

19 Insights from People in Poverty.

Jubilee+ Voices: Two Years of Learning





“ There’s a lot more like me coming and that’s God’s heart: He wants His church full.

J+ Voices participant, Hull

Question: what if the way we share stories of the wonderful work of God in people’s lives actually makes them vulnerable and even potentially sets them up to feel like they have failed?

And what if we discovered that people who have long experienced poverty are much less likely to enrol for a leadership course, even if they have a strong leadership gift, simply because the word ‘leadership’ is in the title?

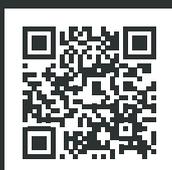
Here’s another question: when we see or hear of people church-hopping, do we consider them to be flaky, wondering if they have issues with commitment, a consumerist attitude to church? What would we change if we discovered that changing churches sometimes has more to do with a tenacious determination to find a church where you know the people want you, just like Jesus wants you?

If we are honest, sometimes we can fall into the trap of making judgements about people and how they live their lives or thinking we know what is best.

If our thinking was reframed, would we change our attitudes, our church practices, or both?

These are just a few of the questions that have challenged our thinking and are refining our practices, and those of the churches we partner with, since we started holding **Jubilee+ Voices** focus groups at churches in the UK.

J+ Voices is about churches, social action leaders, and Jubilee+ learning from those who often don’t have a say, even though they are affected by what we think and do.



Between November 2022 and April 2024, we had the privilege of learning from 55 people who candidly shared their experiences of living on the lowest incomes, and church-based support.

Background

Since the global financial crash in 2008 and the ‘era of austerity’ that followed, churches across the UK have committed with increasing vigour to supporting people who are trapped in

poverty in their local communities. They are spending millions of pounds and mobilising millions of volunteer hours each year to come alongside those who are struggling financially.

The Covid-19 pandemic worsened poverty and hardship, pushing many who were ‘just about managing’ into difficulties and plunging those already in poverty deeper still. Then the cost of living crisis began, with everyday food items rocketing in price, energy bills doubling for many, and petrol prices fluctuating significantly.

It is estimated that 4.3 million children (30%) are now living in poverty¹ and 11% of teenagers in the UK say they skip meals at least once a week because of poverty.² The UN’s special rapporteur on extreme poverty has said “much more needs to be done” and that the British Government is in danger of violating international human rights laws if it does not act to combat growing poverty.³

Against this backdrop, thousands of churches across the country are working flat-out to provide for people’s basic needs through social action projects (also known as mercy ministries). We are in direct, weekly contact with many people who are currently trapped in poverty. We have seen first-hand that as the economy has gone into harder times, it is the poorest people, the sickest people, the most marginalised who feel the biggest effects of that.

However, people in poverty are encountering the church. We are blessing those around us, doing good to them, following the commands Jesus gave us to feed the hungry, visit the sick, and shelter the homeless.

Churches with an active social action ministry are likely to see more non-believers each week at their projects than through anything else they do. One Jubilee+ partner church had fewer than 50 people participating in Alpha courses over the whole of 2023, but regularly sees more than 50 people per week through its foodbank. Likewise, while popular events such as Christmas carols services can attract large numbers of visitors, most churches will still see more people from outside the church at their social action projects across a year than they will at ‘big’ events.

Most churches want to provide help for people facing a crisis *and* an opportunity to find out more about Jesus. Most want to offer hope for today, and hope for eternity. But there seems to be a disconnect between finding support through church-based projects, and finding a sense of belonging in the church.

¹DWP, Households Below Average Income, 2022/23 statistics.

²OECD Pisa survey, December 2023, reported here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-67619470>

³<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/nov/05/uk-poverty-levels-simply-not-acceptable-says-un-envoy-olivier-de-schutter>

'With us' not 'for us'

Many see only a handful of people come to faith in Jesus each year. We long to see more. But even those who come to Christ often struggle with church life. The transition from projects to becoming part of the church family can be tough and is often far from straightforward.

Why is this? What makes it so difficult for people with recent or current experience of poverty to feel fully welcomed and integrated into church life?

