



DIOCESE OF
LICHFIELD



Come follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad

For Richer, For Poorer

A church partnership initiative

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 **rooted**research

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Original painted by Oliver Pengilly at Stafford, 14th June 2014, during the 'For Richer For Poorer' Poverty Hearing and purchased at auction by St Chad's, Pattingham for their partner church St Alban's, Ashmore Park

1. Introduction

“When churches develop relationships which go deeper than their differences, they discover the depth of the good news they have to share.”

Revd Dr David Primrose, Diocesan Director of Transforming Communities

For Richer, For Poorer (FRFP) is a church partnership initiative that was developed in the Diocese of Lichfield from 2013-2017.

This report reflects on this initiative, offering insight to those within the Diocese of Lichfield and beyond who want to reimagine how churches can learn and work together.

1.1 Background

“I really felt that what you are doing is fantastic and something which the church is uniquely placed to do. In the context of inequality and potentially widening gaps between communities, it is vital that connections are made which hold groups together.”

Revd Bill Mash, Diocesan Officer for Mission in the Economy

FRFP developed out of Church Action on Poverty’s [‘Close the Gap’](#) Partner Church initiative – seeking to address financial inequality across the UK.

Building on Church Action on Poverty’s involvement in projects such as [Life Expectancy Wirral](#) and [Listen Up!](#) in the Diocese of Sheffield, FRFP sought to develop partnerships between churches from different socio-economic contexts. In doing so it spoke to Archbishop Justin Welby’s challenge that in times of austerity and increasing social division The Church needs *“to speak in solidarity and witness together to a shared vision for life lived well together”*.ⁱ

FRFP also resonated with many of the values and activities of the [Church Urban Fund](#) (CUF), which aims to build communities that encourage and allow space for relationships between and among those who live in poverty, and those who do not. Echoing the values of CUF, FRFP was founded on a conviction that churches are well placed to do this work. Much of the learning from FRFP has been carried forward into Transforming Communities Together, the Diocese’s joint venture with CUF.

1.2 Project Development

“Church partnerships bring home the primary truth of being the Christian church: we belong to one another in the body of Christ. The way we care for each other, support one another, pray for one another and share our talents, stories and sorrows, our weaknesses and our strengths is the very essence of Christian life.”

The Very Revd. Adrian Dorber, Dean of Lichfield Cathedral

Alongside a year of consultancy-based support from Church Action on Poverty, FRFP was facilitated by a Church Partnerships Worker, Ruth Clay, funded for the first year by [St Peter's Saltley Trust](#), with the initiative continuing through diocesan funding. The Church Partnerships Worker was based 2 days a week within the Diocese of Lichfield's [Transforming Communities Department](#).

In its first year, FRFP sought to connect 'core churches' in more disadvantaged parts of the diocese with 'partner churches' in more affluent contexts, to form a series of intentional, sustainable and mutually supportive relationships.

The concept of **mutual learning** was foundational. The initial focus led by Church Action on Poverty was on a facilitated programme of listening within the churches and within the community. Partnered churches were encouraged to identify together both the challenges and assets present within each context. Reflecting this, the initiative adopted its name 'For Richer, For Poorer'. Taken from the marriage service, this name signals the covenanting of churches to walk together with, through and across their differences.

Over time, whilst addressing financial inequality remained important within the partnerships, conversations developed to acknowledge and work across **other aspects of difference** between churches and between their communities.

FRFP drew on Church Urban Fund's framing of [poverty as a web](#), which recognises that individuals and communities can be impoverished in different ways including a poverty of resources, relationships or identity. As such over time, initial distinctions between 'core' and 'partner' churches became less significant as churches reflected on aspects of poverty present in *both* sets of communities.

Several of the churches who participated were of distinctive churchmanship; they were open to partner with others of a different tradition. Rather than be constrained by churchmanship, the opportunity was welcomed to work together in mutually transformative relationships for the sake of the Kingdom.

1.3 Aims

"As we follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad, we pray that the two million people in our diocese encounter a church that is confident in the gospel, knows and loves its communities, and is excited to find God at work already in the world. We pray for a church that reflects the richness and variety of those communities and partners with others in seeking the common good, working for justice as people of hope."

