

Money Talk

We need to talk about money, says **Fred Robinson** – imaginatively and generously

Churches talk quite a lot about money. That's not surprising, given that many have financial worries. They may be struggling to pay the bills. A leaking roof or toppling spire can easily turn into a financial crisis and frantic fundraising – or even closure. Churches need money, not just to meet their own needs but to support their wider mission and other charities. When we celebrate the offertory, we are reminded that money matters.

But actually I don't think we talk about money enough. Or perhaps I should say that our conversations about money are too limited, too constrained by an excessive respect for money. The Bible is full of stories and insights about money: think of the moneychangers in the Temple, the parable of the talents, the labourers in the vineyard. But we don't seem to get inspired by scripture when we draw up the church budget. We seem overwhelmingly focused on keeping the show on the road. Above all, we're intent on following secular convention and balancing the books. If that critique sounds a bit radical, then maybe I've made my point about the narrowness of our thinking.

So, what should we be thinking about and talking about? A good starting point is to ask ourselves where our 'treasure' is invested – and what that says about where our heart is. What are we doing with our church's money, wealth, assets?

This matters now more than ever because, paradoxically, as the United Reformed Church declines its finances grow. Churches shut, we sell them and the proceeds go into the coffers of our synods. There's nothing wrong with that, but I do wonder if we are thinking enough about the opportunities it might bring.

For the most part, synod trusts invest that growing wealth in funds managed by CCLA, an investment company used by many churches and charities. These funds are ethical, in the sense that they are invested in companies that aren't substantially involved in things like armaments, tobacco, alcohol, gambling and fossil fuels. But is it really enough to just avoid 'sin stocks'? Are our investments consistent with our aims? Couldn't we be much more proactive, and invest in things that will actually do good?

It's often supposed that charities have to maximise their returns and that that means investing in big business. In fact, charities,

including churches, have a fair amount of leeway and can take into account wider considerations when deciding how to invest their assets. The Charity Commission is clear that charities can consider ethical issues when making their financial investments and they can, of course, also invest in activities in pursuit of their organisational aims and objectives.

These days, more progressive investment portfolios often perform as well, if not better, than the standard conventional funds, so there may be no great financial sacrifice. Overall, the risks may be pretty similar too. We could become leaders in what some US foundations call 'social justice investing', with investment in enterprises that enrich and nurture communities rather than exploit them. Imagine: the URC could become known as a progressive lender – maybe the enormously wealthy and rather conservative Church Commissioners of the Church of England could learn from us?

We could invest in joint ventures, for example linking up with housing associations to build social housing on church land – in fact, some Church of England dioceses are now looking at that. We could invest in funds that support businesses involved in activities such as sustainable agriculture, recycling and renewable energy. Good things are happening and we can support them by investing more proactively.

At the local level, many of our churches are short of money, while others aren't. But they all have bank accounts. At the very least, our church meeting should question who we are banking with and, if we have reserves, where they are held. Should we keep our church's money in, say, Barclay's – heavily invested in fossil fuel expansion – or in the Co-op Bank or in a Building Society?

Of course, much of our material wealth as churches is in the form of buildings. Many churches have taken on board the idea that these buildings are community assets, and have opened their doors to a wide range of groups. My own church in Durham is used by at least 18 different organisations, including a mental health group, the food bank and U3A poetry. That's using our talents well.

We need to challenge ourselves to do more of that – and rejoice in being welcoming and giving to others, even if it costs us. If we can afford to be generous, let's be generous. Let's ask ourselves the question: should we be charging market rents for

'As the Church declines, its finances grow'



an unused manse – or using it to house refugees?

Church treasurers might think I'm suggesting a cavalier approach to money and a disregard for future financial security. On the contrary, this is real investment.

Generosity could extend to the sale of redundant churches. At present, redundant churches are sold by synod trusts to the highest bidder. Should we always do that? I think synods might more often consider selling to related charities at less than market price when that safeguards community use. The Charity Commission may need to be asked for their advice and support – but it's worth asking. That kind of sale seems consistent with honouring the contributions of generations past.

But let's go further than these modest ideas. The work of the URC's Legacies of Slavery group is posing much tougher questions about money and wealth. Very few of our denomination's churches will have been built with money coming directly from slavery, but all of us – including our churches – have benefited from the wealth generated by slavery and colonialism. Our relatively comfortable lives today are built on slave labour, colonial appropriation and economic exploitation and racism in the past and present. So, what are we prepared to do about any of that?

Certainly, facing up to the realities of history and expressing remorse for the dreadful sins of

our ancestors is a good start. But it's not enough; we need to try to make amends, as best we can. In the Caribbean, in the US and elsewhere there is growing pressure for reparations. We owe the descendants of slavery and the victims of colonialism reparatory justice and that surely means – among other things – money. Financial compensation needs to happen if we are to create a fairer and more stable world, especially when we can't rely on the government to maintain the overseas aid budget. The Legacies of Slavery work is going to force us to look at power and money in a different way – and that's uncomfortable.

In all of this, I am not suggesting that only churches need to think again and think differently about money. Of course not. We all do. As individuals we need to make more ethical choices and be more generous – here, I'm telling myself to do much better. Our government, our institutions, our businesses need to change too (that's an understatement). But perhaps it's up to churches, including our own denomination, to take a lead in thinking, praying – and doing. ●

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'Should we charge market rents or house refugees?'