



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

Surveillance and Social Justice – May 2017

Section 18. Welfare Benefits

18.1 The proper administration of welfare benefits requires information about people to be gathered and retained. It helps to ensure that people get the benefits to which they are entitled. The hitherto neglected widows of the Early Church could testify to the positive contribution of others watching and reporting their need to the Apostles (Acts 6:1).

18.2 The same monitoring systems raise alerts when someone makes a mistaken benefit claim. In a political climate where welfare benefit clients are regularly vilified as a group, it is distressing that data gleaned through surveillance is conflated in such a way that figures for mistaken claims are included within those for fraudulent claims.¹ This is a clear example of the wilful misuse of information.

18.3 A Judeo-Christian position can be shaped by remembering the Biblical figure of Hagar.² Hagar is oppressed in three ways: as a slave; a foreigner; and as a woman.³ In the midst of her oppression, she speaks up for herself finding that this has negative consequences. Those who are under surveillance, possibly sanctioned for actions over which they have little room for manoeuvre, are sisters and brothers of Hagar who is honoured in the biblical narrative as the only woman to name God:- *el Roi*, the God who sees. This mirrors the warning of Jesus in his parable of the unwittingly righteous (Matthew 25) that he *is*, and not merely *with*, the 'least of these.'

18.4 In a culture of a suspicion-driven welfare system, claimants are easily de-humanised within a regime of datafication. It is Jesus who is under surveillance whether the monitoring is disproportionate, intrusive and life-quashing, or proportionate and enabling. Conscientious and compassionate advisors and managers working within the benefits system may feel they are a minority, but their kindness towards those whose data is demanded is, from a Christian perspective, thoughtfulness toward Jesus himself.

[See full report](#)

¹ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-archive-2010/churches-write-to-cameron-asking-him-to-set-the-record-straight>

² Genesis 21

³ Elsa Tamez, 'The woman who complicated the history of salvation,' *Cross Currents* Summer (1986), 129-39.