Diocese of Lichfield Vision, 2018

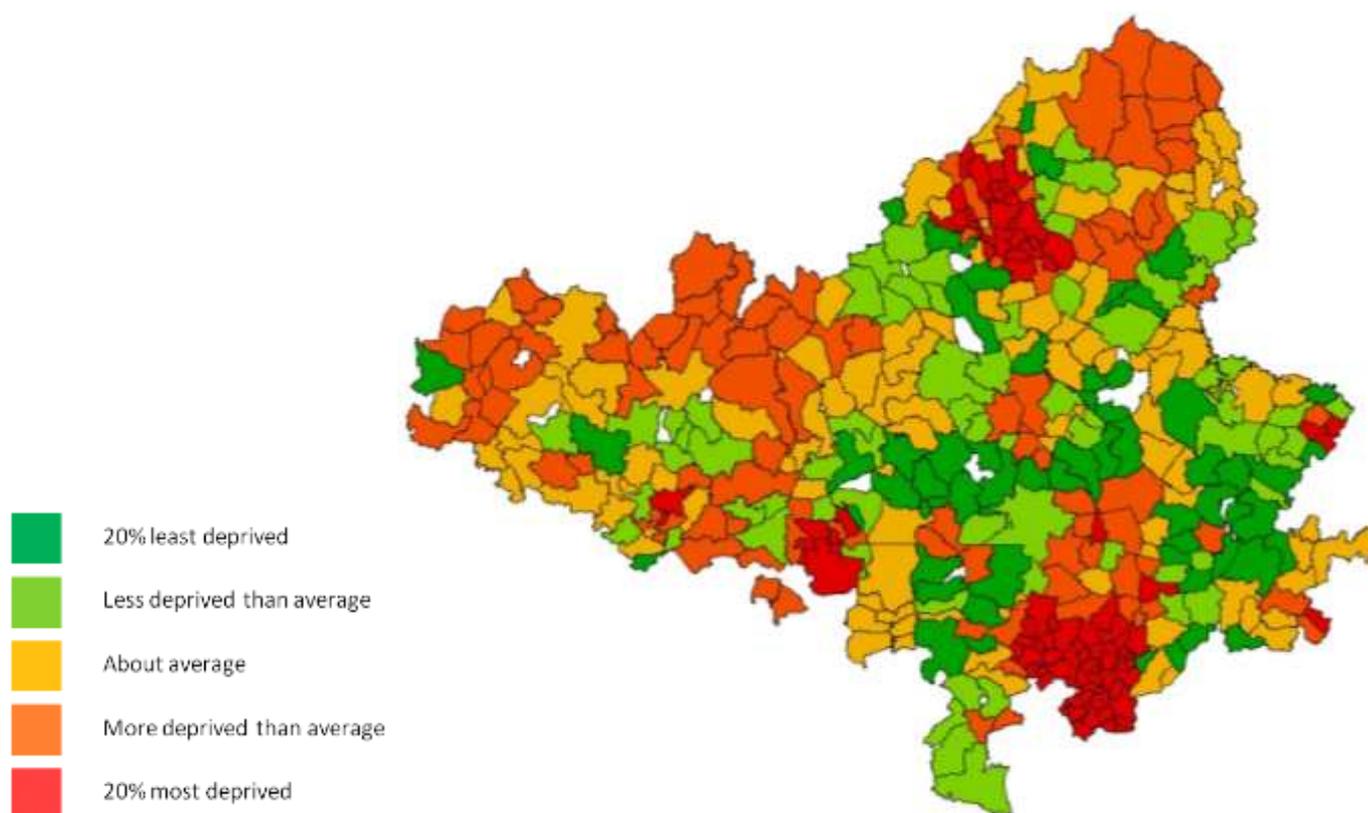
Although preceding the development of the current diocesan vision, FRFP encapsulated many of its aims – encouraging churches to partner together for the common good, working for justice and modelling the richness and variety of the church and wider communities across the diocese.

