



WT

WISDOM CRIES OUT

PUBLIC THEOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

Andrew Grinnell

TEMPLE TRACTS



Wisdom Cries Out: Public Theology from the Margins

Andrew Grinnell

Temple Tracts: Book 21

Sign up for our free newsletter at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter [@WTempleFdn](https://twitter.com/WTempleFdn)

©William Temple Foundation 2021

Cover image from [Pixabay](#)

Picture taken by [Olexy](#)

Author

Dr Andrew Grinnell has been involved with developing responses to poverty for over 20 years. After working nationally with The Salvation Army, he spent 10 years living in a low-income neighbourhood in East Leeds seeking to develop places of hospitality with local people. He is a facilitator for both the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission and the Poverty Truth Network and a core team member of [Urban Life](#). His doctoral research addressed the political and societal implications of the practice of Christians relocating to low-income neighbourhoods in the UK.

Contents

Author	ii
Contents	1
Introduction	2
Wisdom in public theology	3
Cries and wisdom	4
Hearing the cries	5
Proximity to cries matters	7
Attentiveness and discernment	10
Who should communicate in public?	12
Making public theology more public	14
Conclusion	17
Questions for further consideration	19
Further reading	20
Bibliography	21

Introduction

Theology should always be public. Throughout scripture and church history we see how theology interacts with its context, discerning understanding from within the world and communicating back a vision of how things should be. In this respect, all theology is public theology. Yet, some theologies place particular emphasis on the ‘publicness’ of theology. For over a century, a strand of public theology in the UK has sought to engage in issues that diminish society and cause injury to many of its citizens by seeking to influence public policy with a theological vision of the common life. This tract is concerned with this tradition of public theology.

Wisdom Cries Out raises questions about where public theology is conceived, how it is constructed and who articulates it. My central claim is that the location of public theology should be amongst the people for whom it often claims to be speaking for. I argue that those who face the struggle and daily challenges of poverty offer wisdom that is often articulated through their cries. It is their cries of anguish, injustice and loss, alongside their cries of joy and celebration that is a rich location to find wisdom. By being attentive to these cries, the public theologian may discern with their bearer the wisdom it contains and communicate it to wider society. In doing this, I am attempting to make public theology even more public. Rather than the theological method being removed from the context, as is often the case, my claim is that public theology from start to finish includes the ‘public’.

Throughout the tract I will draw upon the witness of those who have chosen to live alongside people who are often discarded by wider society. Some of the examples I offer are from my own experience and practice. At all times, these are offered as one possibility of how public theology may be conducted and never as the only way.

Wisdom in public theology

To modern ears the phrase ‘wisdom cries out’ seems almost contradictory. When describing a wise person, we tend to portray someone who is measured and careful in the words they choose, and calm in how they offer them. Wise characters from fiction usually share these characteristics—Yoda from Star Wars, for example, or Mary Poppins or Professor Dumbledore from Harry Potter. Yet, at the beginning of Proverbs, the author introduces the character of Lady Wisdom by saying: ‘wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice; at the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks’ (Proverbs 1:20-21). This does not seem like a dignified entry onto the scene. It does not look like the wisdom of the sage waiting by a swamp for the young Jedi knight to visit. Wisdom here is not cool, calm and collected. Rather, she bursts on to the scene, shouting out at every vantage point in the city. Here, wisdom cries.

Cries are an essential part of the human experience. They are an outpouring of emotion. There are cries of grief when something or someone has been lost; cries of anguish when things go wrong; and cries of suffering when we have been hurt or are in pain. Then there are the cries that accompany life’s victories. We might cry out in joy at hearing about an achievement of a family member or in adulation as our sports team wins the game. Whatever the reason for the cry, it tends to signify an important moment in the life of a person or community. As such, it is worthy of consideration and demands our attention. This is particularly the case if, as in Proverbs, it is Wisdom who is crying.

‘Wisdom cries out’ challenges our notions of who is wise and how wisdom should be communicated. This passage of scripture also challenges us about where wisdom should be spoken. Here Proverbs declares that wisdom’s place is in the open. It is not to be hidden, a secret conversation for the chosen few. Rather, it is visible and accessible to all (Longman, 2017, p. 15). Thus, wisdom needs to be made public.

