

## **Prayer:**

*Lord of the Word; speak to our hearts and set our souls ablaze,  
Teach us and train us, rebuke and inspire us, fill us with the knowledge of your Truth.  
Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord, who is The Way, The Truth and The Life,*

**Amen.**

## **Reading:**

Read the card 'Why we do what we do – a Biblical Understanding.'

John Stott in his book 'The Living Church' makes this statement:

*'...a living church is a caring church. Generosity has always been a characteristic of the people of God. Our God is a generous God, His people must be generous too.'*

- Using the above quotation, what have you learned from the information card, and reading Genesis 1:27-31, what can we learn about the character of God? What qualities does He possess that we should emulate?
- What else is God saying to us in Isaiah. 1:10-17, and how does this relate to His character and demands on our lives? Whom should we defend?
- Read Acts 2:44-45 and compare this with Paul's description of the Macedonian Christians in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. What qualities are Christians to display towards each other? Reflect on this in light of James 2:15-16.
- From the Gospel narratives, we know that Jesus spent much of His time with those in chronic need and expended a huge amount of emotional and spiritual energy in meeting those needs. What do the passages Matthew 9:36 and John 11:33-45 say about what motivated Him? Finally, reading Luke 4:18-19 reflect on the unambiguous central focus of His (and our) ministry?

## **For Further Exploration:**

Who are those on the margins today?

## **Summary:**

Just as God displayed concern for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and sought to meet their needs in the provision of food, shelter, community and work, He challenges us to reflect that same care for others within our community. Sharing what we have with others, defending their rights and interests, and sensitively showing love and care, without prejudice, reflects His image within us despite sin's attempt to distort it.

## **Prayer:**

*Help us, O Lord, to reflect your image and character towards others in our community.  
Enable us by your Holy Spirit to show kindness, grace and care without prejudice or precondition.  
Change us from glory to glory and, mirrored here, may our lives tell your story.*

**Amen.**



## Study 2 – **Beginnings** of our work (Suffering & Struggles)

### **Prayer:**

*Eternal God, who made the heavens and the earth.  
You have revealed your beauty in creation and inspired the book that we are now about to study.  
Help us now as we read together, to deepen and broaden our understanding of you and your love for us.*

**Amen.**

### **Reading:**

Read the cards

- 'Helping Presbyterian Children before the Society – Parish, Poorhouse and Foundling Hospital'
- 'The Society - Beginnings and Early Years'
- 'Helping children during wartime – The Two World Wars'

Identifying the disadvantaged and 'poor' can be difficult with others stereotyping the debate as 'strivers' against 'skivers' – those viewed to be hard working and decent people against those perceived as being comfortably supported by a 'generous' welfare system. Views of poverty can be unduly selective, subjective and at times agenda-driven.

The Bible, however, doesn't view poverty or the disadvantaged as one-dimensional but as nuanced and multifaceted. The Bible speaks of the disadvantaged in economic, relational, aspirational and spiritual terms.

- In light of the statement above, the information cards and Bible passages such as Leviticus 19:10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 10:18, which groups does the Bible identify as being disadvantaged? Are these different today?
- The founders of the Society were pioneers in helping Presbyterian children and their families. What would pioneering care look like today? Use this paraphrase of Jesus' words in Luke 14:13-14 to aid our understanding: 'Don't just invite the kind of people who will return the favour. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks.'
- Why do you think it took so long for the Society to accept applications on behalf of 'unmarried mothers'? What would God want us to do?
- What implications does James 1:27 and Acts 6:1-7 have on our thinking when considering the relationship between vision and practical administration?

### **For Further Exploration:**

How similar was nineteenth - century Ireland to the Developing World today?

### **Summary:**

Sometimes the norm in our society is to respond to the needs of people according to their behaviour. The norm for the Christian, however, should be very different. Helping the disadvantaged has been a characteristic of generations of God's people. Christians (just like those in the book of Acts) have responded to need with vigour, sensitivity, imagination, initiative and above all love.

### **Prayer:**

*Help us, O Lord, to see others through your eyes; to appreciate their value and uniqueness. Enable us by Your Spirit to clearly identify those in need, and being stirred to action and motivated by compassion, grace and Christ's example, to live in a way which is pleasing to you.*

**Amen.**



## Study 3 – **Background** of our work (Statistics & Society's Attitudes)

### **Prayer:**

*God of the poor, and friend of the weak give us compassion and love  
to show grace and care for those around us who are struggling, hurting, and needing our help.  
Melt our cold hearts with the warmth of your unfailing love, fan the flames of compassionate service and  
stir your people through Word and the Spirit to know your plan and purpose for our lives.  
Through Christ Our Lord,  
**Amen.***

### **Reading:**

Read the cards

- 'Perspectives 1866 – 1945'
- 'The Johnston Memorial School 1887 - 1985'
- 'Women, wives and mothers 1866 - 1945'

Quoting the Book of Deuteronomy (8:3), Jesus said "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth." (Matthew 4:4, The Message ). To put it simply, it's not enough for people to have the ability to live; they need God to live effectively.

- How did the Johnston Memorial School give young people an ability to fulfil their potential? What can we do today to enable our young people to fulfil their potential?
- What difficulties do 'looked after' young people experience? How can we help? Use Proverbs 31:8-9 to reflect on this further.
- What agencies are available today to support young people who have experienced the 'care system' and how as a Church can we support them in their work?
- Using Exodus 2:1-9 and 1 Samuel 2:1-10, what can we learn about two mothers and their sons? What qualities did they possess?
- Do we 'value' motherhood today? If so, how is this shown?