FRFP aimed to go beyond a focus on developing campaigns and/or forming new or joint initiatives to address inequalities. **It aimed to nurture a culture where churches walked together** – listening to and learning from each other’s lives, contexts and experiences. This enabled an oblique approach to poverty and inequality which mitigated against responses which might appear patronising or defensive.

Specifically, the initiative aimed to:

- help partnered churches develop relationships and cultures of mutual respect and learning
- facilitate listening and theological reflection within and between churches
- raise awareness of the similarities and differences between churches’ experiences of, and engagement with, poverty
- explore through partnerships across difference the Biblical imperative of addressing poverty

There was also the hope that the learning from this initiative would travel beyond the diocese, to others seeking to reimagine how churches can learn and work together.



Map from Diocese of Lichfield’s Poverty Briefing, Church Urban Fund, 2014

2. Project Overview

Year 1 Overview

- ◆ 8 churches entered into partnerships – 4 'core churches' and 4 'partner churches'. All these parishes had already shown an interest in other initiatives instigated by the Transforming Communities Department
- ◆ The distance between partner churches varied from 1 to 11 miles
- ◆ Aspirations for partnerships included developing friendship and support, journeying with others, and potentially going on a pilgrimage.
- ◆ A Poverty Hearing conference was held in June 2014 – churches shared stories of life in times of austerity, Bishop Jonathan described this event as *"one of the most exciting things to be happening in the diocese at this time"*

Challenges

- ◆ Recruitment: after an initial expression of interest, several parishes hesitated to embark on a long-term commitment
- ◆ Delays: even amongst those keen to be involved, the initial phase in the relationship challenged assumptions about church and identity, and hence there was a tendency for meetings to be postponed
- ◆ Concerns over power (and material) imbalances between 'core' and 'partner' churches
- ◆ The development of partnerships was hindered by incorrect assumptions about participants' confidence and literacy levels, and their ability and willingness to travel beyond their communities

Key Learning

- ◆ Relationship building takes time and is organic – few partnerships would develop without external support from the facilitator
- ◆ Spending time listening to each other was essential (but wasn't always prioritised); sharing facts about levels of poverty in each parish helped nurture relationships. Listening to partner churches also prompted greater listening and reflection on their OWN contexts and communities
- ◆ *Mutual* learning is key to sustainable partnerships
- ◆ Whilst quantifiable activities are important, the process of partnering was recognised to be valuable in its own right

Years 2 – 4

Overview

- ◆ 30+ churches involved in mutual learning partnerships
- ◆ 160+ churches engaged with the Church Partnership Worker
- ◆ The Church Partnership Worker attended 17 deanery synods and numerous PCC meetings and church services
- ◆ There were regular FRFP newsletters and high levels of project awareness
- ◆ There was a noticeable shift towards understanding poverty as a complex web and recognising each community's assets and strengths, as well as challenges and material differences
- ◆ A FRFP conference was held at Lichfield Cathedral in June 2015

Challenges

- ◆ A lack of models of partnership to follow meant that the initiative required ongoing self-reflection
- ◆ Churches did not prioritise FRFP - cluster meetings were often poorly attended with churches prioritising interaction with their partner church (journey times and costs also impacted levels of attendance)
- ◆ There was a continuing tension between a longing to set up initiatives to address poverty, and recognising the value in the process of partnership building

Key Learning

- ◆ Involving lay members from the onset facilitated more sustainable partnerships
- ◆ Effective partnerships developed when churches prioritised time spent listening; this often led to a sharing of reflections, resources and expertise
- ◆ The Church Partnerships Worker played a valuable role in initiating and encouraging ongoing partnerships

Visit to Matlosane Diocese (year 2)

Highlights

- ◆ 5 representatives of FRFP formed a mission team with members of Matlosane Diocese, South Africa

They spent 2 weeks in Mpumalanga in conjunction with charities: [Link 4 Life](#) and [Hands at Work](#)

- ◆ The aim of the visit was to listen, learn, pray and grow together. They hoped to demonstrate God's unconditional love across aspects of difference

Impacts

- ◆ 3+ churches have started supporting and engaging with Link 4 Life and Hands at Work
- ◆ Team members shared their experiences with local groups – 1 team member facilitated a concert to raise awareness and money for projects in South Africa
- ◆ A team member from Matlosane Diocese spent a year as a St Chad's volunteer in the Diocese of Lichfield