It is the ‘publicness’ of wisdom that I am interested in exploring in this tract. My argument is that making wisdom known to society is an act of public theology. Yet, we cannot jump straight to sharing wisdom without paying attention to its genesis. We must be attentive to the cry. More particularly, if our hope is to effect public policy so that society becomes more just, we must listen to the cries of suffering that emanate from those who experience injustice. Furthermore, those expressing the cry should be part of the wisdom discerning process. Commenting on Proverbs, Tremper Longman III (2017) claims that wisdom can be discerned through observing ‘what works and what doesn’t work’. In my experience, it is those crying about the injustices they face who possess this kind of wisdom. They seem to know what works and what does not. Public theology conceived in this way must be done in community *with* those for whom we claim to speak.

Throughout this tract I will draw upon my own experiences and those of others who have intentionally placed themselves alongside and within communities that are marginalised—collectively I will refer to them as relocators. By drawing on these experiences, I offer ways in which we may be attentive to cries, discern wisdom and communicate it to wider society. It is from their witness that I believe a new generation of public theologians might emerge who bring together lived experience with public pronouncement. For this to happen, relocators will need to be more aware of the political and societal implications of their practice. However, they are positioned better than most to be able to hear the cries. In a world that appears increasingly fragmented, a key task of public theology is to be attentive to wisdom in the cries of the marginalised and to seek to bring them into public discourse. As Mary Grey outlines, ‘in the hearing into speech of the forgotten wisdom of connected knowing’ lies ‘the healing of the land’ (Grey, 1993, p. 84).

Cries and wisdom

David Ford commences his argument about ‘Christian Wisdom’ by arguing that ‘prophetic scriptural wisdom is inextricably involved with the discernment of cries’ (Ford, 2007, p. 14). Jesus, as the embodiment of wisdom, was surrounded by cries. Cries were heard at the announcement of his birth. He witnessed them in his encounters with people who were suffering. He uttered them as ‘woes’ to Pharisees and lawyers. Cries accompanied the waving of palm branches as Christ rode into Jerusalem and then, days later, he cried out at the point of his death. Ford argues

that cries are not just words uttered loudly; they go beyond mere statements. Speaking of the cry that announces Christ's last breath, he writes that it is 'an excess of the cry over any verbal articulation, knowledge or explanation [...] Its inarticulable mystery stands as a continual provocation to thought' (Ford, 2007, p. 44). It would seem to me that the visceral nature of the cry conveys something of the depth of the wisdom to which it points. A cry goes beyond words. It contains a recognition that our words are only partial reflections of wisdom.

For Ford, being attentive to the cries of others leads us to desire wisdom. In particular, he is keen to consider the cries of suffering. In a passage reflecting upon the tribulations of Job, he draws upon Simone Weil's definition of affliction. Weil claims that 'affliction is not a psychological state; it is a pulverisation of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances' (Ford, 2007, p. 106). The difficulty of paying attention to those who are afflicted, to hear their cries and be with them, is acute. Yet, for wisdom to be sought, attentiveness to these cries is of paramount importance. Their unsettling nature calls us to press beyond easy answers. They question our 'neat' solutions and cause us to grapple with the deeper wisdom that they contain. In turn, this provokes within us a humility, in that any claim to wisdom is only ever partial.

In *The Fear of the Lord is Wisdom*, Longman argues that wisdom unfolds in scripture at three levels: practical, ethical and theological (Longman, 2017, p. 6). He argues that the source of all wisdom is Yahweh and that the process of discerning wisdom is a theological act. He writes, 'even our capacity to reflect on our experience, learn from our mistakes, and benefit from tradition is ultimately a gift of God' (Longman, 2017, p. 120). I accept that more must be said about what makes wisdom theological, although there is not space within this tract to do so. However, my claim is that this way of discerning wisdom is in itself a theological practice.

