

Session 3

Cancelling debts

‘Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.’ (Romans 13:8)

Inspired by the Old Testament laws commanding the cancellation of debts in a Jubilee year, Christians campaigned in the closing years of the last century for the unpayable debts of the world’s poorest countries to be written off. After genuine successes were achieved, what happened to the money? This session looks at what we can learn from the Jubilee Debt Campaign, and how it challenges us today.



The reason George Ibanda is wearing his school uniform and carrying text books is directly connected to the campaign to cancel the unpayable debts of poor countries. George is 12 and goes to Butansi Primary School. Uganda was the first country to benefit from debt cancellation. The Poverty Action Fund in Uganda was set up with the money that Uganda is now able to use to pay for education, healthcare and building roads and wells, instead of debt. Because primary schooling is now free, millions of children like George can receive an education that their families could not previously have afforded. No wonder he has such a huge grin!

George Ibanda, 12, goes to Butansi Primary School, Uganda, without paying fees, because of debt relief money from the Poverty Action Fund

3.1 Introduction

Invite everyone to tell the rest of the group where they were and what they were doing at the moment the third millennium began.

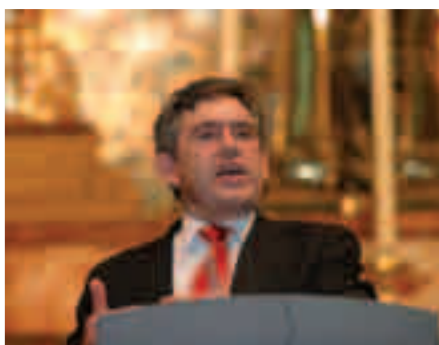
Then go on to tell the story (below) of Jubilee 2000's efforts in the years leading up to that moment to have the unpayable debts owed by the world's poorest countries cancelled. Encourage anyone present who was involved to share their own stories about the debt campaign. What, in retrospect, are their feelings about its achievements?

On to the Jubilee! The continuing story of the campaign for debt cancellation

Remember Bono meeting the Pope? The 'human chain' of 70,000 people encircling the Birmingham G8 summit? Gordon Brown promising activists his help?

The campaign to cancel Third World debt has been one of the great causes of our time. The issue has long created outrage. Many of the world's poorest countries are crippled by repayments on old loans from rich countries and big financial institutions.

Jubilee 2000, the debt-cancellation alliance co-founded by Christian Aid, became a global movement that simply couldn't be ignored.



- Campaigners sent half a million postcards, emails and letters to the Treasury and Downing Street, calling on the government to 'drop the debt'.
- Hundreds of thousands of people pressed for debt relief, demonstrating peacefully at annual meetings of world leaders.
- An incredible 24 million people around the world signed a petition – the biggest in history – demanding that poor countries be released from their debt burden. Breakthrough came at the 1999 G8 summit in Cologne when leaders promised to cancel US\$100 billion of debt owed by the poorest countries.

It was a desperately needed step in the right direction. Millions of children in countries such as Uganda are finally getting the chance to go to school, because their governments can once more afford to fund education.

But the crisis continues. More must be done: by August 2004, US\$36.3 billion of debt had been written off (just under 40 per cent of what has been promised) and some types of debt will go untouched under the current deal.

The Jubilee Debt Campaign, following on from Jubilee 2000, continues to push for the cancellation of 100 per cent of poor countries' unpayable debt.

Gordon Brown at the Trade Justice event in Brighton coinciding with the Labour Party Conference, 2004, where he announced a further ten per cent of debt cancellation from the UK for the world's poorest countries

3.2 Worship

Do you not know? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

[The Lord] sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in...

'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One.

Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name.

Isaiah 40:21-22, 25-26

Choose from the following, depending on the time available:

- Invite the group to shut their eyes and imagine themselves looking out of the window of their home. What can they see? Then ask them to imagine themselves standing at a well-known local viewpoint (a hill or tower) over the surrounding area. God is the God of every inch of that landscape. Next, ask them to imagine themselves in space, looking down at the planet. With that image in mind, read the psalm.
- Continue to worship the Lord, inviting prayers that praise his greatness, power and goodness.
- Choose some songs that encourage us to exalt God in the good times, as well as the bad. Numbers 3, 7 and 9 from the list on page 30 may be particularly appropriate.

3.3

Word

1 Read 2 Kings 4:1-7 aloud. The story starts with a cry for help from someone made wretched by debts she cannot pay. It is the story of a miracle that involved the cooperation of numerous people. What part in the working of the miracle is played by the widow, her sons, her neighbours, Elisha, God? With which character in the story do you most identify?