### **For Further Exploration:**

Why do we find it easier to help those 'at a distance' rather than those nearest and closest to us?

### **Summary:**

Since the Garden of Eden, God has provided work for us to do. So, whether working at home caring for children, volunteering in the Church or elsewhere, or being employed in a paid capacity, we are fulfilling God's plan for us. These may help us discover our potential. Mothers are valued in Scripture (consider Jesus' own desire to care for His mother on His departure from the world, John 19:27), so let's continue to value them and our children, abandoning unhelpful stereotypes, prejudices and distractions.

### **Prayer:**

*Lord Jesus,  
Send us out with confidence in your Word, to tell the world of your saving acts, love, grace and compassion.  
Help us to appreciate and value people, whatever their circumstances or background. Give us grace to love others  
as you do.*

**Amen.**



## Study 4 – **Battles** in our work (Structures & Survival)

### **Prayer:**

*Blessed are you, sovereign God, gentle and merciful,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
Your word brings light to dark places.  
In Jesus Christ you have proclaimed good news to the poor,  
liberty to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.  
Renew our vigour and faith for witness and service as we read your Word,*

**Amen.**

### **Reading:**

Read the cards

- 'Left Holding the Baby' – from unmarried mothers to single parents
- 'The Society and the Changing Face of Welfare'
- 'Doing good because we should – Christian Philanthropy'

The Bible affirms the Church as being 'in the world, but not of the world' (John 17:16) or to use a modern paraphrase, 'not defined by the world' or 'joined to its ways'. The Church is called to be thoroughly distinctive and counter-cultural. As Christians our attitudes should be markedly different from society's and subject to the 'mind of Christ' (Philippians 2:5). In practice, however, we often absorb unhelpful stereotypes and half-truths about people.

- In what ways can the Church unknowingly mirror the values of wider society?
- John Wesley made this statement in 1753: "So wickedly, devilishly false is that common objection, 'They are poor, only because they are idle'". What does this tell us about what can happen to our perspective on disadvantaged groups? Is it ever right to judge people by their behaviour?
- There are some who talk disparagingly of 'problem families'. A more compassionate view is that they suffer multiple disadvantages. Whatever you call them, it is clear that a relatively small number of families are in substantial need. What attitudes might they evoke among wider society? What would be the most appropriate Christian response?
- One of the primary responsibilities of any Government is to provide services and help for its people in times of need. Should they help everyone? If not, which groups should they help and why?

### **For Further Exploration:**

What does 'Christian Community' mean to me?

### **Summary:**

Doing good feels good because it is good. It is something we were created to do (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus was compassionate and kind to everyone he encountered: the blind, the lame, publicans and sinners, prostitutes, the destitute and helpless. We are to be like Him and avoid the danger of being 'hard hearted' or 'tight fisted' towards others who need our help (Deuteronomy. 15:7).

### **Prayer:**

*Lord, help us realise that you are a shelter for fragile lives,  
ravaged at times by the storms of life.  
Give us a heart to do small things with great love.*

**Amen.**



## **Prayer:**

*Gracious Lord, you have given us Scripture for our learning:  
help us as we hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, being encouraged and enlightened by your Holy  
Word, we may embrace your sovereign will for us.*

**Amen.**

## **Reading:**

Read the cards

- 'Transition and the Troubles – The Post-war decades 1946 – 2015'
- 'Voices From the Archives 1866 – 1945 and 1946 - 2015'
- 'The Society in the Twenty-First Century'

William Booth, the founder of The Salvation Army, demolished the Victorian myth, sometimes prevalent even today, that financial hardship is punishment for those people classed as 'undeserving poor'. He said, speaking of a cab horse which had fallen in the midst of traffic, 'there is no question of debating how he came to stumble before we get him on his legs again'. Therefore, in supporting the disadvantaged within our community, we should help first and ask questions later.

- What do stereotypes lead us to believe about those in financial need? Would this reflect God's concern for His creation?
- There is a modern preoccupation with radical transformation, instant results, miraculous change, and immediate impact. The Society however, has grown in a more measured way over the period of its history. How has the Society ensured its survival and relevance today?
- Consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. What lessons can be drawn from this narrative to help us examine the relevance of the Society today, and how we deliver pastoral care and financial support within our Presbyterian community?
- Reflecting on Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 3:6-8, who can we conclude ultimately blesses any practical spiritual work within the Church? How is God blessing the work of the Society today?

## **For Further Exploration:**

Are there ways in which the 'less well off' might be better off than us?

## **Summary:**

Supporting the vulnerable is not exclusively the work of Christians. Many agencies throughout the world engage in good work and are not Christian. However, Christians do have something to offer that others do not. We are not relying simply on human effort to transform and change lives, but on a God who is intimately acquainted with the needs of the poor and offers hope as well as practical help. Jesus' response to human need combined prayer fuelled compassion, heart-warming empathy, commitment, faith, and available human resources. Let us live lives with absolute consistency, stirring our hearts to action with the words of James 2:17: 'Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?'

## **Prayer:**

*Eternal God, we thank you that you are a Father to the fatherless, a champion of widows, and a defender of the weak.  
Accept our praise for your steadfast and unfailing love, and your kindness towards us which so often is undeserved and  
sadly at times, unacknowledged.*

*Gracious Lord, as you survey the expanse of our world, continue to raise the poor from the dust,  
lift the needy from the ash heap, seat them with princes, and honour them among us.*

**Amen.**