Hearing the cries

I have found the wisdom of faith most profoundly in the cries of people and communities experiencing the struggle against poverty. Whether that was working with a group of young people in South-East London, in the favelas of Brazil or in living in low-income neighbourhoods in the United Kingdom. Proximity to these cries 'makes sense' of Christianity for me. For ten years we lived in a low-income neighbourhood

a mile to the east of Leeds city centre. Some of my earliest reflections of living there were that my neighbours possessed a certain type of knowledge that seemed similar to Longman's characterisation of wisdom in Proverbs. They understood 'what works and what doesn't work' (Longman, 2017, p. 117). This knowledge, which I later appreciated as wisdom, was about everything from how to survive as a family on a low-income to how best to respond to the needs, challenges and opportunities that were faced by the neighbourhood. Yet this wisdom was seldom heard in public meetings with decision makers. In part, this seemed to be because of the way it was communicated. It was often expressed like a cry that was sometimes emotional, could be explosive and was not polished public speaking. It was a cry born of years of frustration where, to adopt Weil's terminology, the soul of individuals and the community as a whole felt like they had been pulverised by the loss of jobs, local businesses and social institutions. The cries seemed to be unpalatable for public officials and so they were either silenced or ignored. As a witness to those cries, I was aware of the need to find an environment where they might be heard.

It was as I was thinking about how we might create a place for this wisdom to be heard that I spoke to a friend about the work of the Poverty Truth Commission in Scotland. A number of things struck me about the process they had adopted. The commission started with people who experienced the struggle against poverty setting the agenda by presenting their experiences in a public event. Those who had shared became a part of an eighteen-month process as equals with senior leaders from within Scottish society. The wisdom they shared helped articulate the real problems of poverty and meant that better decisions and effective solutions were found. Having heard about this I wondered if starting a commission in Leeds might be a place of wisdom-seeking. So, with others, we established the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission. Since starting in 2014 commissioners have expressed many cries. Amongst them have been cries about the stigma felt by people who had experienced multiple forms of marginalisation; there have been cries about the barriers that stop people moving on; and there have been cries about systems that meant people felt unable to contribute to wider society. There have been cries of joy and of laughter. There were times when the brilliance of people who have overcome challenges was evident to all. And there have been those moments when we have run out of words, when the excess of the experience or affliction meant that no language was adequate to fully express the anguish. By reflecting upon these cries together, commissioners have crafted deep wisdom about how to make Leeds a better place for everyone.

My reflections upon my own experience in Leeds as a relocater and facilitator of the Poverty Truth Commission is offered to be illustrative rather than prescriptive of how I understand the task of public theology.¹ I offer it to illuminate a number of points that I want to make about public theology as wisdom crying out in the streets, namely: that public theology needs to be practiced in close proximity to the cries; that it must discern the wisdom of the cries with those who experience them; that those expressing the cry should be involved in communicating this wisdom publicly; and that public theology should be shared with the whole of society, not just political leaders. None of these points are exhaustive of all that might be said. Rather, they are both speculative and provocative in order to call theology to be more public in its search for wisdom. I will elucidate on each point in turn.

Proximity to cries matters

Put simply, if public theology is wisdom crying out in the streets then we have to be near those who are crying out if we are to hear them. My doctoral studies focussed upon the practice of Christians who had moved to low-income neighbourhoods for reasons of faith. This included groups and organisations like the Eden Network, Urban Expression and InnerChange in the United Kingdom and the New Monasticism and New Friars movements across the world. Collectively, I called them relocators. From literature written by these organisations and practitioners I identified several motivations for relocation. The primary one was mission within the local neighbourhood. Mission was understood in terms of transformation that was enabled by what one practitioner called ‘the proximity principle’. In combining physical and relational proximity, ‘the potential for transformation increases exponentially’ (Wilson, 2012, p. 116). Authentic mission could only be practiced within these neighbourhoods through close proximity.

¹ I am aware that I may have drawn from many other contexts that offer this approach. In *Is God Colour Blind? Insights from Black Theology for Christian Faith and Ministry*, Anthony Reddie shows how the proverbial wisdom of older, Black Caribbean Christian women ‘can be a resource for the Christian formation and nurture of young Black children’ (Reddie, 2020, p. 25).

