



Week 4: A Labour of Love

NEW LIFE

20 - 24 December 2009

THEME OF THE WEEK

Labour, Life, Love



Photo source: NASA

This last week in Advent marks the time when Mary was in labour – a life-giving labour, a labour of love.

Mary's labour meant the birth of our saviour. It was a unique event but not an isolated event. Because, as Paul so beautifully expresses it: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves' (Romans 8:22-23).

We are in this together, as Paul expresses it so beautifully – groaning together (*sustenezai*) and sharing in the labour pains (*sunodinei*) – with the whole of creation.

Our own labour, too, is – or is meant to be – a life-giving labour. That's what the economy is all about, as John Ruskin put it 150 years ago in his essay on creating value, 'Ad Valorem'. The Latin root of 'value', he reminds us, is 'valere' – to be well or strong. He continues: '...strong, in life (if a man), or valiant; strong for life (if a thing) or valuable. To be "valuable", therefore, is to "avail for life".' From this he draws the conclusion: '... the question for the nation is not how much labour it employs, but how much life it produces.' And '“There is no wealth but life.”

Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings.'

Ruskin was writing at a time when people of all classes were beginning to fight, in their own ways, for the dignity of labour. Right until the last decades of the last century – labour was held up as having a central place in our culture. Theologies and ideologies of work flourished, as did labour organisations and movements. Work, whether in the factory or in the home, established a person's role and defined their very identity. But then, gradually, as the shape of work changed and as society became more affluent, it was consumption, not labour, that began to move to centre stage.

Yet labour remains vital – not just because we need to earn a living but because the creating of true life-enriching wealth comes, not from the clever manipulation of share prices and currency values, but from working to meet human need and to promote human development.

For Christians there is another dimension. Human labour is a participation in God's own creative and



redemptive work. That is the framework for Paul's image of our 'groaning together' and 'sharing in the pangs'. It is part of a wider process in which many other people, and indeed nature itself, play their part.

What we produce and what we consume is part of a process that began perhaps in the fields or in the laboratory. It will probably have involved training, research and planning, managing, assembling, packaging, transporting, marketing, selling, using, disposing, re-claiming, etc.

Increasingly labour is a process in which people in distant parts of the planet will have played a part. And it is a process which draws on and either depletes or renews the earth's resources. Its groans should be the groans that accompany birth. All too often, its groans are the groans of exploitation and death.

For millions, including children, the 'groaning' is

a desperate expression of the exploitation they are suffering – labouring unrelentingly, often in brutalising conditions, for long hours, with little satisfaction and little time for much else. The groans of a life of bonded labour, servile labour, slave labour.

And we are called to take part in the ending of such bondage, remembering that all creation '... waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8: 19-21).

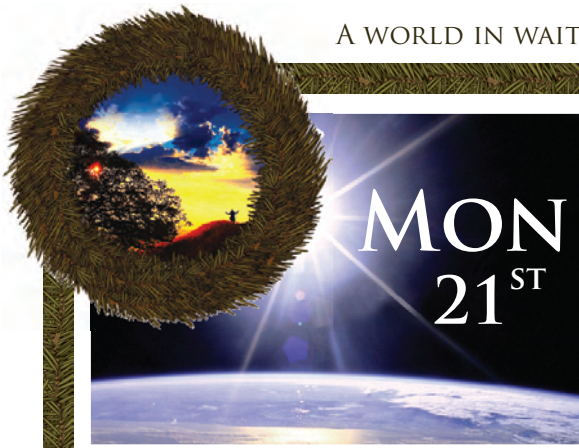
The focus of the reflections for this final week of Advent will be on how we are called to share in that hope-filled labour of life-giving and life-enriching love – and on what we must do to help make that a reality for all. They will draw, first, on the Epistle to the Hebrews.

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'Sacrifices and Offerings You Have Not Desired' HAPPINESS AT WORK

Hebrews 10:5

Sacrifice has been a basic part of most religions, long before Judaism or Christianity. The offering of sacrifice fulfils many different functions. It is a means of thanking a good God, of placating a powerful God, of expressing submission to a sovereign God, of expiating an offended God, of making reparation for even an unintentional trespass against the order arranged by a just and wise God. And the performance of sacrifice takes many different forms – from cruel and gruesome destruction to an offering of gifts which can then be used only by the priestly elite.

