

Politics and Christianity - Do they Mix?
Harmony Christian Centre, East Ham, 17 May 2006

Christian engagement: the facts

I am very pleased to be part of this event tonight, and I am thankful for everyone who has come. Unlike many of the events I attend, I feel I am on home territory tonight, and among people who think about the world in the same way as I do.

I first came to Newham almost exactly 30 years ago, when one university summer break I came to help out on a tent mission in Forest Gate, working with what was then called Bignold Hall. It was only two weeks, but I was hooked. For the first time after that mission I could see how what I believed, and the way I believed I should live my life, could make a real difference. When I graduated and got a job in London, I went and joined the church which was planted by the mission team. I have lived in Newham and been a member of that church ever since, and our pastor throughout that time, Terry Diggines, is here this evening. And because I wanted to be involved in the life of the local community, I also joined the Labour Party. Since then I have been working - and praying - with others whose ambition is to transform Newham. I was elected to Newham Council, and in 1994 became an MP.

So it is very encouraging to me that so many local Christians are here to consider our role in the life and politics of our local community and our country.

And I am also very encouraged by the work of Transform Newham. The Transform Newham vision statement says something which is hugely important. It says we are called not just to rescue people from society, but to change society. I quote: *"Day in, day out, 'ordinary' Christians are doing extraordinary things in ordinary circumstances - not only reaching out to friends and colleagues, but also transforming schools and city centres, working practices and product strategies."*

I agree with that. And all those ordinary Christians are not alone in the extraordinary things they are doing. Looking around in Britain today, we are seeing more and more examples of people following Jesus and getting involved in tackling the problems in our world in a practical and imaginative way. Twenty years ago I don't think you could have said that - but today its unmistakable. Its one of the most heartening developments of our time.

Sometimes in the media you see people arguing that they suppose religious people can be allowed to join them in playing some kind of role in society, so long as we behave ourselves and don't do anything too over the top. But, you know, I don't meet a lot of secularist organisations out there providing shelter to the wanderer, food to the hungry, freedom to the oppressed. Day by day, night by night, it isn't the secularists, it is people of faith, who, in our streets, in our communities, are giving their time and their energy to comfort, to heal, to stand up for right, and to confront what is wrong.

I met up recently with someone involved in work to support refugees around the country. She had become aware through her work that the people actually doing things to help refugees in Britain were almost all in practice from the churches. It was a complete shock to her. You won't find it written about in the newspapers. But it is the case - in little struggling churches, in big and successful churches, followers of Jesus are doing what they can to help refugees and asylum seekers. And the refugees and asylum seekers are noticing.

Churches often feel hard pressed. People know about declining church attendance, and long for revival. But look around, and there are many, many green shoots of the kingdom breaking through where Christians are at work. It's amazing how much impact we can have when we are rooted in God's kingdom.

Look at the campaigns on *Make Poverty History* and *Jubilee 2000*. They weren't really thought of as Christian campaigns, but the truth is that almost all the effort that went into them - sending in postcards, turning up at rallies, forming human chains - 80% of the people involved were followers of Jesus being faithful to the teaching of the Bible. And the result has been that hundreds of millions of pounds which poor countries would have spent on repaying debt has been spent instead on health and education, and thousands of children in Africa have started going to school. And it's all because Christians have campaigned, and really dramatically changed the public mood as a result of campaigning. And we need more of that.

It's been true as well in some areas which you wouldn't think so much of Christians as having been involved. Through the 1980s and early 1990s, almost everyone was telling us that full employment was a thing of the past, and that a couple of million people out of work was just the price you had to pay to keep Britain economically viable. But there were some who refused to accept that. In particular, it was the churches. There were two major churches' reports - on *Faith in the City* in the 1980s and *Unemployment and the Future of Work* in the 1990s, with Bishop David Sheppard, drawing on his experience in Canning Town, influential in both of them. And more than anyone else, those reports sounded a rallying call to action that created the climate the new Government could respond to in 1997. Today we are closer to full employment than any of the other big industrialised countries. I believe we have the churches, in no small measure, to thank for that.

As a result, the Government has put a great deal of effort into working out how to help unemployed people get into a job. Some of our best partners have been in the churches - for example in the Peckham Evangelical Churches Action Network, Pecan, in Peckham, which I shall be visiting again in a few weeks time. Or the diocese of Birmingham, which has worked with the Government's New Deal programme.

The diocese of Birmingham used to pick up the New Deal participants nobody else would touch. On one occasion, they were asked to find a New Deal placement for a young man who was due in court shortly to be tried for 117 offences of burglary. He was placed on a project to decorate a church complex in Edgbaston - and he turned out to be a superb painter, a skill he had developed while imprisoned at a young offender's institution. He struck up a friendship with the part time church administrator, who was also the husband of the vicar at the church, and when the time came for him to go to court for his trial, the administrator went along to speak up for him and to ask the court that, despite all these dreadful offences, he should be given another chance.

The court, perhaps rather surprisingly, agreed. The young man was given another chance. The painting project was completed and to an extremely high standard. And the young man has since apparently started up with a couple of others a painting business of their own.

And at the ceremony to mark the conclusion of the work, one of those who turned up was the young man's mother. She sought out the church administrator and she said to him; "When you went to court to plead for my son to keep his job, you saved his life". And through Christian witness, through Christians caring and

lobbying in the name of Christ, we can bring about changes in Government policy which will allow other lives to be saved in the future as well. And we should be doing more of it.

Christian engagement: the theology

Transform Newham has it exactly right: day in, day out, ordinary Christians are doing extraordinary things, in the power of God, to transform society.

No-one should be surprised by that. This is biblical faith in action. These Christians are doing exactly what the Bible says.

It's there in Genesis: God created human beings as social people in a physical world. And he gave us responsibility to govern things: *fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over every living creature.* God doesn't just care about disembodied souls and ignore the rest. He made our world, he sustains it every day, and he wants us to join him in caring for it.

It's there in the Old Testament prophets - for example, in Isaiah 58: *"Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords; to set the oppressed free. Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?"*

It's there in the words of Jesus, announcing the kingdom of God's rule that has broken into our world: *"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."*

Christians take the world seriously, because God takes the world seriously. God made this world. Jesus is Lord of this world. We cannot turn our backs on it.

The Bible is about the things that our society is grappling with to this day: How do people make the best of life? What values should guide families and communities? How do we bring reconciliation in place of hatred in a varied world? How do we enjoy material blessings without leaving others in want, hurting our world, and stifling our souls? How do we handle difficult questions about the beginning and end of life? Those questions are being asked just as urgently today as they were when the Bible was written.

The challenge to Christian engagement

But you will have noticed that Christian engagement in society is not welcome to everyone. Lots of people argue today that you shouldn't mix faith and politics. They point to right wing Christian politicians in the US. Or they say that if you let faith and politics get tangled up, then before long someone is setting off bombs. And there is no shortage of object lessons for them to point to underline their argument - Belfast, Bosnia, Beslaan, Baghdad - all of them witnessing horrors in the last few years because of political conflicts linked - on the surface at least - with faith.

After the London bombings last year, Polly Toynbee wrote passionately in the Guardian newspaper that all religious faith is dangerous to modern society. *"It is time now", she wrote, "to get serious about religion - all religion - and draw a firm line between the real world and the world of dreams.... Those who believe they alone know the only way, truth and life will always feel justified in doing anything in its name. You would, wouldn't you, if you alone had the magic answer to everything?"*

Her's was an extreme argument, but it reflects a mindset that crops up at every turn in modern western thinking. It draws a clear line between two spheres - the secular and the spiritual. The secular world, they say, is based on rationality; the spiritual world is based on faith. The secular world is the basis for public business - economics, society, government, science. The spiritual world is a private concern, fine in the privacy of homes and churches, but unreliable and even dangerous if allowed to intervene in running things.

I believe it is very important that we challenge that thinking. Our society would be far, far worse off if Christians stopped doing all the things which are being done at the moment - and much *better* off if Christians did more of them.

There have been Christians who have effectively accepted Polly Toynbee's argument. Many Christians in the last two hundred years have accepted this domestic and privatised role which has been assigned to faith. The emphasis has sometimes been purely on the inward spiritual journey to heaven after death. Turning away from society and politics makes sure that we don't get distracted, and protects us from slipping into a social gospel that loses sight of the eternal and thinks social progress in the here and now is the be all and end all. We all understand and perhaps can sympathise with that thinking.

But the idea that faith should be fenced off in a small private portion of life, would be incomprehensible to Christians of any earlier age. The Bible makes no such distinctions. I think we should resist that thinking, and stubbornly refuse as Christians to leave the affairs of the world to others.

But I would want to go further and argue that that means for some Christians being heavily involved - being involved in a costly way - in party politics too.

Now I know that many will resist that view. Working to help unemployed people and asylum seekers is one thing. Campaigning to make poverty history is a task which Christians can commit themselves wholeheartedly to. But getting involved in party politics itself is a different kettle of fish altogether. Party politics is after all almost a term of abuse these days. It is seen as competitive and focused on power for power's sake. People see the jousting and the shouting and the game-playing and are understandably turned off.

The case for party politics

Now I can confirm from first hand experience, that there is what you might call 'rough and tumble' in politics. But I want to say something about this which I believe is very important. If you only take away one thing that I say tonight I hope it will be this:

Party politics is too important for Christians to turn their backs on it. And Christian involvement is too important for politics to do without it.

Let me offer you three reasons why I believe so strongly that Christians do have a calling to engage with mainstream party politics.