Key Learning

- ◆ The visit reflected several themes of the FRFP initiative: the importance of spending time listening to stories, encouraging one another and being vulnerable together
- ◆ Individual team members experienced personal learning and growth, developing understandings about poverty, resilience and the importance of initiatives being sustainable

One team member reflected on the experience: *"I never thought I would see the kingdom of God until the end times, but I have seen it...where people of all races eat, drink, pray and worship together, in order to serve the poorest of the poor"*

3. Impacts

FRFP was a relationship-centred initiative. Its impact was therefore evident both through formal, visible actions and also through subtler, smaller changes in culture and attitudes:

- ◆ **Resources were shared between partner churches.** At times these were material – with churches contributing financially to their partners – however other resources, including the sharing of knowledge and volunteers, were also common features of partnerships.
- ◆ Both **new and joint initiatives began** as a result of the partnerships. Drawing on the wider understandings of poverty as encompassing more than financial hardship, some of these centred on addressing issues of social isolation and fostering community spirit. Other initiatives focused on engaging with issues such as dementia, which was a growing area of ministry within the diocese.
- ◆ Churches benefited from having a partner as a **critical friend** – with those on the outside often able to speak into difficult situations. Clergy in particular benefited from having a colleague to journey alongside.
- ◆ The partnerships prompted **self-reflection**, for both churches and individuals.
- ◆ Engaging with those from different socio-economic contexts **increased awareness and understandings of issues of social justice** – prompting both theological reflection and practical responses.

The impacts of FRFP also resonated with the three diocesan priority areas: discipleship, vocation and evangelism:

- ◆ FRFP enabled the **development of discipleship.** Despite often being from very different traditions, churches co-hosted discipleship courses, shared Sunday service speakers and developed joint services. More informally, FRFP fostered Christ-like actions, facilitating engagement with those who are 'other', encouraging honesty and openness, and a willingness to engage with personal vulnerabilities.
- ◆ FRFP **encouraged vocation.** Through offering opportunities for reflection, the Church Partnership Worker spent time supporting the vocations of both clergy and laity – with some participants engaging with the diocesan Pathways to Ministry course and/or exploring Reader or ordination training. Exploring her own calling throughout the initiative, the Church Partnership Worker has also embarked on ordination training.
- ◆ FRFP **inspired evangelism.** New outreach initiatives were developed through partnerships as participants were brought into contact with those both within and outside the church who were very different to them. Through working across aspects of difference, churches became a more pro-active visible witness of God's love for the wider community.

3.1 Case Study: St John's, Marchington Woodlands and St John's Welcome Centre, Abbey Hulton

The churches

St John's is a small, rural church serving the village of Marchington Woodlands in Staffordshire, which has a population of approximately 250. Using the [Church Urban Fund's poverty index](#), the surrounding parish ranks 4554 out of 12,599, where 1 is the most deprived parish. Church activities centre around the farming year.

St John's Welcome Centre is a well-equipped church situated in the centre of Abbey Hulton housing estate in Stoke-on-Trent. The district has a population of approximately 6,500. Using the Church Urban Fund's poverty index, the surrounding parish ranks 293 out of 12,599, where 1 is the most deprived parish. The Welcome Centre hosts a large variety of community activities, including a lunchtime café, craft and exercise groups, a CAB advisor and a mental health support group.

The partnership

The partnership began in 2016. After visiting each other's services and sharing meals together, the partnership developed to encompass joint worship services. Other partnership activities included a partnership BBQ, and visits to local places of interest and a Songs of Praise event.

Due to strong connections made between lay people the partnership continued through interregnums at both churches.

Key impacts

Encouraged by activities at St John's Welcome Centre, **new initiatives developed** at St John's Marchington Woodlands including a book swapping service and a community coffee morning.

Occasionally individuals **gave financially** to support areas of need within the other church.

The churches benefited from being each other's **critical friends** – able to advise and encourage each other.

Clergy and parishioners benefited from **verbal encouragement** from their partners – this helped nurture a sense of empowerment and resilience.