2 Half way through this stops being a story about despair and starts being a story about hope. What brings about the transformation?

3 What obstacles are preventing similar transformation for poor people in the developing world? How can we play a part in overcoming these obstacles?

4 The cry of the widow has powerful echoes today in countries trapped by debt. Read the story of Christine Lubaale below and/or watch part three of the *Act Justly* video. What parallels do you see between the biblical and modern-day stories?

5 In the Bible story, the evidence of a miracle having taken place was shown in the jars full of oil. If God were to work a miracle in the countries held back by debt, what would be the evidence that he had answered our prayer?

6 Given what you have found out in this session, how do you feel about the achievements of the Jubilee Debt Campaign?

Christine Lubaale is a community-based monitor who checks that the debt-relief money released through the Poverty Action Fund is being used properly: for schools, clinics, roads, boreholes and agriculture. Here she is collecting water from the borehole



Christian Aid/Roger Allen

*The *Act Justly* video

Part three of the *Act Justly* video features nostalgic images from the Jubilee Debt Campaign and recent footage that shows how money released by debt cancellation is being used to bring lasting change in Africa.

A frequently asked question: How can you be sure that money made available to countries in the developing world is used to help poor people and not wasted through corruption? An unexpected answer: Christine Lubaale is on the case! She is one of hundreds of locally elected monitors who have been trained by the Uganda Debt Network – an organisation funded by Christian Aid to ensure that the money saved through cancelled debt repayments is used to help those who are in greatest need. Her village, Butansi, has benefited from a well, a primary school, a health clinic, road construction, and training in farming techniques. Christine regularly checks that the money is being well spent, and that the new facilities are being maintained properly. She is George Ibanda's mother (see page 14), and, as a widow, has particular reason to be glad that the children of Butansi are able to go to school. In the evenings she teaches literacy to 20 adults who were denied an education a generation ago.

If you have more time...

Read Matthew 18:23-35. What does this story tell us about why we should forgive each other and how to find the resources to do so? Countries that had huge debts written off after World War Two are among those who now find themselves in a position to do the same for today's indebted countries. What parallels with today's world can you find in this story?

3.4

Our response

Discuss the quotations and suggested actions. Decide on something you can do individually or as a group.

1
Send a message of support to the staff of Uganda Debt Network by emailing them at Info@udn.or.ug or writing to them at Plot 424, Mawanda Road – Kamwokya, PO Box 21509, Kampala, Uganda. Tell them what you have been learning and praying.

2
Visit the Jubilee Debt Campaign's website www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk to find out about how to support the campaign.

3
Pray about local issues, telling each other and God about the needs of your own 'neighbours' and ways in which you are seeking to respond as the widow's neighbours did. Then move on to pray about global issues, thanking God for the successes of the Jubilee Debt Campaign, mentioning the needs of indebted countries and calling on God to move rich countries' governments to hasten further debt cancellation.

'Jubilee 2000 is the most important social movement in Britain since Wilberforce's movement to end slavery.'
Gordon Brown

'I don't know where we would be without Christian Aid. Please go on praying for us. And please keep begging the rich people to reduce our debt.'

Christine Lubaale

'Visiting Uganda has left me with a mixture of emotions. I was so encouraged to see the impact of debt relief on the areas we visited in the south, and very impressed by the grassroots monitoring system that ensures funds are used properly. I thank God for the positive progress that continues to be achieved. However, I also grieve that [worldwide] over 85 per cent of the debt burdening poor countries still remains. There is so much more to do, and we can't sit back and be complacent. We must keep the pressure on the international financial institutions and governments of rich countries. Just imagine what could be achieved if 100 per cent of these debts were cancelled.'

Nigel Tween, director of training for the Elim Pentecostal Church at Regents Theological College

'The Jubilee vision is surely one of the most enlightened, honourable and compelling concepts ever to grace the mind of man. However, as Charlotte Bagorogoza from Uganda, reminds us "The struggle continues and the challenge still stands. We beg and appeal to you not to give up." We have raised the hopes of millions; let us now commit ourselves to keep faith with them and press on. On to the Jubilee!'

David Golding, Whitley Bay Baptist Church

David Golding and campaigners from the north east join the human chain in Birmingham to demand that world leaders cancel poor countries' unpayable debts



Richard Hanson/TeaFund 1998