1 Politics is how big decisions get made

First, thankfully, we do live in a country where the big decisions get taken through a democratic political process. It might be deciding how to manage economic growth to protect the climate; or how to achieve justice for the world's poor; or how to make our communities whole and healthy. If we want the impact we have, as followers of Jesus, to be more than sticking plaster solutions, we cannot afford to be left on the sidelines.

Politics is not neutral. If we are not involved, then others certainly will be. The bread and butter of politics: voting, choosing, arguing, persuading, building alliances and finding common ground, legislating and delivering: all these are the tools we have to use to fight evil, to pursue justice in the place God has put us. Too often in the past, we have left it to others, and then complained about the results. We need to be in there, arguing and persuading as well.

As Christians we have a proud political heritage of forebears who have grasped what is at stake here. Next year we will mark the 200th anniversary of the British abolition of the slave trade. It was a dramatic turning point not just in British history, but in world history, followed 25 years later by the abolition of slavery itself, to close a shameful chapter in Britain's history and to set an example which was profoundly influential around the world. It is one of the most striking examples of good being brought about through political campaigning, and, of course, it was Christians who did the campaigning.

Earlier in the year we had the launch in the House of Commons of a little book called *"Travel with William Wilberforce"* which helps the reader to visit places associated with the work of the great MP. And yes - I admit its true - he was a Tory MP. The book has a photograph of Wilberforce's diary entry from Sunday 28 October 1787 - the moment, a year after he had become a Christian, when he decided on his life's work. *"God has set before me two great objects"*, he wrote, *"the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners"*. The campaign for abolition was the first great campaign - led and inspired by Christians, with Christians doing all the legwork too. And it set the pattern for every campaign since, up to and including Make Poverty History.

Restoring some political balance, let me say something about my Party's history. We have celebrated this year the centenary of the establishment of the first Parliamentary Labour Party. In the General Election of 1906, 29 Labour MPs were elected. Of those 29, 18 were committed non conformist Christians. The most prominent of them was Keir Hardie, who became their Leader and had become a Christian through the ministry of the great American evangelist D L Moody, and who wrote a few years after 1906: *"The impetus which drove me first of all into the Labour movement and the inspiration which carried me on in it, has been derived more from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth than all other sources combined"*.

So, number one, we Christians need to understand that politics is how things get done that are of vital concern. Yes, sometimes, people behave badly in politics and things happen which shouldn't happen. But those are not good reasons for refusing to be involved. In fact, they just go to show that we should be involved, to make things better.

2 Being involved is a witness

Number two, there is an important witness in the fact that Christians do engage in the wider life of the whole nation. We are not people who just fight our own corner. We are not a narrow interest group simply defending our own rights and our own position.

And this is where I part company from friends in the Christian Peoples' Alliance. I am sure there will be a debate about this, but I see the idea of a Christian political party as a cul-de-sac. Keeping to ourselves allows people to think Christian faith as just one more example of a minority banding together to clamour for attention.

I believe that as Christians we are called to stand alongside our neighbours of all faiths and none, in the work of resisting evil and building up what is good. Those who are giving their all to keep the machinery of government functioning, and to keep the major parties focused on what is right, should find Christians their most natural allies, not a group standing aloof in a holy huddle of their own.

3 Politics needs Christians

Number three. Party politics deeply needs the resources that Christians have to offer. In my experience, most politicians are not the charlatans they are painted to be. Politicians are not simply vain wastrels stabbing each other in the back in order to climb up the greasy poll. Politicians I know give hugely of themselves for others in a way and at a cost that Christians are uniquely well placed to understand and to respect. Most people looking at how politicians live their lives would probably just think they must be crazy. But Christians, who understand what is meant by commitment and discipleship, will have much better insight and understanding for what politicians are doing.

They are generally very ordinary human beings trying their best in a pretty tough job. And they are in sore need of reinforcements from people of faith, character and commitment. Party membership is at historic lows. Voter turnout too. Sometimes the ranks of those prepared to take up political work are in danger of wearing pretty thin.

Contrary to what some people say, Christian faith is in fact a great starting point for politics. And politics needs what Christians can offer. This I believe is our calling in twenty-first century Britain.

We need to restore public respect for the work of politics. Christians, by being involved on the inside, and refusing to accept the culture of cynicism, can help to renew our politics.

We need to restore the trust without which politics cannot work. In a climate where the media are ready to believe the worst of everyone, Christians can do politics in a very different way, building relationships in which people stand by their word. I see re-building trust as a huge gain from more and more Christians getting actively involved in politics at all levels.

We need to overcome the world-weariness which has given up believing we can ever change how things are. Christians, living in the hope of God's future, can bring a deeply rooted commitment to change. We are not complacent, nor naïve. But we will never despair or give up on people. