

**Rt Revd Donald Allister, Bishop of Peterborough, writes**

### **Thinking about rich and poor**

**One of the great problems of a recession or a period of national austerity is that the gap between rich and poor grows wider. In a sense this is inevitable: those who depend on support from the state will always suffer most when government spending is reduced. You can't cut housing benefit across the board if only poorer people receive it. A benefit cap isn't going to affect those who only receive a free television licence or winter fuel allowance.**

I am not criticising the general policy of reducing government spending. Governments, like the rest of us, should not live beyond their means. Some degree of borrowing for investment, in the same way as families take out a mortgage to buy a house, may well be appropriate. But borrowing to support everyday spending cannot be a good idea. The government should not be spending what it hasn't got, even on good causes.

The proliferation of food banks, payday lenders, credit unions, loan sharks, and so on (some of which I see as unfortunately necessary, some as iniquitous – I trust you can work out which is which) demonstrates that poverty and debt are becoming increasing problems in our still-affluent country. Christians and Churches should do all we can to resist those trends.



The answer is not simply to give poor people lots of money. Hard work, taking responsibility, and living within a budget are genuine virtues as well as conducive to a

healthy society; and we need to tackle poverty of spirit as well, which is seen in rich and poor alike. But demonising the poor, or referring to those who need support as “scroungers” is not the answer either. There is very real hardship in our society.

General Synod's call to churches last year to ensure that people we employ receive at least the Living Wage rather than the derisory Minimum Wage is a good start. All employers, including local councils and others who employ the least skilled people, have a moral duty to pay at a rate which people can actually live on.

Christians setting an example, and helping others, in living simpler lifestyles, living within our means, and resisting the blandishments of consumerism, would also be a real help. Churches need to be at the forefront in the fight against greed, and offering real support to the less advantaged to live healthily for less.

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