Long ago the prophets tried to convince people that their God was more pleased with the pursuit of justice than with the blood of sheep and goats. But the message did not always get through.

In the Epistles contained in the New Testament it is taken a step further. It is not just that sacrifices are pleasing when accompanied by just behaviour. They are no longer needed at all. This is because with Christ has come a new age of forgiveness, freedom and rest. From now on sacrifices become metaphorical – 'sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving'.

That message is developed more fully in the Epistle to the Hebrews than anywhere else in the New Testament. This is because the Epistle appears to have been written to a beleaguered community in which an important role had been played by priests. It is a marvellously moving and compassionate piece of literature, in spite of its sometimes technical legal and liturgical language. Passage after passage offers words of encouragement and instruction to a group demoralised by the defection of some of their number and still harbouring an attachment to the old ways.

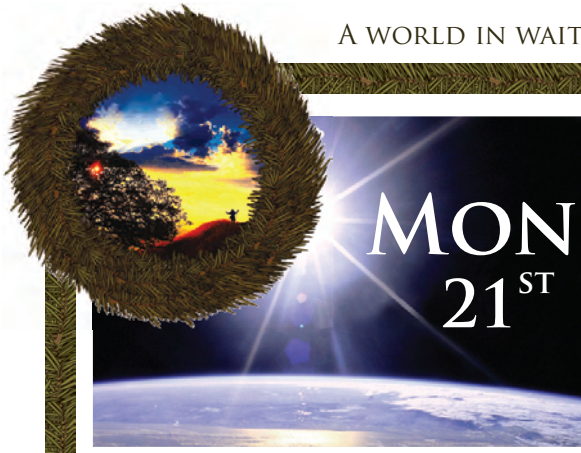
The writer tries to interpret the life and death of Jesus in terms that this priestly group could understand. He suggests that Jesus, like some of them, was not only a priest but a great high priest, who nonetheless experienced weakness and who could sympathise with them (Hebrews 4:15), offering prayers and petitions

with loud cries and tears (Hebrews 5:7). The writer tries to persuade this troubled, but perhaps once prominent group, that they can let go. Jesus has opened the way to a new life. They no longer need to go on repeating practices which merely foreshadowed what was to come. It's all over, finished. No more need for sin offerings. They were freed, purified, able to enter the rest which God had prepared. What is left is simple: 'Keep your lives free from the love of money... Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God' (Hebrews 13:16).

Does the notion of sacrifice have a place in our economic life? Yes, both in the areas of consumption and production – provided we see it is being about reciprocity: accepting (we first receive life) and giving (that others may live). Lovers often deny themselves particular pleasures or take on additional work so that they can have something special to offer to their beloved. Parents do the same for their children, often taking on two jobs or cutting back on luxuries so that their children can have proper food, clothing and education. People will sometimes sacrifice their career in order to look after an elderly parent. In that sense sacrifice is both natural and noble.

But not all economic sacrifice fits that description, particularly in the case of sacrifices which are imposed on some for the private good of others. That workers should be required to sacrifice their health for the sake of a firm's profit is a sacrifice which could hardly be acceptable in the sight of God and which should not be acceptable to society.

Adam Smith himself observed that, even from the point of view of self-interest, employers should treat their workers and servants with genuine care. Free labour, he argued, was both more productive and cheaper in the long run than either feudal or slave labour. Nor did he mean by 'free labour' that workers should be expected to accept the lowest remuneration which the market might impose. On the contrary, he argued that good wages were better for the economy



and for everyone in the long run. He argued against the piece-work system of work because this led workers to ruin their health. Similarly, he argued that workers should be allowed proper rest and that State encouragement should be given to popular recreation and entertainment – ‘painting, poetry, musick, dancing’ as a remedy against ‘that melancholy and gloomy humour which is almost always the nurse of popular superstition and enthusiasm’. Furthermore, he insisted that workers should have opportunities for education, albeit not the higher education reserved for the upper classes nor the education for citizenship undertaken by the middle classes (‘... the object is not so much to render the people good citizens in this world as to prepare them for another and better world in a life to come’). One might say that he saw workers as an asset not just a commodity. They are not meant to be sacrificed.

