ In the UK people are designated as being in absolute poverty, sometimes called “persistent poverty”, if their income is 60% less than the national median income over a *sustained period of time*.⁷⁹

URBAN POVERTY

Urban poverty occurs in areas with populations of at least 50,000 people.⁸⁰ According to Jensen, “The urban poor deal with a complex aggregate of chronic and acute stressors (including crowding, violence, and noise) and are dependent on often-inadequate large-city services.”⁸¹

RURAL POVERTY

Rural poverty occurs in areas with populations below 50,000. The poor in these areas face multiple problems. For instance, “the job market in small towns is limited, which prevents people with an already low-income from improving their finances and gaining access to certain services”.⁸² The rural poverty rate is growing and has exceeded the urban rate every year since data collection began in the 1960s. The difference between the two poverty rates has averaged about 5% for the last 30 years, with urban rates near 10%–15%, and rural rates near 15%–20%.⁸³

Therefore, in the light of this discovery, we must ask the question:

How are people experiencing these different kinds of poverty in one of the richest nations in the world?

I ask the question because of research carried out by the World Bank.⁸⁴ They, like most Western institutions, measure poverty by *income*. They set the daily poverty line at \$1.90 per day which means that just under 10% of the world live in abject poverty

below this line. That amounts to just under 700 million people. One of the interesting things about their research is when they asked people who lived below this line the following question: “What is poverty?” The responses were startling inasmuch as a high majority of the respondents talked about their poverty in terms of their *experience* of it. How it made them *feel*. If we were to ask the question in the financially rich Western world, the answers are instead almost exclusively centred around *lacking money, education or physical services* (schools, hospitals, etc.).

In light of these findings, we need to understand that for many people experiencing poverty in the UK, the issue is about *how they feel* and not always about a lack of physical and financial resources. It’s important that we consider this before writing off people in the UK who we think of as not being poor merely because their income dwarfs that of somebody living in a shack in a Brazilian favela. The issue is more complex than that.

STATISTICAL EVIDENCE OF UK POVERTY

The most recent statistics back up the claim that poverty, in all of its types, is a serious problem in the UK. Research tells us that *14.2 million people experience material deprivation across the UK* – a number that has increased since the Social Metrics Commission report of 2018.⁸⁵ Consider the following: