

## Working for a Poverty Free New Zealand

I want to acknowledge the work of the Christian Budgeting Service, thank you for the privilege to speak and hopefully encourage you in your work.

The title I've chosen for my contribution to you conference is "Working for a Poverty Free New Zealand". A laudable vision, but difficult to achieve in the present realities of New Zealand.

From where I sit, I see New Zealanders who are impacted by threefold poverty. A material poverty, a spiritual poverty and what I would term an aspirational poverty. How do we free New Zealanders and New Zealanders from this triple curse is the question I would like to explore with you briefly this morning.

Economic recession and its impact have over the last year dominated the media, the actions of government, business and the community. This recession appears to have deepened poverty and the level of need in New Zealand. So what are some of the indicators of poverty we are seeing?

Two weeks ago The Salvation Army released its quarterly abstract of key social statistics. These show a 40% rise in food parcels over the same quarter last year with 5000 families in the last quarter we had never seen before.

The recession is deepening material poverty in New Zealand. Its' human face is people losing jobs, parents not able to pay the rent or the doctor, individuals turning to alcohol, gambling and drugs for relief, families suffering relationship stress as the strain of economic uncertainty impacts them. Recession also however brings spiritual and aspirational questions for people. This is especially true when the centre of life has been built around material acquisition and consumption. Rubbed of the ability to consume and acquire, a spiritual crisis emerges and there seems to be less hope for the future.

Another poverty indicator is people's ability to deal with the life crises that are part of normal life. People seem to be struggling more. Illus Plane. As people are pushed into an economic corner in their personal finances this seems to escalate the possibilities of other crisis impacting their lives and the realities of spiritual and aspirational poverty kick in.

A further indication is New Zealand neighbourhoods tend to be creaking under the weight of social dislocation. Often showing up in a lack of connectedness and individuals isolated from each other. For the elderly person this lack of social may mean there is no neighbour available to get their milk or bread when their sick. For the young they seek gangs and peer recognition to feel part and their sense of aloneness leads to drug use, binge drinking and high rates of youth suicide.

Some of the simple glue that kept communities together and enabled families to thrive appears to be now evaporating. In the community where I live both Mum and Dad are working sometimes leaving the eldest child to look after the youngies after school. Or Mum works at night and Dad works during the day so they are never together to talk and share with their children, neighbours and do things that bring richness to life. Even in social services a more competitive model of social services has fostered disconnection, double ups and competitiveness.

Another poverty sign is our communities use and or more importantly abuse of alcohol. Increasingly I detect in conversations with people a great deal of unease around the use of alcohol. Alcohol is easily obtained at neighbourhood bottle stores and dairies. And there is almost an encouragement to excessively consume where the local supermarket alcohol prices are so cheap because they are using it as a loss leader.

It seems we are slow learners. The social ministry of The Salvation Army was born nearly a 150 years ago responding to the problems of the day created by cheap alcohol and its easy availability. . . Today ease of supply is leading to a culture of binge drinking, alcohol fuelled violence, alcohol dependency and young people making lives important decisions while tanked up on a deadly cocktail of drugs and alcohol. .

Other indicators are

- A diminishing supply of early childhood education centres for poorer communities. Illus Sth Auckland 28,000 under 5's with only 11,000 places.
- An inability in our society to educate, inspire and mentor our young people, towards lives in which they feel purpose, security and hope
- A public attitude in New Zealand that sees the only answer to crime as longer and harsher sentences rather than punishment that involves useful work, adequate victim support, strengthened mental health treatment and addiction therapy for offenders.

The context of New Zealand society then you are asked to do your budgeting work is one where your clients are impacted by this threefold poverty challenge

- Material poverty
- Spiritual poverty
- Aspirational poverty

This poverty provides for a faith based service like you own an enormous challenge but also a fantastic opportunity. The question is "Are we up for that challenge of working for a poverty free New Zealand?"

I want to put up for discussion and debate five suggestions I think could help

My first suggestion is for governments to stop managing our social welfare system by responding to one off newspaper articles and emotive media comments.

Instead let's have robust governance and management of social welfare systems based on evidenced based research and information systems that report reliably on what is going on and what the impact of social delivery solutions are

Politicians of all political hues it seems are rather keen to play politics for their own advantage with the welfare system. A pattern has emerged where an alleged abuse of a benefit or other welfare provision raised by the media; triggers a Minister to order an inquiry into the working of their department. I'm sorry but my understanding of good governance and management is that you have as normal practice robust reporting and information systems in place which enable you to know clearly whether your department is delivering as it should be. Every time a social policy minister questions their own departmental practices they undermine and weaken public trust in the social support system.

Illus: This week is an example. RNZ makes a statement. Minister Bennett announces an inquiry that is going to take to the end of the year to complete.

New Zealand has been experiencing the impact of a global economic crisis. In response to that crisis the government has taken some reasonably dramatic actions in the last six months, providing bank guarantees, increased dramatically the spend on capital infrastructure, instituting the cycleway project and providing for a nine day fortnight. Welcome measures, to protect the economy, the banking system, business investment and the jobs of individuals.

Given those decision by cabinet wouldn't it seem reasonably obvious that W&I was likely to spend more on emergency assistance during that same period. Wouldn't that also mean you budget and institute good rigorous interview criteria for recipients and ensure reporting mechanisms that ensure the money is well spent? And if you have been reading those weekly monitoring reports why would you suddenly be surprised by a Radio New Zealand report and feel the need to institute an enquiry that was going to take the rest of the year to complete?

A solution then is governance and management systems by government of social services that ensure the multi billion dollar spend on welfare is correctly and efficiently monitored and targeted. A system that enables Government to strongly defend the public delivery of social and welfare services against any media mischief making, one off events and further ensures maintains public confidence in those systems is maintained.

My secondly suggestion is to really understand the drivers of social need and base New Zealand's welfare and social policy on evidenced based research and proven delivery solutions.

New Zealand continues a fascination with a bumper sticker approach to social welfare policy making.

Economic realities mean social costs are acceding budgets creates a bumper sticker solution which says "Stop people ripping off the system"

A particularly nasty and horrendous crime is committed by an individual so the bumper sticker "Longer and harsher prison sentences for all criminals"

A gang destroys one state house the bumper sticker "The state house system is in crisis tenants destroy their houses"

And on it goes. The more often the bumper sticker is repeated the more truth it seems to gather. The characteristics of bumper sticker solutions are they are usually quick easy answers, they usually argue from an individual problem to a collective solution, they often protect the self interest of the person giving the solution and frequently provide answers that have already been proven in practice to fail.

New Zealand has access to good quality information on most of its social problems. Reputable organisations and researchers provide valuable work that is often largely ignored in favour of the bumper stickers approach. Politicians sadly don't help when they fail to concentrate on evidence based solutions opting instead for populist solutions which they often know won't work but they will win the next election.

Understanding and having reliable data and research is vital to sound social solutions. Some of the present social stats of New Zealand should cause us to furiously work for answers.

- 230,000, or 22 percent, of New Zealand children are still living in poverty. That is, in households with incomes below the 60 percent median income poverty line. This is more than the entire population of North Shore City (205,605) and means one adult and one child living on \$430 a week before they pay their housing costs.
- Of these children, 170,000, or 16 percent, live in households with incomes below the 50 percent median income poverty line, after taking housing costs into account. This means one adult and one child living on \$355 a week, before they pay their housing costs.

2800	Increase in prison population in the five years to 8,500 people	100%	Increase in the cost of running the Corrections Department since 2004
\$1.9 billion	The increase in Government spending on National Superannuation since 2002	\$385 million	The decrease in Government spending on income tested benefits since 2002
6.7%	Growth in the average value of wages and salaries since 2003 after taking account of inflation	0%	Growth in the value of income tested benefits since 2003 after taking account of inflation

Sometimes the real evidence put a different picture on the drivers of social and consequently requires changed solutions.

If we base the development of solutions on evidence based research and international evidence we are far more likely to achieve long term answers to our welfare and social problems

My third suggestion is that we value the building blocks of good social infrastructure as highly as we value economic and capital infrastructure.

In Auckland we are currently engaged in discussion and debate about the super city. Debate often centred on the efficient and effective use of capital and economic infrastructure. Effective economic and capital utilisation is vitally important to a well functioning future Auckland city, it will be great if we have a world class port and we will all be proud if the city executes well the rugby world cup.

But in our consideration of the governance and management of Auckland are we valuing sufficiently the development of a vision and plan which will achieve social harmony, social justice and the spiritual and aspirational health of citizens. The Royal Commission on Auckland identified a need to value and encourage these things. Those recommendations from the Royal Commission to specifically address social-infrastructure have not presently been taken up by Government. This may prove to be a costly mistake if it is not rectified.

Valuing and improving key elements of New Zealand's social infrastructure is vital:

- A social welfare provision which provides safety for people but does not destroy individual effort or create unhealthy dependence.

- An economy that generates adequately paid work opportunities for all citizens.
- Safe and affordable housing for all citizens
- Free education, for all children which provides a life pathway into work or further educational opportunities.
- A social safety net that adequately protects people experiencing loss of earning power through accident, sickness or unemployment.
- A system able to provide income where a parent or caregiver needs to forgo work opportunities to provide adequate and sustainable care to children.
- A system that keeps the community safe from crime, while keeping offenders productively working and undertaking actions that will lead to their successful rehabilitation into community and non criminal activities.
- A system that works to maintain the spiritual, cultural and mental health of its citizens

My fourth suggestion is a controversial one. We must start believing again that there actually is enough. What do I mean by that?

The global economic crisis has hijacked our imaginations, by filling our lounges and places of study and work with imagery of bankruptcy, credit-defaults, credit-card debt, national debt, etc etc. Images that speak of *what we don't have* and of *what we have to control, protect and save* if we hope to make it through the recession.

The Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says it this way

"... the dominant text of our culture is despair... there are no new gifts to be given, and there is no Giver who might give new gifts. There is nothing more than management and distribution and redistribution, wars about distribution of land and oil and water, nor more gifts. Everything is limited and scarce, to be guarded and kept, to be confiscated and seized. It is so in the public domain of economics, not less so in the intimate world of human transactions and emotional need – not enough of love, a shortage of forgiveness, and finally a deprivation of grace in this age and in the age to come."<sup>1</sup>

It seems that everyone everywhere is listening to and speaking this *despairing language of crisis management, this language of grasping, loss and scarcity*. There is less talk today of *what we already have*, less talk of *gratitude*, and even lesser talk of *what we could redistribute or share*. The future is finite, limited, and closed to surprise.

*Friends there is a large elephant at our dinner tables that we're ignoring?* The elephant is that *there is "enough"*, and if this economic crisis fuels a shift of our energies/interests from over-consumption, to a desire to the meeting and sharing of need, then there is going to be "enough" in the future. It's the elephant that no one seems to be mentioning or, for that matter, even seeing. Who has the courage to defy the depressing-speak of the immediate economic crisis and talk of the "enough" we already have?

Three things are required

The first is *championing that "there is enough."*

We have to counter the despairing speak of "crisis management", the current economic hype that is focusing only on *what is* rather than *what could be*. We need

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 2006. *The Word that Re-describes our World*.

to engage in *celebrating what we already have* and in the same breath, we have to courageously point to where there *could be a fairer distribution or redistribution of "goods"* to ensure that everyone, everywhere has "enough", that everyone, everywhere can *contribute to and enjoy a fairer share of the economic pie*. This will really eat into poverty

Secondly we have to *re-covenant* ourselves to be caring just where we live. What if where we live was a hub of *our social ministry*? What if we each became something of a food-bank? What if we were to *rediscover the practice of hospitality, the practice of sharing our dinner tables with others, the practice of sharing what we traditionally label our own and private*? What difference could that make to the communities with which we live and mix?

What if social service agencies were prepared to collaborate financially with other community groups who, with the economic downturn and the shrinking cash flow, now face the impossibility of securing decent funding sources? The collaboration could help close some of the cracks that communities fall through, limit the growing sense of competitiveness between organizations, and stop the inefficient duplication of social services.

*"If Christian social service becomes a place where welfare is administered rather than an organic community, they fail. Our services become a distribution centre, a place where the poor come to get stuff and the rich come to dump stuff. Both go away satisfied (the rich feel good, the poor get clothed and fed), but no one leaves transformed. No new radical community is formed."*<sup>2</sup>

We have to recommit ourselves to *community development*, to being a living, messy, organic network of partnerships.

Thirdly we need to re-explore and reinvest in policies of *"Reciprocity."* We have to move our energies and practices from *doing stuff for people to doing stuff together with people to doing stuff of the people*. We have to help the communities we connect with feel and see that they can contribute to something good, that there is some expectation on them to add something of real value. We have to shift from "hand-outs" to "hand-ups" to "sharing the workload together." The expectation of *reciprocity* creates a:

*"... community that (can) embrace not just the poor and their advocates, but the better-off as well. For the poor will not only be less poor if they work (contribute); they will become less alien to (and less distant from) other people. That is a vision that is often not popular but it is a vision that, speaks to the real needs of the poor, and advances the gospel's vision of a unified society."*<sup>3</sup>

What could this reciprocity look like? It could mean that clients get invited to help church people establish and sustain community gardens. It could mean that clients of the budgeting service get invited to volunteer time in community projects. It could mean that congregations get invited to leave the church edifices on Sunday and collaboratively partner with our clients to "beautify" neighbourhoods. If handled carefully, *reciprocity* can increase the felt dignity of individuals and strengthen the communal feel of connectivity. There is a renewed sense of *what is possible together* and of how *"we're (truly) in this together."*

<sup>2</sup> Shana Claborne, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Mary Jo Bane and Lawrence M Mead, 2003. *Lifting Up the Poor.*

And that leads to my fifth and final suggestion that is that getting rid of poverty is a job that lies with us all

It lies with government in the provision of state systems of social provision that are adequately funded, strongly managed, rigorously monitored and can be adequately defended when the provision or the people benefitting from the social system are unfairly attacked

It lies with politicians especially those in opposition, not to foster electoral success by jumping on populist social solution bandwagons that lack supporting evidence of effectiveness

We currently have a record prison number of 8500, rising so fast Government needs to introduce policies of temporary prisons and double bunking. This situation has not been driven by a rapid increase in criminal offending but by a public pressure for longer sentences and more offenders in prison. The public pressure has been effective but is our community safer and are prisons working. Each year 7000 people are released from New Zealand prisons often living just down the road from you and me. They are released having not worked for the length of their sentence, without for the P, drug or alcohol addiction that contributed to their offending and often suffering from diagnosable mental health illnesses that have not been treated. They will be released without housing, jobs or any income. We have shelves of reports and international evidence which show there are better ways to deal with offending and punishment. New Zealand politicians however are choosing policies that gain electoral success rather than policies that rethink crime and punishment.

It lies with local authorities. Local Government cannot just be about roads rates and rubbish. A local authority needs also to providing services of recreation, housing, and community development that will enhance families and foster social justice.

It lies with the church and church based organisations. Making sure that the three big themes of the gospel are preached and acted upon faith, mercy and justice.

It lies with the media. Instead of falling into the trap of sensationalising how about more quality journalists trained to uncover quality social policy solutions and international best practice in social service delivery

And it lies with you and me. To value, speak up, support and encourage the development of sound social structure that creates a New Zealand we are all happy to live in. And to start to live lives that will challenge the threetold curse of poverty

I often receive letters from people whose lives have been rescued from poverty. I received such a letter this week in closing let me share it with you.

Hello my name is..... I'm a 29 year old mother of 5 children. I met The Salvation Army at the Manukau Court. They helped me to get home, I was so upset, my kids had been taken off me and my life was a mess.

Since the day when I asked for help the Sallies for help they have continued to support me which I really needed.

Asking for help that day was the best decision I have ever made. I started on a life skill development course which teaches mothers like me everyday basic skills.

Baking was one of the skills I have always wanted to learn. The Sallies taught me to bake. My kids love my baking and I have made it a family time to talk and enjoy baking together.

I'm really grateful, I just light up when I get complimented by my kids on the little things I do. And even my family compliment me as well. They say how nice my cooking is and not "oh it's burnt".

Through the support the Sallies have given me I have become a better person and parent to my children and I know that because my kids have told me so many times. I just don't want to look back, just o move on with my life. Making it safe and pleasant life for my family.

I have my kids every weekend now, they sit next to me in church and they are happy. They don't need to worry that I'm going to do something wrong again because they see I'm different.

I just want to thank you for giving me my life back. We can work to make New Zealand poverty free. It just requires greater faith, vision effort and determination from us all

Campbell Roberts  
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