In some sectors of the economy, this more humane and enlightened approach to workers has been taken on board by employers. But in many others it has been completely ignored.

Some employers have woken up to the fact that unhealthy working practices are bad for business as well as for the individuals concerned. NHS Smokefree commissioned a study by the LSE, which found that the direct cost of smoking to businesses in 2008 was £2 billion (£1.1 billion from smoking-related illnesses, £914 million from time lost for smoking breaks, and £133 million from fire damage) plus a further £1.1 billion in indirect costs to companies whose image was hurt by staff smoking outside the entrances. Employers have also begun to realise that as the average age of the work force is likely to rise over the next 20 years, more employees will suffer from long-term health conditions, for which preventive measures may need to be taken.

In the US, some employers have taken the compulsory route, actually requiring workers to lose weight,

to exercise or to stop smoking as a condition of employment or to qualify for benefits. Fortunately, compulsory programmes are open to legal challenge. In the UK the more common approach is voluntary. Unilever invites staff to undergo confidential health screening (blood pressure, cholesterol, body fat). PruHealth awards employees points for using the gym, undergoing health screening, stopping smoking, buying fruit – points which can be redeemed for cash. Others are providing healthier food in their canteens.

But there are more jobs than we might care to think that do effectively demand intolerable sacrifices on the part of those employed. Some are so routine and dreary as to dull the mind. Others are so burdensome in terms of the rigours of the work, the conditions or the long hours that they wear down workers’ health. A long list of such occupations could be mentioned: social care, cafes and restaurants, hotel cleaning, crop-picking, mining, working with toxic chemicals on farms and in industry, etc. There is also evidence to suggest that having to work night shifts involves not just a loss of sleep which can make a person more tired and irritable but also contribute to metabolic abnormalities, such as a craving for carbohydrates leading to weight gain, insulin insufficiency leading to diabetes, calcification of the coronary artery which can cause heart attack, as well as making a person more susceptible to cancer.

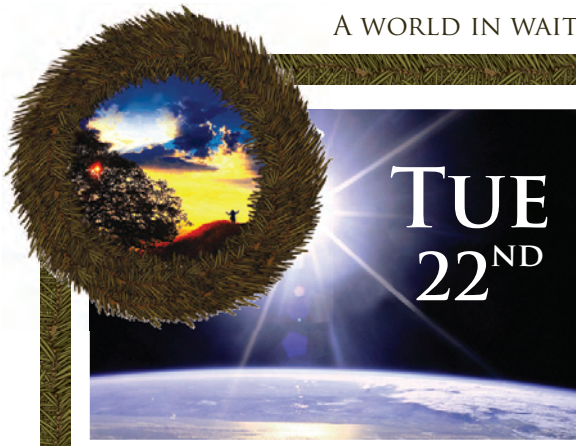
If we choose to make sacrifices so that others may live that is one thing. But we need to be sure that the good things that we enjoy are not bought by the destructive, involuntary sacrifices forced upon those who have produced them, perhaps in far-off countries, perhaps on our doorstep. Those are the sacrifices that awaken the anger of a just and loving God.

ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

London Citizens’ Living Wage Campaign
<http://www.londoncitizens.org.uk/livingwage/>

The Work Foundation - Health and Well-Being Programme
<http://www.theworkfoundation.com/research/health.aspx>



WORLD HUNGER

**'You Have Fed Them with the
Bread of Tears'**

Psalm 80:1-7

**'You Have Fed the Hungry with
Good Things'**

Luke 1:53

The cries of the poor and hungry are never far from any of the authors of the Bible. Compassion runs through the Biblical narrative from beginning to end. In the next to last chapter of the last book of the Bible we read:

'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be an end to death, to mourning, to crying and pain' (Revelation 21: 4). And God's care is celebrated in the Psalms: 'He has satisfied the thirsty and has filled the hungry with good things'

Psalm 107:9

Yet one in six people in the world today – over 1 billion people – are suffering from chronic hunger now, this Advent, this Christmas. That is an increase of 200 million people in the last two years. That sort of hunger is not about a desire to eat more. It's about a lack of nutritional food.

And the effects are all too obvious. Malnutrition saps the ability to fight off infections and diseases, with the result that even the most common illnesses can be fatal, especially to malnourished children. According to the UN World Food Programme, hunger (under-nourishment) and malnutrition are the number one risk to health worldwide. More than 9 million people every year die of hunger, malnutrition, and related diseases every year – most of them in Africa and most of them children. In Africa, more people die of hunger than from AIDS and malaria combined.

'Is there a food shortage in the world?' The UN World Food Programme's answer is no: 'There is enough food in the world today for everyone to have the nourishment necessary for a healthy and productive life'.

So why are a billion people suffering from chronic hunger? The UN Food and Agricultural Organisation

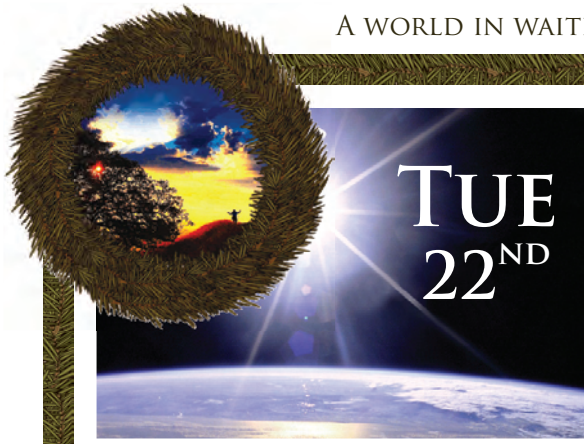
has looked at the countries where the problem is greatest and classified them according to which of three broad factors is most significant. In six countries, including Zimbabwe and Somalia it is attributed to 'exceptional shortfall in aggregate food production/supplies'; in another six countries it is put down to 'widespread lack of access' and in nineteen countries it is seen as due to 'severe localised food insecurity'. To try to address these immediate needs, the World Food Programme assisted 100 million people in 2008. That leaves 900 million more!

Nor is hunger the only problem with world food. There are also concerns about affordability in the prices of food, concerns about security in terms of access to food and concerns about sustainability in methods used for the production of food.

Food prices rose steeply in 2007 and the following year, so dramatically that riots broke out across the developing world. Although the steep rise in 2008 was followed by a somewhat less steep decline, by early 2009 world food prices were still 75% above what they were at the beginning of the decade. Even in the UK, food prices rose 11.3% between 2008-2009.

As for food security, one of the most controversial trends in recent years is about foreign investors and even governments buying up huge areas of agricultural land in the less developed countries. Since 2004, over 2½ million hectares of land have been allocated this way. And this figure excludes smaller allocations (of less than 1,000 hectares) as well as transfers of all sizes for which there is insufficient documentation.

The contracts are sometimes vague, simple, based on an inadequate assessment of costs and benefits, and lacking in compliance measures. Even where a deal may bring gains to a developing country it does not necessarily help local people.



All this has put the food question high on the international agenda and triggered a much-needed burst of activity. In April 2008, the UN established a High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis and a month later the World Bank Group set up the Global Food Crisis Response Program (GFRP) to provide immediate relief to countries hard hit by high food prices.

And sustainability? By 2050 the world's population is likely to rise to 9 billion. And it's not just about more mouths to feed. As the developing countries become more prosperous, their people's eating habits will change – not always for the better. There, too, unhealthy eating habits are already leading to an increase in illnesses such as diabetes. And, there too, the demand for more meat may mean that more sheep and cattle will have to be raised with more land being set aside for the production of animal feed – and more releasing of methane gas by livestock into the atmosphere.

We must all change. Perhaps the experience of so many people in rich countries, like the US and the UK, having to queue up at soup kitchens and food banks, as well as steeper costs even for bread, fruit and vegetables may serve as a wake-up call.

ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

The Trussell Trust
www.trusselltrust.org

Oxfam
<http://www.oxfam.org.uk>

United Nations World Food Programme
<http://www.wfp.org>

World Bank
<http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/foodprices/bankinitiatives.htm>



Mary's response to the call to be the mother of the Messiah is followed in the Gospel of Luke, by her canticle, which we have come to call 'The Magnificat'.

Such canticles are literary devices, common in the Bible. There is the canticle of Moses, after the safe crossing of the Red Sea, followed immediately by the tambourine-playing, dancing and singing by the prophetess Miriam, Aaron's sister (Exodus 15). And the song of the prophetess Deborah and Barak, following their successful freedom struggle against the Canaanites (Judges 5). Then the song of Judith the beautiful widow who, according to an apocryphal account, slew the Assyrian general Holofernes (Judith 13). And the song of Hannah, previously unable to bear a child but now having given birth to Samuel (I Samuel 2), so similar to the situation of Elizabeth who in her old age gave birth to John the Baptist.

The Magnificat is a song of joy for being chosen to bear the Messiah. But it also expresses another sort of joy: 'He Has Brought down the Powerful from their Thrones, and Lifted up the Lowly'.

The hopes of the oppressed have, since ancient times, found expression in the dream of seeing the power of their oppressors overturned and they themselves being installed in the seat of power. It is often described as 'The Great Reversal'.

The theme appears in the prophet Ezekiel: 'Put off your diadem, lay aside our crown. All is changed: lift up the low, bring down the high' (Ezekiel 21: 26). It is the repeated refrain in the song of Hannah, mother of Samuel: 'The Lord makes a man poor, he makes him rich. He brings down and he raises up. He lifts the weak out of the dust and raises the poor from the dung heap to give them a place among the great and set them in the seats of honour' (I Samuel 2: 7-8). It finds resonance in the revolutionary movements of the English Civil War amongst groups like the Levellers and the Diggers, who felt God was calling them to 'turn the world upside down'.

No Longer High and Mighty THE GREAT REVERSAL

Luke 1:52

We would be less than human if we did not feel a certain sense of satisfaction at seeing those who have lorded it over us, or who have reaped immense rewards at the cost of our sacrifices, finally getting their come-uppance. We might even wish to see those who have caused and yet profited from the current economic crisis experiencing deprivation and those who have worked hard yet seen their incomes fall finally manage to be in the driving seat.

But that is not quite the point that Ezekiel and Hannah and Mary are making. It is not a matter of revenge, of envy or resentment. It's not about changing places and putting new occupants in the old structures of power, class and status. It's about equality.

The kind of change we need in our economic system is not about replacing bosses with workers. It's about changing the structures which promote the wrong sort of relationships – both in the workplace and in society at large with its class system. It is the nature of the structural relationships that need to change – from exploitation to mutuality, from domination to partnership, from marginalisation to participation.

Few people have articulated the case for equality more clearly and more wittily than R. H. Tawney. He was particularly sharp in his critique of the sham equality which is about a kind of mobility by which a person can 'move up the social ladder' and 'escape' from their situation: 'The upper classes...were not seriously disturbed by the spectacle of Lazarus [the poor man] in the House of Lords', he once wrote, 'for they were confident that he would behave like a gentleman in his new surroundings...Their welcome to individuals was conditional, therefore, on the latter identifying themselves with the sphere which they entered, not with that which they left.'

Mary knew all that instinctively. Her role as mother of the Messiah was not a question of 'rising above her station'. It was about expressing the voice and the hopes of the faithful poor.



There have been considerable movements in the direction of greater equality since Tawney's time. A genuine commitment to equality has been evident in government policy and in the development of equalities policies by public and private sector firms. And in many cases, this has indeed been directed at the structures of inequality – against racism, sexism, ageism and sexual discrimination at both individual and institutional level.

But much of this has meant an integration of certain excluded groups into a class structure rather than the right kind of change in the class structure itself. In many ways the class structure has become more entrenched as persistent economic inequality has been stubbornly on the increase.

Robert Reich, the former US Labour Secretary has observed: 'Half a century ago the prosperity of America's middle class was one of democratic capitalism's greatest triumphs... But starting three decades ago, these trends have been turned upside down... Job security is all but gone. And the nation is more unequal.'

