

## Avoid austerity — in the Church and society

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Those who are financially cushioned need to think hard about their spending priorities, argues *Peter Selby*

“ENORMOUS amounts of pent-up financial energy are waiting to be released, like a coiled spring” — Andy Haldane, chief economist of the Bank of England, expressing the belief that, as infection rates decline and vaccinations are rolled out, there is light, too, at the end of the economic tunnel.



The light is certainly not there for everyone. The Financial Conduct Authority forecasts that one in three adults is likely to cut back on essentials; one in ten to will use a foodbank; one quarter will be financially vulnerable, and one eighth will face increased debts — all increases of about 15 per cent on pre-pandemic levels. At the same time, the charity sector has been hit by a tidal wave of demand and a serious reduction in income.

Churches, like charities, have been impressive in their response to those hurt by the lockdown, showing dedication and compassion in full measure in the service of their communities. An early end to the need for their services looks very unlikely: if the Government decides to focus on reducing the fiscal deficit, we can be sure that the burden on the poorest will increase.

It is not surprising, then, that there is anxiety, as the Archbishops wrote in *The Spectator*, “over the sharp fall in collection-plate donations with fewer people currently attending church”. But it will only add to the anxiety borne by congregations and their clergy to read that “the aim is to make each parish and each Christian community sustainable. If that doesn’t happen, there really will be no Church of England.”

Clearly, the Archbishops were not intending to increase the sense of existential threat; but it would have been more helpful had they been clearer about the principles that will guide the churches’ own economic life as some of us emerge from this tunnel, and others don’t.

THE impression at present is of churches’ making a compassionate response to the vulnerable, while the decisions being made about their own future bear the marks of a fatalism about the loss of income, and a rush to find economies: an ecclesiastical version of the austerity response that has done such damage during the past decade.

Quite rightly, churches and their leaders will seek to draw attention to the needs of the poorest. In allocating their own resources, they will want to mitigate the harsh realities facing the poorest dioceses, the poorest congregations, and those of their ministers suffering the greatest hardships.

To describe that very appropriate response as the churches' inhabiting their comfort zone may seem churlish. But, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, Christians have generally found it easier to approach humanity in its weakness than in its strength, and that is as true in the world of economics as in any other.

So, responding to the quarter who are financially vulnerable, and to struggling dioceses and congregations, is, in a sense, easier than knowing what to say to the three-quarters whose finances have not deteriorated during this time.

There is another, bolder message, which those of us whose jobs or pensions have remained secure, and who have not been able to spend our money in theatres and restaurants or on holidays, need to hear. We need, surely, to be faced with a challenge to express our gratitude for the care that we have received and our commitment to justice. If there is a "coiled spring" of pent-up economic demand and eagerness to spend again, churches should surely be asking their members now to look hard at their priorities before they fall in with the encouragement to spend their unlooked-for savings.

If the economically vulnerable in the community have rightly commanded our attention during 2020, the need now is to address those — probably over-represented as a proportion of our church membership — who have been financially cushioned. Why go along with the default response of adjusting to the financial hit as though there were no remedy in our own hands, and in our own bank accounts?

NOR is this a matter just for the Churches. The substantial proportion of society needs to be asked to address the decimation of the charity sector before the rush to spend what it has saved. Only when church members start with themselves do they have authority to raise these issues; for there is a political challenge here as well. We are going to see priority given to getting people to spend — "Eat out to help out" was, literally, a foretaste of this — when, at the same time, sharp economies are made in public services and welfare.

Those who four decades ago produced *Faith in the City* rightly understood that Churches could address society only if they had addressed issues of justice in their own life. If the light at the end of the tunnel is to reveal something better than a wilderness of private affluence and public squalor, we must accompany compassion for the vulnerable with a robust challenge to the relatively secure. Lent might be no bad time to encourage that level of self-examination and challenge.

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