

## **WHY EQUALITY IS BETTER FOR EVERYONE**

About 80 people congregated in the Upper Room at St Mark's on the morning of Saturday, 16th April for a one-day conference promoted by the Centre for Radical Christianity. The morning was devoted to hearing the contributions of the two speakers. First to speak was Dr Walter Houston (whose wife Fleur Houston is well-known at St. Mark's, thanks to her time as minister at St. Andrew's United Reformed Church). Dr Houston's approach to the topic of equality and justice was through the Bible and mainly the writings in the Old Testament. In a highly interactive session he encouraged us to come up with our own suggestions about which Biblical writers had included ideas of justice in their writings, and we examined in turn a number of those proposed by the audience, amongst them the Book of Job, some of the minor prophets such as Amos and Micah, and sections of the Psalms, the Beatitudes, the Magnificat and the book of Leviticus. Another key text was chapter 10 of Mark's gospel (the story of the rich young ruler) which contains some of the clearest teaching from Jesus about equality. This seemingly rather haphazard approach was in fact highly effective in getting us to think hard about how and when Biblical concepts that we rather take for granted began to develop and appear in the various writings, and how these were inevitably dependent on the social context in which they were being written.

We then moved on to a very different approach with a presentation by David Price on the ideas and arguments contained in the book *The Spirit Level*. This book has been quoted by many in the press and various politicians have taken up its ideas, notably David Cameron. The authors are two academic epidemiologists, Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett, who began to examine a number of social problems and wonder if there was any common thread linking them. In their book they produce a number of graphs testing the correlation between issues such as life expectancy, health, crime rates, educational performance, teenage pregnancy and many others. The overwhelming conclusion of the writers is that the common thread linking all these problems is inequality – societies where there is a relatively small gap between the well-off and the not-so-well-off have a much lower incidence of social problems than societies where the gap is much wider. The argument may seem unconvincing when any one factor is examined in isolation, but the cumulative impact of the numerous graphs presented makes it very hard to believe that these correlations are just random, or the product of other unrelated factors. David took us through the complex arguments of the book with great skill - a useful refresher for those who had read it and an indispensable summary for those who hadn't. He also addressed some of the common objections, for inevitably there is a strong opposing view coming mainly from the political right. The conference then broke for lunch, which was followed by discussion in small groups on some set questions prepared by the speakers. Finally we came together again for a plenary session ably chaired by Ian Wallis, with our two speakers, plus Helen Fisher (former CRC Chair), and Kate Plant, Diocesan Director of Faith and Justice, fielding questions from the floor. The majority view among those attending seemed to be broadly in agreement with the views expressed in *The Spirit Level*, though some of those who spoke in the plenary expressed their frustration at the difficulty of getting anything changed, whether by working through political parties, pressure groups or the Christian Church. Altogether it was a challenging day, and one which left us uncomfortably aware of the inequities of our society and the stubborn resistance of the „haves“ to making any concessions towards sharing more fairly with the "have-nots". CRC are to be congratulated for organising this timely and thought-provoking event.

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