3.2 Case Study: St Bartholomew's, Penn and St Martin of Tours, Wolverhampton

The churches

St Bartholomew's is a large, active church, with an open evangelical tradition, in Penn on the edge of Wolverhampton. Using the Church Urban Fund's poverty index, the parish ranks 8,596 out of 12,599, where 1 is the most deprived parish.

St Martin of Tours is a smaller, Anglo-Catholic tradition church serving newly arrived and established communities within Wolverhampton. Using the Church Urban Fund's poverty index, the parish ranks 398 out of 12,599, where 1 is the most deprived parish.

The partnership

St Bartholomew's and St Martin's were part of the second wave of churches to partner through FRFP. Although in different deaneries, the clergy shared chaplaincy experience and had a natural friendship which helped establish a strong partnership. The partnership began as groups from each church met regularly sharing coffee and cake and asking questions such as 'what are the strengths in your church?' and 'what changes would you like to see in your communities?' Those from both churches shared the challenges of changing community contexts.

Key impacts

The churches **ran a Lent course together**. It met in St Martin's to enable those with less access to transport to attend. Attendees were challenged and blessed by learning alongside those with different experiences and understandings of life and faith.

They **shared stories and advice** as the churches looked to begin new initiatives. Individuals began to look out for the material and emotional needs of those in the other church.

Informal mentoring developed between members of the churches: a woman from St Martin's who was exploring her vocation was connected with a mentor from St Bartholomew's. She reflected: *"Linking with her has made a huge difference...it's been a Godsend...Being a single Mom, things can be tight and she has helped me such a lot... you know when you walk dark paths....she has given me some books...she believes in me."*

Parishioners from St Bartholomew's have **supported St Martin's in making grant applications**.

A **parish nurse project** has been established in St Martin's – the nurse worships at St Bartholomew's. St Bartholomew's supported the development of an office space for the nurse within St Martin's: contributing financially and providing volunteers to help with the refurbishment.

One clergy person commented that the partnership was a reminder of what could be done *"with a humble spirit, a sense of humour, good friendship and prayer"*. This partnership is ongoing with Revd Prebendary Ben Whitmore from St Bartholomew's explaining that *"the partnership is going well and is bearing good fruit"*.

4. Key Learning

"This is really good, but don't underestimate the cost and the pain"
FRFP clergy participant

"Church partnerships are challenging. They raise questions like 'What does it mean to be church?' which can be a disturbing process. It has been fascinating to see clergy and laity explore this together, however we also recognise how easy it is to postpone this difficult and uncomfortable task. This is where the role of a facilitator has been so key, in walking alongside people. Without this accompaniment, many partnerships would have stalled or ceased to grow. It has been important to sense the pace which is appropriate for each participant, encouraging on-going movement without taking responsibility away from the local parishes."

Revd Dr David Primrose, Diocesan Director of Transforming Communities

Engaging in church partnerships across difference can be both a challenge and a blessing – you must walk alongside those who may see and experience the world in very different ways to you.

The process of being involved in FRFP prompted theological reflections for many participants. These included:

- ◆ **Moving beyond the familiar:** Engaging with those from different church and community contexts sparked engagement with questions of what it means to 'be church' both in our own communities and together as the wider church of God.
- ◆ **Valuing the whole church:** FRFP highlighted the importance of valuing every Christian community. FRFP resonated with the notion of *kenosis* – being willing to 'give yourself away' in partnership.
- ◆ **Embracing the 'other', revealing God's character:** Although often challenging, FRFP saw churches prioritising Christ's Kingdom above their own agendas and differences.
- ◆ **Remembering the poor, challenging poverty:** As participants wrestled with ideas about poverty (both its definition and its presence in their community and that of their partner church) they also explored Biblical teachings on poverty and were challenged to consider how they could be an advocate for those whose voices may be marginalised. Participants reflected on the need to walk alongside others rather than simply offer 'aid'.
- ◆ **Being created to work together:** Participants reflected on the Biblical principles of being individually created by God, but designed to live and work in community. This manifested in concrete ways as partners offered each other physical and spiritual support.
- ◆ **Weeping with those who weep:** FRFP encouraged journeying together - rejoicing when others rejoice and weeping when they weep.
- ◆ **Prophetic encounters, painful realities:** FRFP exposed the vulnerabilities of partnerships across difference. For some this led to powerful prophetic encounters, but also to moments of discomfort, pain and the need for grace and forgiveness.