A concern that I developed through my thesis was that the potential political and societal implications of the practice were underdeveloped and understated within both literature and practice. My argument was that close proximity to ‘the cries’ of people who were struggling individually and collectively against poverty, meant that the relocater was made aware of the systemic challenges communities faced. From this vantage point, relocators, in my view, may be able to respond to the structural injustice that people face in unique and creative ways. This is not only a political task, but a theological one. If theology begins ‘in the middle of things’ (Williams, 2000, p. xii) my argument is that, due to their close proximity, where they could hear the cry of suffering, a relocater could make a significant contribution to the development of public theology. Again, my claim here is not that relocation is the only way of ‘hearing cries’, but this immersive experience does enable a rich understanding of what it means to listen to them. I want to highlight three distinctive contributions that theology practiced within this location might make.

First, public theology conceived in a low-income neighbourhood acknowledges that cries are always situated and particular. Some of the issues that our neighbours cried out about were very specific to the local context. Whether it be the closing down of shops, the building of an incinerator or a badly planned housing development, these issues were particular to our neighbourhood. Duncan Forrester’s approach to public theology was to claim that all that could be offered were ‘theological fragments’. These fragments may address specific issues that arise at a particular time (Forrester, 2005, p. 7). They may act ‘as irritants, as illuminations, as road metal, as lenses, as fossils, reminders of the past, and ultimately, perhaps as building blocks once again’ (Forrester, 2005, p. 19). The relocater’s responsibility as a public theologian is to draw attention to ‘specific issues, situations in which people are hurting and being oppressed’ (Forrester, 2003, p. 116). By implication, the cries that articulate this hurting and oppression will be specific to the particular situations in which the theologian is placed. This will guard against generalised pronouncements and enable a more nuanced public theology.

Second, immersion within a context in which the cries of suffering are regularly heard ensures that reductionist understandings of issues might be avoided. On its first hearing, the issue that causes the cry may appear clear-cut. Over time, as similar cries are heard on multiple occasions, the relocater begins to understand that there may be more to the issue than had originally been thought. This is further intensified as competing cries about specific issues may also be heard. Thus,

relocators become aware of the complexity of the issues people and neighbourhoods face. If public theology is about hearing these cries, acknowledging this complexity is vital. Snowden and Borne (2007) contrast the difference between complicated and complex systems. They cite a Ferrari car as an example of a complicated system in which ‘an expert mechanic can take one apart and reassemble it without changing a thing’ to repair it. An answer is found to the complicated problem that can be repeated in every similar situation. But in a complex context, ‘right answers can’t be ferreted out’ (Snowden and Boone, 2007, p. 72). For instance, a rainforest is a complex system that is always in flux, containing what the authors call ‘unknown unknowns’, with the whole being far more than the sum of its parts. Recognising the complexity of cries reminds the relocater that easy solutions may not be appropriate. There is an unknowing contained within the cry which acts as a reminder that any discernment of its wisdom is only ever partial. Accepting this, points the practitioner in the direction of humility.

Finally, by locating close to the ‘cries’, the cry may not be something that is observed in others, it may be something in which the relocater shares. The structural injustice that low-income neighbourhoods face is encountered in some ways by the relocater. If decisions are made that disadvantage the neighbourhood, they also disadvantage the relocater. The cry is not only something that is heard from others, it may be something that the relocater utters. For instance, the building of an incinerator not only affected our neighbours, it affected us. It is important to be careful here that we recognise that the injustice experienced by the relocater is of a different order to some residents who have experienced injustices throughout their lives. Simone Weil claims there is a difference between suffering and affliction. She suggests that there are three types of suffering: physical, psychological and social suffering (Weil, 2009, pp. 67-82). She distinguishes between the ‘ordinariness of suffering’ and the ‘horror of affliction’ claiming that the afflicted suffer all three types of suffering simultaneously and consistently. In these terms, those who experience the struggle against poverty might be considered afflicted, whereas the relocater experiences something of the ‘ordinariness of suffering’. Thus, the relocater experiences the wound that elicits the cry, but as one who suffers, not as one who is afflicted. Acknowledging the difference in experience does not discount the relocater from joining in with the cry. Rather, it reminds the relocater that whilst they may experience injustice, it is not felt in the same way as others.

For public theology to be wisdom crying out in the streets the theologian must be located in the context of the cries. This will enable the theologian to understand the particularity of the cries they hear, to appreciate the complexity of the issues that elicit them and to cry alongside others as they experience something of that injustice. Yet this is not a one-way street between relocators and public theology. Relocators would do well to learn from public theology so that they may be alert to the political and societal implications of their practice.