This is among the key questions **Jubilee+ Voices** explores, so that we can learn, adapt, and work towards churches becoming places where people from all socio-economic backgrounds can thrive together, finding unity in diversity and the love for each other that Jesus says will mark us out as His disciples.



What is it?

Jubilee+ Voices is a series of focus groups designed to learn from people who are or have recently been in poverty about their experiences of church-based social action, and church life in general. While some of the Jubilee+ team, including our chief executive, have lived in poverty themselves, are familiar with low incomes, and are from a working class background, no one on our current leadership team has lived in poverty in the last decade. Our experiences are historic, so we want to learn from and be shaped by people who know what it's like to be in poverty or on a persistent low income now.

Why does this matter?

1. God is especially concerned about the plight of the poorest and is active on their behalf (see, for example: Exodus 23:10-11; Deuteronomy 15; 1 Samuel 2:8; Proverbs 21:13; Isaiah 61:1-4; James 1:27; etc, etc).

2. God's vision for people in poverty is not just to lift them out of it, but also to transform them into "oaks of righteousness" who bring Him glory; renew, restore and rebuild others (Isaiah 61:1-4); are honoured (1 Samuel 2:8); and become rich in faith (James 2:5).



3. God wants all people to come to know Him (1 Timothy 2:1-6), yet many churches across the UK are predominantly middle class.⁴

4. The voices of those in poverty matter to God (Exodus 3:7-9; Psalms 9:18, 40:17; Proverbs 21:13, 31:8-9; Luke 6:20-21; Galatians 2:10).

5. "The harvest is plentiful..." (Matthew 9:37) – there are tens of thousands of people being supported through church-based social action each year in the UK and Jesus gave His life for a diverse church, which will one day worship around His throne for eternity: "...a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, *people*, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9). Jesus wants a harvest of people from all walks of life.

6. Many church leaders know that there are certain demographic groups in our communities who are missing from our churches. We want to be accessible to people in our communities, but if people perceive themselves to be different to the majority, or cannot see themselves represented in the church, they may feel they do not 'fit in'. Even if they come along for a while, unless they can find a sense of belonging, they are less likely to stay.

7. We all have blind-spots, and often the ways we do things are based on habit or tradition, rather than a regular review of whether they are working in terms of drawing in new people. For well-established churches and/or leadership teams, it is very easy to be in an echo chamber, where all opinions mirror our own, and new voices are diluted or excluded. Hearing the voices of those affected by poverty, and by our ministries, helps us to see important things we are missing, and means that all we do can be shaped by those involved at every level, following the principle "nothing about us without us".⁵

8. Followers of Jesus are called to imitate His humility. This means we can always and should always be learning from others. We tend to assume the ways we do things are working, but no one is better placed to tell us how welcoming (or not) our social action projects are currently than those who have come to them recently. Likewise, our Sunday gatherings or mid-week church meetings.

⁴ See *Invisible Divides* by Natalie Williams and Paul Brown (SPCK, 2022), especially Part 1: Is class an issue?

⁵ 'Nothing about us without us' is a slogan popularised among disability rights groups, which embodies a principle that no policy should be enacted on behalf of groups affected by that policy, without the involvement of those groups. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothing_about_us_without_us

Who is involved?

Over two years, 55 people connected to 17 different churches participated in Jubilee+ Voices focus groups. The first three groups took place in Hastings, Hull, and Bracknell, with participants from those locations joined by people who live in Brighton, Leeds and Reading, respectively. We invited some participants to attend a second time – five people from three churches in Brighton and Hull attended the fourth session, which was held in Leicester.

The final three groups were held in Bristol, Norwich and Liverpool joined by people who live in Bath and Dereham. Everyone involved in these Jubilee+ Voices groups is currently in poverty or has experienced it within the last five years. Some have found faith in Jesus; others have not.

How does it work?

Each **Jubilee+ Voices** focus group was an interactive session featuring games, discussions and activities, with very little talking on the part of Jubilee+. The sessions were led by Rosie Hopley from the Jubilee+ leadership team. With a relaxed structure, participants were free to join in with as much or as little as they felt comfortable. Some questions were asked in different ways, to help those who were less confident to speak up. For example, a simple game of snakes and ladders was a popular exercise that helped participants to identify factors that hold people in poverty and factors that lift them out.

The groups were kept small (6-12 people each time) so that everyone could have a voice and in an attempt to avoid the setting feeling intimidating.



Aside from two gatherings (Leicester and Norwich), church leaders and social action ministry leaders were not present, as we did not want participants to feel that any topics or opinions were off limits. We

wanted to hear them express what they feel has been done badly, as well as what has been done well. In general, we didn't record audio or video for the same reason.

In Leicester, because participants were already familiar with the format, the session included two people in church leadership and the Jubilee+ chief executive, and we filmed interviews with each participant as part of the day. In Liverpool, our final session, we extended the focus group to happen over two days with our chief executive. By the second day, when participants were more familiar with our team and relaxed, we recorded audio and filmed semi-structured interviews.



What's the point?

The purpose of **J+ Voices** is for Jubilee+ and the churches and social action leaders we serve to learn from people in our communities who have current or recent experience of poverty. We want to know the truth of how they have found our churches and our mercy ministries. Often people in poverty or on low incomes do not have a say, even though what we do affects them and their lives.

As one J+ Voices participant told us: "It's so hard to be heard nowadays. If you're not in power, if you're not in privilege, it's so important to be heard, and it's so important to know that there's a place you can go where you can be heard."

Another said that being invited to take part in J+ Voices "kind of makes you feel like you're important, like a proper member of the community".

We want participants of J+ Voices to influence our work – if we are a charity that equips churches to change the lives of those in poverty in their communities, then we must be shaped by people who have more recent experience of poverty – who know what it's like to be trapped in poverty today.

What was the value of it for participants?

Participants found being involved in J+ Voices very valuable in ways we did not expect. Several talked about feeling isolated and even unaware, in some cases, that there are other people in churches on a similar journey to them. People valued the opportunity to be in a room with others who have recent or current experience of poverty, and particularly with others who are overcoming debt, homelessness, addiction, domestic abuse, and/or mental health challenges. Poverty of love and connection were common themes.

Some of those involved found it cathartic, especially as they found it a safe space to speak openly about their experiences.

Several said that it helped them to feel that they are valued not just in their local setting, but also as part of something bigger than just their church.



What was the value of it for church and social action leaders?

The social action leader from Hastings pointed out that because most of his church's social action ministries are "run by faithful middle class Christians" they might fall into the trap of thinking "we know the best way to deliver our projects". He said that because many of the projects focus on crisis support (rather than long-term help), it can be hard to get feedback. Indeed, Jubilee+ would recognise the obvious flaw with asking beneficiaries for feedback while they are in the process of receiving from your project.

This leader said: "**Jubilee+ Voices** gave us a good opportunity to involve several people who had been helped initially by our mercy ministries and, as a direct result, encountered Jesus. Now actively involved in our church family, they were keen to share the experiences of when they were in need."

The social action leader at Kerith Community Church in Bracknell found the same, and this has led to **J+ Voices** being replicated at Kerith after the group asked to meet again and she realised that they are better placed to "act as bridge-builders... reaching people that others can't reach".

What did we learn?

While some of what was shared by participants confirmed some of the assumptions we already had, the insights we have gained from spending time with the 55 **J+ Voices** participants have been eye-opening and are transforming the way we think and the activities we are planning for the future.



After spending a few hours with five participants, Jubilee+ chief executive Natalie Williams said that it had been "the most informative day" – she said that she had learnt more in that day than at any conference or event in the previous year, adding: "I think every church leader needs to do this."

Church leader Abi Flavell sat in on one of the **J+ Voices** groups and said: "Every suggestion [participants] made regarding how churches could help lift people out of poverty was listened to and validated... Guests were able to identify things that helped and hindered their journey out of poverty and their journey towards Jesus, as well as what helped them feel 'at home' in a church family."

Here are some of the insights we picked up from **J+ Voices** participants over the two years:

Insight #1: Honest leaders

This is probably true across the board, but **J+ Voices** participants emphasised the importance of leaders who are honest about their own struggles, so that people who come to churches and projects can relate to them. They don't have to have experienced the same things, but there is high appreciation of leaders who are willing to authentically share their own struggles and be open about the fact that they do not have it all together. Similarly, some participants expressed strong value for leaders who are visible in social action projects on a regular basis, pointing out that then they get to know them in those settings during the week and so the leaders feel more approachable at church gatherings.