So we have work to do. But the question is: how

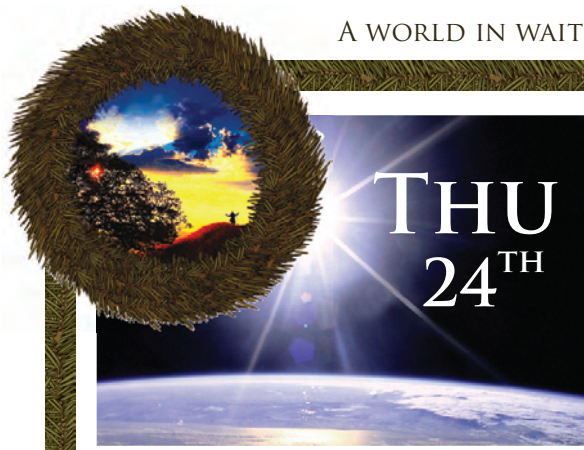
far do we want to go? How much and what kind of equality does justice demand? Of course we need fairer representation of minority groups and women on boards of directors, in Parliament and in the pulpit. And of course we need fairer access to good schools and good health care. But we need to be clear about basics. And Tawney was good on this as well. For him the central issue was not simply the advantages which follow from greater equality. It was the principle itself. It is not only that inequality contributed to poor health. It was the disease itself.

Are we headed in the right direction? The blurb on the back cover of a 1979 edition of Tawney's *Equality*, reads: 'Do the English really prefer to be governed by Old Etonians?' The question, a favourite one of Tawney's, remains as apt as ever.

ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Equality and Human Rights Commission
<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com>



What Micah had in common with many other prophets was his denunciation of injustice. What was special about him was not who he was against but who he was with.

Micah came from the village of Moresheth. Unlike his contemporary Isaiah, Micah was an outsider as far as Jerusalem and its circles of royal, priestly and aristocratic power were concerned: 'Its rulers give judgement for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money' (Micah 3:11). But he was not an outsider as far as the people were concerned. Well might he be called 'The People's Prophet'.

He spoke out against the way the smallholdings of the poor were being seized by the perpetrators of injustice in the process of accumulating their wealth: 'They covet fields and seize them, houses and take them away' (Micah 2: 2). The court prophets tried to silence him but, unlike them, he had nothing to lose by speaking the truth. Micah took sides, identifying totally with the victims of injustice: 'You rise up against my people as an enemy' (Micah 2:8). He would not be silenced. And the more he spoke out, the more his strength increased: 'But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might' (Micah 3:8).

His outrage stemmed from what he saw as the results of the greed of the powerful: 'You... who tear the skin off my people and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron' (Micah 3:2-3). He had to speak out on behalf of the defenceless: 'The women of my people you drive out from their pleasant houses; from their young children you take away my glory forever' (Micah 2: 9).

This takes us back to where these Advent reflections began – a few becoming super-rich with astronomical bonuses and the world's leading banks being bailed

'The People's Prophet' MICAH

out, all at the expense of the people. As in the reading from Jeremiah so with Micah, from such things God is hiding his face: 'Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly' (Micah 3:4).

But with Micah we hear it from the perspective of the victims of injustice. The lesson? Advent hope arises and becomes strong not by abstract discussions of the meaning of justice or even by clear visions of the type of reforms that are needed but by solidarity with the victims of the injustice by which some of us have a modicum of prosperity, whether they be on our doorstep or on the other side of the planet.

Micah could certainly denounce the powerful. But denunciations, especially in today's economic climate, are cheap. Denunciation without love is not what the prophets were about. Behind the denunciations of Micah was love – love for and identification with the people and love enkindled by God's undying love for a people who have yet to know how real that love is.

That is at the heart of the message of the prophets.

ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Churches Community Work Alliance
<http://www.ccwa.org.uk>

Housing Justice
<http://www.housingjustice.org.uk>

Contextual Theology Centre
<http://www.theology-centre.org>

Micah Challenge
<http://www.micahchallenge.org.uk>