Attentiveness and discernment

Whilst the cry of suffering may contain wisdom, it does not necessarily mean that, in its raw form, it is wisdom. Uncovering wisdom requires discernment. Thus, although proximity to cries is vital, it does not guarantee that wisdom has been heard. For wisdom to emerge, the relocator must adopt a posture that is attentive and discerning.

An attentive posture requires a commitment to deep listening to cries. Deep listening to victims of injustice is a particular feature of Duncan Forrester's public theology. For him, it is a skill that needs to be cultivated by the public theologian if we are to 'better understand, explain and cut through [...] the subtle ideological distortions we so often face' (Forrester, 2001, p. 212). Public theology understood this way is 'both persuasive speaking, focusing on the other's ear, and attentive listening, focusing on one's own ear' (Storrar and Morton, 2004, p. 27). Forrester cites Bob Holman as an exemplar of 'deep listening'. He was Professor of Social Policy at Bath University before relocating to become a community worker in Easterhouse, a large, low-income housing scheme on the outskirts of Glasgow. Forrester (2001, p. 178) says of Holman:

His renunciation of status has enabled in a small area at least the breaking down of some serious barriers to communication so that ordinary people are enabled to speak without fear of coercion or ridicule, and academics and clergy are enabled to attend to people in such a way as to appreciate the human meaning of social problems.

Deep listening requires a willingness to become a learner and a commitment to listening with empathy. In so doing, the one crying is able to trust the listener and is rehumanised. Thus, deep listening goes beyond simply listening to the words being spoken and pays attention to the whole person.

Samuel Wells describes paying attention as requiring ‘one to harness concentration, memory, emotion, intellect, gaze, scrutiny, wonder, and alertness here and nowhere else, directly and without mediation’ (Wells, 2018, p. 14). The focus is not just upon the words that are said, but the gestures, the body language and the circumstances of the other. It is also paying attention to the silences: the times when words run out, when all that is left is a cry. Deep listening is not simply listening for clues in which a cry might be translated into wisdom. It recognises the visceral nature of the cry. It requires the listener to have an open posture to the ‘all’ of the cry, its words, its body language, the situation in which it was uttered and the intensity of emotions. In the move from hearing the cry to discerning the wisdom, the cry should not be reduced to the words expressed. Rather, this ‘all’, and the unknowns that are embedded within it, should be retained.

The second aspect of posture is discernment. In *Christian Wisdom* Ford offers a reflection on L’Arche.² L’Arche is a network of residential communities across the world in which members with intellectual disabilities live alongside assistants. For Ford, the distinctive wisdom of L’Arche comes through being gripped by the cries of their members, ‘discerning their meaning, and judging what response is appropriate to them’ (Ford, 2007, p. 357). This discerning process recognises the ‘radical particularity’ of each cry and reflects upon it in the light of scripture. By bringing the stories of experience together with the stories of the gospel, a ‘wise love’ is nurtured through relationships in which the members are the teachers and the assistants their apprentices.

² For more information on L’Arche see www.larche.org. In 2020 an investigation concluded that the founder of L’Arche had initiated sexual relations with several of L’Arche’s assistants. Whilst obviously condemning these actions, I have used L’Arche as an example of good practice within this tract in honour of all the other members and assistants associated with the community worldwide. I have been careful not to quote the founder. Rather, I have used David Ford’s observations and analysis of the movement. I hope that its inclusion in this tract will not cause hurt or offence to anyone.

This particular posture displayed by L'Arche is necessary for all as we seek to discern the wisdom that is found in cries. Two things are of particular importance. First, the discerning of wisdom is recognised as a communal activity. This is not about the assistant paying attention to the cry and then interpreting it alone. Rather, members and assistants discern together the wisdom that is emerging and, crucially, seek to embody it within the community. Second, this practice subverts the usual norms of power within these relationships. The teachers of wisdom are those who experience the cry. They are the source of wisdom. The assistant's role is to help with its articulation. Both parties are necessary as wisdom is discerned together in dialogue within the community.