The development of FRFP offers valuable insight and encouragement as we reimagine how churches can learn and work together.

Specifically:

- ◆ **Recruitment can be a slow process.** Time is needed to address hesitations, including fears stemming from previous negative experiences of partnership working, concerns over time commitments and seeing beyond aspects of difference.
- ◆ **A wide variety of parishes engaged with the initiative.** For example, this included inner city parishes under the Bishop of Ebbsfleet's pastoral and sacramental care, partnered others with female incumbents. The Church Partnership Worker observed that clergy who prioritised the value of process over outcomes and had a relational approach to building community were more likely to engage with the initiative than those who were more programmatic.
- ◆ Clergy have many competing priorities in their daily lives. **Employing a Church Partnership Worker was important** to establish and support the development of the partnerships. Having someone with the time dedicated to walk alongside clergy and laity, encourage and nurture small beginnings and share ideas across partnerships was vital to the growth of the initiative.
- ◆ Churches wanted the freedom to develop partnerships in ways that were meaningful to them, rather than follow set processes or work towards specific targets. **Nurturing new cultures of 'being church' requires significant levels of commitment and trust** from diocesan leadership with impact primarily evidenced through stories rather than measurable outcomes.
- ◆ **Sustainable partnerships** were fostered by: creating cultures of mutual listening and learning, prioritising time spent getting to know each other's contexts, using asset-based approaches and understandings to poverty and inequality, nurturing a culture of humble mutuality and empowering laity in the leadership of the partnerships.
- ◆ **Reflectively journeying together was a slow but powerful process;** sustainable, mutual partnerships often resulted in a realisation that churches were 'better together'.
- ◆ Actions between partner churches did not need to be big. **Small gestures** such as inviting partner churches to events, sharing gardening tips, committing to praying for one another, sending Christmas cards between churches and sharing musicians, made partners feel valued, encouraged and connected to the wider Christian body.
- ◆ **Impact can continue beyond the life of an initiative.** The role of the Church Partnership Worker ended in 2017. However, the impacts of FRFP can still be felt across the diocese through ongoing partnerships sustained by clergy and lay leaders, and the new webs of connections and relationships formed through the process. For example, one parish in an ongoing partnership relayed how they continue to use their partner church as a venue for their PCC away days, pray for each other and regularly reflect on practical ways they can offer each other support.

5. Concluding remarks

"Obviously a local congregation cannot do everything...but it can do a lot...and a great deal more if it joins hands with other congregations and people of good will. It can certainly cry out, loudly and clearly... (it) will bring comfort and encouragement to the poor and all people of good will. It will be judgment and challenge to those in the corridors of power."

Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision*, 1997

FRFP was an innovative and courageous initiative. It honoured the commitment which churches have to their local context, whilst enabling them to engage at depth with one other church ministering in a different context. Relationships developed over years, hence were shaped by honesty, transparency and mutual accountability.

FRFP's significance goes beyond what it can teach about the value and blessing of church partnership working. In a time when society is increasingly divided, FRFP powerfully demonstrates how The Church can model unity across difference for the Common Good.

"For Richer For Poorer goes to the very heart of all that we seek to achieve in the Diocese of Lichfield. Our vision is to transform individuals and the communities in which all two million people of our Diocese reside. If we are to sustain ministry in all our communities we need the concept of mutual support to be well understood and to flourish. We emphasise this as a key part of our share formula but I want to say that mutual support is so much more than about money, it is about support and understanding. I want to thank the Transforming Communities team and all the participating churches for being part of this radical initiative and making such a pro-active effort to demonstrate being the body of Christ in our very diverse Diocese."

Julie Jones, CEO /Diocesan Secretary

This report draws on material produced by Ruth Clay, Church Partnerships Worker for the project.

ⁱ <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-and-writing/speeches/archbishop-justin-welby-common-good-and-shared-vision-next-century>