Insight #2: Saviours and heroes

Many helpful and well-intentioned Christians admit to developing and having to fight against a 'saviour complex'. However, there was an acute awareness among some **J+ Voices** participants that Christians cannot fix people, but they can lead people to Jesus and He can make change possible.

At the same time, one of the most striking personal testimonies involved being "made to feel like I was some sort of hero with my story... everybody's so happy that you've come to know Jesus" but that wearing off when struggles continued. We must be careful to celebrate the work of Jesus in someone's life without putting them on a pedestal and opening them up to feelings of failure if they slip back into old patterns, as we all do sometimes.

Participants expressed a deep understanding that they are neither saviours nor heroes, but they very much want to be heard and understood, and to contribute to church life and social action ministries. The majority enjoy serving as a way to 'give back'.

Insight #3: Church commitment

When people change churches, especially more than once in a few years, they could be demonstrating resilience and tenacity rather than flakiness or consumerism. Participants spoke of wanting to find a church that "fits" and that "feels secure, stable and safe". Moving from one church to another had more to do with a determination to find other Christians who would embrace them, than preference for meeting style and so on.

Insight #4: Supernatural encounters

Supernatural experiences are common for people in need.

J+ Voices participants shared stories of meeting Jesus in extraordinary ways, such as through a dream that led a whole family to faith. When shared in their own words, these testimonies are powerful for building faith in others, especially those who have perhaps become complacent about God's ability to save, provide, heal and free people in miraculous ways.

Insight #5: Saturday warfare

There was a heightened awareness among **J+ Voices** participants of spiritual attack taking place on Saturdays, especially in the evening, to prevent them and their family or friends attending church on Sunday mornings. Some talked of "crisis after crisis on a Saturday night" and this was very clearly understood to be spiritual warfare, with the need for prayer and support on Saturdays being emphasised as more important than we might appreciate.

Insight #6: Telling stories

As alluded to under Insight #2, the way we tell other people's stories matters. In our excitement about what Jesus is doing in someone's life, many of us rush to tell stories that are not ours to tell. Participants want to tell their own stories, reminding us that it is their choice what to tell, when, and to whom. This should also affect the questions we ask people. Recognition that they do not have to share details about their past or present situations was appreciated.

Insight #7: Radical generosity

Some **J+ Voices** participants expressed radical generosity – the kind that is often associated with people who would 'give you their last ten quid'.⁶ One took the gift card she was given as a 'thank you' for taking part and used it to buy five smaller vouchers so she could give away four to people in her block of flats who were struggling in the run-up to Christmas.

Those who were asked a specific question about how to help people in need really liked the idea of churches holding a 'back on your feet' fund that supports people for 3-6 months (see Insight #10), but felt that giving money directly could be unhelpful.

Insight #8: Faith-filled expectation

J+ Voices participants expect God to act on their behalf. They expect Him to answer their prayers. They have faith for His provision. They acknowledge that God answers in a variety of ways – through family, church community, friends, leaders,

work, etc. – but they have confidence He will answer when they pray to Him to meet their material needs. They have much to teach more comfortable or affluent Christians about faith.

Insight #9: Finding community

Many of those involved in **J+ Voices** are naturally evangelistic. They want to tell people about their faith and are actively sharing their stories about Jesus with people in their families and communities. They loved telling people about Jesus and inviting them to church, wanting them to find faith, safety and belonging too.

However, a number of participants expressed pain over Christian friends leaving their church without a clear reason (such as moving town or city). This causes a lot of confusion, especially when the person leaving was instrumental in bringing them into the church family, emphasising the importance of church, and/or helping them to feel welcomed and included.

Insight #10: Generating ideas

J+ Voices participants were full of ideas about how existing social action projects could be sharpened and new initiatives that could be piloted. At one group, there was unanimous enthusiasm about the idea of churches setting up a 'back on your feet' fund that would provide support for 3-6 months to give the boost that is sometimes needed to help people out of a poverty trap. They suggested that taking care of someone's rent and/or bills for three months, paying for travel to work for six months, or covering food shops for a few weeks, could be just what some people need to create a buffer zone to stop them falling back into poverty.

The idea of a 'back on your feet' fund was preferred over many other ways of helping, because it was seen to do exactly what the name implies – help people not just with their current crisis, but to emerge from it onto a more secure footing. Other ideas ranged from taking practical support into schools to church services where questions can be asked.

Insight #11: Giving and receiving

Beyond suggesting ideas, participants were keen to get involved and most didn't wait until they were back on their feet to do so. Several were both receiving support and volunteering at the same time. They want to help their churches by giving their input but also by getting involved in the delivery of projects as volunteers. They were particularly energised about offering things that are fun to those who are facing poverty, alongside practical support. Participants expressed willingness to pilot ideas, so that everyone can learn what works and what doesn't.

⁶ See *Invisible Divides* by Natalie Williams and Paul Brown (SPCK, 2022), chapter 6: Money and generosity.

Insight #12: Speaking and doing

Participants also wanted to have more opportunities to speak up through groups such as **J+ Voices**. One group suggested that these could be held in their local churches quarterly, monthly, or even fortnightly. Other churches might decide to hold something once a term. Interestingly, there was a real desire to be involved in putting into practice whatever specific outcomes emerge from Voices-type groups – they don't just want to talk about what needs to be done; they want to be involved in making it happen!



I aspire to be a Spurgeon.

Leicester participant

Insight #13: Leadership potential

Many of the participants we met have clear leadership gifting, but would not say that of themselves, because most would struggle to recognise it of themselves. We asked 13 participants if they would be interested in a leadership training programme – most said they would be interested, but not if it is called that, or had the word 'leadership' in the title or synopsis of the course. Those who were not interested gave reasons that revolved around disqualifying themselves.

But this isn't about aspirations. Many expressed a desire to be like heroes of the faith they have heard about, but on the whole they think of themselves as helpers rather than leaders. Suggestions from participants about leadership training included that any front-led talking should be restricted to 15-20 minute blocks, workbooks should be provided, and it should be a few days' residential rather than a monthly commitment, to avoid too much travel and time away from home and/or family. There was unanimous agreement with these ideas.



I struggle to think of myself as a leader, but I love people.

Voices participant

Insight #14: Church unity

J+ Voices participants want to see churches working together irrespective of denomination. They want to see unity among local churches, where they can all be proud to be working together to offer both practical support and prayer to those in need. They find it confusing that this doesn't happen more.

Insight #15: Beyond finances

Many Jubilee+ partner churches are aware that poverty is not just a financial issue. **J+ Voices** participants confirmed this,

emphasising relational poverty – isolation and the impact of stigma, in particular. They expressed a strong grounding in New Testament principles of 'one anothering': standing together in solidarity and spurring each other on. Specific aspects of poverty that emerged as themes in the groups were fleeing domestic abuse, grappling with addiction and recovery, mental health challenges, and grief. They are well aware that overcoming any of these requires strong relational support, ongoing pastoral care, and a sense of belonging.

Insight #16: Better advertising

People loved coming together for the Voices sessions, to share experiences and to pool ideas. One participant said: "The church hasn't lost the community, the community has lost the church. Open your doors more. Let groups come and use those spaces." **J+ Voices** participants want churches and projects to be more vocal about what they are providing for the community, especially so that people know about it before they reach crisis point, and also so young people are aware. **J+ Voices** participants feel proud of the help that is available and want others to know about it too.

Insight #17: Walk our journey

J+ Voices participants really want leaders in the church and in social action projects to understand the reality of their lives, especially if those leaders have never experienced poverty themselves. They wanted to challenge leaders to live for at least a week on their income, or even in their home, especially those who are living in multi-occupancy housing so leaders can start to grasp how "soul-destroying" that can feel.

Insight #18: Support for young people

There was a strong desire among some participants to see more signposting for young people to know where to get help, within the church in particular. Alongside the idea about taking practical support into schools, the encouragement to help children and teenagers was an interesting theme that emerged, raised by younger adults in the groups.