Public theology that seeks to cry out wisdom in the streets needs to adopt an attentive and discerning posture. In the first place it must be attentive to the 'all' of the cry. In the second, it should discern the wisdom contained within the cry in dialogue with the person who experiences the cry. Many contemporary exponents of public theology argue for the use of dialogic methodologies in the construction of public theology.³ Often these are primarily utilised in engaging with other academic disciplines and public discourse. My claim is that the dialogical approach should include those on whose behalf they believe they are doing public theology. If wisdom is to cry out in the streets, the one who expresses the cry has a crucial part to play in its discernment.

Who should communicate in public?

In discussing human rights, Rowan Williams claims that 'the body is the organ of the soul's meaning' (Williams, 2012, p. 152). His point is that the body is the medium through which a person communicates to others and their wider environment. As one's body cannot be the property of another, it should not be utilised for another person's purpose. For Williams, 'the ultimate form of slavery would be a situation in which your body was made to carry the meanings or messages of another subject and never permitted to say in word or gesture what was distinctive for itself as the

³ For instance, Elaine Graham in *Beyond a Rock and A Hard Place* and Duncan Forrester's use of Habermas's communication theory in *Theological Fragments*.

embodiment of a sense-making consciousness'. (Williams, 2012, p. 152). Thus, in the terms of our discussion, the cry belongs to the person uttering it and should not simply be 'used' by another.

In many respects this confirms what we have just been saying about attentiveness and discernment, but from a slightly different angle. Any public theology that seeks to discern wisdom by being attentive to cries should ensure that the person crying is fully a part of that discernment process. Yet, I want to extend this point further. We should not stop engaging with the one expressing the cry at the discernment stage. If part of what it means to be human is that we are communicative beings, then the public communication of wisdom should be made not by an interlocutor alone (e.g. the theologian) but with the person whose cries were the source of the wisdom. This hearing of cries into speech is a process through which those who have cried do the speaking.

This is not a new claim for public theology. Forrester stated the importance of ensuring that, in discussions about social issues, the voices of those who experienced them should be heard (Forrester, 2001, p.22). My concern is that these voices are only used to illustrate Forrester's argument rather than generating their own. For instance, in *On Human Worth*, 'Erica' speaks clearly and extensively within the first chapter. However, her account is seldom returned to in the rest of the book and we are left unaware as to whether she had the opportunity to either co-theologise or speak publicly on her own terms. Doug Gay, in his doctoral thesis, comments that, although the Centre for Theology and Public Issues—of which Forrester was the convenor—claimed to prioritise the voice of those who are in poverty, this was seldom the case. Academics or church leaders provided the vast majority of speakers and wrote all of the publications (Gay, 2006, p. 228). If public theology is wisdom crying out, then it matters that the one expressing the cry is heard.

Finding ways in which those who experience the issues can speak publicly is crucial for any authentic public theology. Doing so enables the person to become more human on the one hand, and potentially begins to challenge stigmatised views of people who are marginalised by society on the other. In a film made by commissioners from the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission, the women involved reflect upon how the stigma of poverty has caused them to internalise shame. At one point one of them says, 'It's important that people hear about the shame. It's about living the shame, feeling it, living on, inspiring people through that shame.' (Tyler, 2020, p. 29) Stigma here is about a belief that you have nothing to offer, you are worthless, and,

in many cases, you are responsible for the challenges that you face. This stigma is compounded by media portrayals of benefit cheats and welfare policies orientated towards austerity. Yet, the quotation from the film is also a sign of hope. Here, someone who had felt shame had an opportunity to speak. In being public about their circumstances their perception of themselves began to change. By speaking out, the perception of others about people who experience poverty as having little to contribute to society may also change. The person is no longer passive; they are using their agency to bring change. In some senses it echoes Paul's contemplation to the Corinthian church that 'God chose the foolish things of the world, that he might put to shame them that are wise; and God chose the weak things of the world, that he might put to shame the things that are strong' (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Making public theology more public

So far, I have tried to show how public theology, understood as wisdom crying out, must be practiced in close proximity to the cries, attentive to all that is being cried, discerned with those that are crying and communicated with them. At this point I want to return to the scriptural passage from Proverbs 1. Commentators refer to the voice who cries out as Lady Wisdom. Imagine if she is in fact someone who is marginalised within our contemporary context. Maybe she is someone seeking asylum from another country because of something that they had written as a journalist. Maybe she is 'a recovering sex worker' who, throughout her life, has had the double stigma of the past and all its memories and their continued effect on her family's circumstances. Maybe she is a person brought up in care who has battled to make ends meet so that she may save her own children from a similar fate. Let us now give them a collective name, Sophie, and with those images in mind let us read the passage:

Sophie cries out in the street,
 In the squares Sophie raises her voice.
 At the busiest corner Sophie cries out;
 At the entrance of the city gates Sophie speaks:
 "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
 How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
 And fools hate knowledge?"

Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words know to you. (Proverbs 1:20-23)

Take note that Sophie is crying out to all areas of society. It is not just to public policy or to the politicians. It is not just to the church. It is at the entrance to the city, the places where people gather. It is in the public square and on the busiest corners (another version translates this as marketplaces). Sophie is speaking in the economic centre or the business district of her day. She speaks everywhere. If public theology is wisdom crying out, then it must not be obsessed with the horizon of public policy alone. It is vital that this wisdom is communicated to policy makers if society is going to develop just laws and policies that truly serve, support and nurture all citizens. Yet, our wisdom speaking should never be limited to that. Public theology is a gift that the church offers to the whole of society.

Discerning wisdom from the cries of suffering means that one cannot speculate about the specifics of what is to be communicated. As I have previously said, cries are situated in specific contexts and are by definition always particular. It is critical that the relationship between the cry and the speaking of wisdom is maintained. However, it seems to me that there are several possible gifts that public theology practiced in this way will seek to offer society. In conclusion I want to comment on two—lament and hope.

To illustrate how lament and hope may emerge from wisdom crying out I am going to look at the ‘Humanifesto’ written by commissioners to mark the end of the second Poverty Truth Commission in Leeds. They had collectively recognised the dehumanising effects that poverty had on everyone within the city—whether you experienced the struggle against it, you worked for an organisation that sought to alleviate it, or you witnessed it in the life of others. As the report said, ‘Any society is weaker when some of its members are excluded. Poverty dehumanises us all’ (Leeds Poverty Truth Commission, 2018, p. 3). Here, commissioners from across society in Leeds acknowledged the impact of the wound that poverty inflicts on us all. Whether they were victims of poverty, complicit in the society that seemed to be exacerbating it or fellow citizens, poverty was dehumanising for everyone. This insight was not necessarily gained through looking at statistics or campaigning. It was gained through close proximity with one another, paying attention to the cries

and discerning together the wisdom of their collective experience. The recognition that poverty dehumanises us all is an admission of failure and its effects upon the human condition. It should lead us to lament.

However, the Humanifesto does not leave us in lament. Rather, it highlights some of the areas that need to be addressed and offers ways in which Leeds might be humanised. It celebrates the work that has already been done, challenges the language of how people experiencing poverty are depicted, and highlights ways that businesses and organisations may overcome barriers. It calls everyone who lives and works in the city to play a part in reducing the dehumanising effects of poverty. This call, delivered by those experiencing poverty, politicians, public sector workers, faith leaders, sports people, CEOs of voluntary organisations and business leaders, in some ways reflects something of the wisdom that cries out. It offers the hope of an alternative future for Leeds and a call to action to which everyone can respond.

Public theology understood as wisdom crying out creates opportunities for theology to share its radical hope of an alternative future. It is immersed in the reality of people crying out in suffering and offers a vision of how all may work together for the common good. In a world where society seems increasingly fractured, I hope that we may find ways of hearing the cries of suffering and discerning wisdom together. Through it, we may discover the ‘healing of the land’ (Grey, 1993, p. 84).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the wide levels of inequality in the UK. For example, home schooling is tough if you do not have access to devices or data. The call to build back better has been uttered by many. Yet, to coin a friend's phrase, 'there is a need not just to build back better but to build back with'.⁴ We must build back with the whole of society, enabling those whose cries are not normally heard to be able to contribute towards what our common life might be.