Insight #19: Voices everywhere

Participants saw great value in coming together for **J+ Voices** sessions to share their stories, experiences and what has been helpful to them. They want it to spread around churches across the UK to "open their eyes to things they [may have] never thought of doing" and so that people in poverty have the opportunity to be heard and to know there are church leaders who want to listen to them.

What did we observe?

Meeting people in **J+ Voices** groups helped to upend some of our stereotypes and prejudiced thinking. Listening to people's stories confirmed what we expected – that many on low incomes are facing and dealing with extreme challenges, such as severe trauma, injustice and criminality. Some stories were shocking: as people felt confident to share about their hardships and suffering in a space where they felt safe, we heard some harrowing accounts of life on very low incomes.



However, it didn't take long to create an atmosphere of welcome and belonging, even when people in the room didn't know each other. Participants in all sessions were quick to support each other, displaying gifts and fruit of the Spirit such as encouragement, serving and helping one another, joy, kindness, gentleness and patience. We met some who could be described as 'prayer warriors' and expressed inspiring levels of faith in God. Several demonstrated clear leadership gifting even in the few hours we were with them, and some told us of previous times in their lives when they had been able to exercise this more fully.

What next?

These 19 insights have the potential to change our minds and our habits, if we are open to allowing the Holy Spirit to convict, challenge, and change us through the voices of those who are or have recently been in poverty.

One question that was frequently raised by **J+ Voices** participants was what will happen on the back of these focus groups. It is a good question, and one that Jubilee+ can answer only partially. For our part, we are sharing what we have learnt with churches across the UK and further afield whenever we have opportunity, and encouraging church and social action leaders to take it seriously and adapt accordingly.⁷ We are also taking seriously the need for Jubilee+ itself to be shaped and changed by what we are learning.

But to a large extent, the real impact of J+ Voices is down to local church leadership teams. As such, we invite you to ponder and pray into these questions with those who head up your social action projects:

- Going through each insight one-by-one and reflecting on your own thinking and attitudes, do you need to repent of anything? If so, what will you then change?
- Looking through the insights again, are there any traditions, habits or behaviours that you could change as an a) individual,

b) team, c) church, and d) network/group of churches to help those in poverty or on lower incomes to become part of church life?

- How will you create space to hear the voices of those in poverty or on lower incomes? Could you run a **Voices** group in your church?
- How might you disciple people with recent or current experience of poverty into leadership?
- How could you disciple the whole church so that there is a culture of welcoming those who may have different life experiences to the majority in your church family?



Here are three ways that Jubilee+ Voices has influenced us:

1. We will create a setting where we can keep listening and being shaped by past participants of **J+ Voices**. We want to be open-handed with our strategy, culture, and activities, letting them be influenced and adapted by people with recent and current experience of poverty.
2. We want to equip churches to replicate **Jubilee+ Voices**, as Kerith Community Church in Bracknell has. We believe every church leadership and social action team will benefit from holding something similar to **J+ Voices** so we have recorded a series of short videos to equip churches to do this, based on the model we have tried and tested. These videos are available free to Jubilee+ Partner Churches via the QR code above.
3. We believe we have a responsibility to invest in future leaders who have come to church through social action projects or experienced low incomes, who might disqualify themselves from traditional leadership training programmes. We have secured funding to run two residential leadership training pilots in March and October 2025. If you would like to find out more about this, please email: admin@jubilee-plus.org.

Thank you

We are grateful to the Douglas Trust for funding two years of **Jubilee+ Voices** and to the 55 participants for their enthusiasm, honesty and openness with us. Your willingness to share your stories and experiences has impacted Jubilee+ and is already impacting churches across the country. The full extent of that impact won't be known until we see Jesus face-to-face, but we are grateful to God for you, and we are grateful to you for being willing to invest in something that is mostly unseen, but has eternal worth.

Finally, thank you to all the participating churches and social action projects for coming on this journey with us. We look forward to seeing how **Voices** shapes your activities in future.

⁷In May 2024, we were able to share about the J+ Voices work with 50+ representatives of Christian social action organisations working across Europe at the Eurodiaconia Conference in Bucharest.