What if the church became a place where 'building back with' was practiced? Could it become the sign of hope of which it speaks? Here are a few steps that may enable this:

1. Reverse mentoring schemes where the great and the powerful are mentored by those who have the wisdom contained in their cries. Through these relationships, theologians, church leaders, politicians, business leaders and all who claim to speak on behalf of others might hear regularly the 'cries of wisdom'.
2. Public acts of lament. For instance, rather than reflecting in our churches on Good Friday, we could practice lament at the places of loss within our communities—the closed factories, the locked meeting points, the places where people have committed suicide etc.
3. Setting strategies and discerning theological positions on social injustices through communities rather than committees. Creating initiatives that are similar to Poverty Truth Commissions to focus on specific injustices experienced within society and the church.

⁴ <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/some-things-are-so-urgent-we-cant-afford-do-them-quickly>

4. Making the provision and support of those living within low-income neighbourhoods a denominational priority. This includes providing opportunities for local practitioners to develop theological reflection skills such that their reflection is considered when setting denominational agendas.

There are many other practices that might be considered. However, with these starting points we may begin to release a new generation of public theologians. Public theologians from a wide diversity of backgrounds, all bringing their own wisdom into a conversation that serves the common life of the nation. In turn, this will close the gap between local practice and public pronouncement so that we all remember that ‘wisdom cries out in the street’.

Questions for further consideration

- What marginalised communities may we need to listen to if we are to hear the cries of wisdom?
- Do you agree that poverty is a complex rather than a complicated issue?
- How does poverty relate to other injustices—race, environment, migration?
- Where might you build places of hospitality where wisdom may be shared?
- What other practices are necessary so that we Build Back With?

Further reading

- Anna Ruddick (2020), *Reimagining Mission from Urban Places: Missional Pastoral Care*. London: SCM Press.
- Ruth Harley and Al Barrett (2020), *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In*. London: SCM Press
- Charles Mathewes (2007), *A Theology of Public Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dorothy Day (2006), *From Union Square to Rome*. New York: Orbis Books
- Dorothee Soelle (1975), *Suffering*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- [Poverty Truth Network](#) and [Leeds Poverty Truth Commission](#)
- [Finding Shame Film](#)
- [International Journal of Public Theology](#)

Bibliography

- Bishop, G., 2007. *Darkest England and the Way Back In*. Leicester: Matador.
- Ford, D. F., 2007. *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Forrester, D. B., 2001. *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality*. London: SCM Press.
- Forrester, D. B., (2003). 'The Political Service of Theology in Scotland', in Storrar, W. and Donald, P. (ed.) *God in Society: Doing Social Theology in Scotland Today*. Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, pp. 83-121.
- Forrester, D. B., 2005. *Theological Fragments: Explorations in Unsystematic Theology*. London: T&T Clark.
- Gay, D. C., 2006. 'A Practical Theology of Church and World: Ecclesiology and Social Vision in 20th Century Scotland'. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis: University of Edinburgh.
- Grey, M., 1993. *The Wisdom of Fools? Seeking Revelation for Today*. London: SPCK.
- Leeds Poverty Truth Commission, 2018. 'Humanifesto', http://www.leedspovetrytruth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/LPTC_HuManifesto_2018_OnePage_Final.pdf
- Longman III, T., 2017. *The Fear of the Lord is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Reddie, A. G., 2020. *Is God Colour Blind? Insights from Black Theology for Christian Faith and Ministry*. London: SPCK.
- Snowden, D. J. and Boone, M. E., 2007. 'A Leaders Framework for Decision Making'. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(11), pp. 68-76.

- Storror, W. and Morton, A., 2004. *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Duncan B. Forrester*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Tyler, I., 2020. *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality*. London: Zedbooks.
- Weil, S., 2009. *Waiting for God*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Wells, S., 2018. *Incarnational Mission: Being With the World*. London: Canterbury Press.
- Williams, R., 2000. *On Christian Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Williams, R., 2012. *Faith in the Public Square*. Edinburgh: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Wilson, M., 2012. *Concrete Faith: The Inside Story of the Eden Network*. Manchester: Message Trust Publication.



Thank you for reading.

‘Temple Tracts’ are short, free-to-download books from the William Temple Foundation, presenting engaging analysis on key debates in religion and public life. Find out more and download the other books at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/temple-tracts.

Sign up for our free newsletter at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk.
Follow us on Twitter [@WTempleFdn](https://twitter.com/WTempleFdn).

©William Temple Foundation 2021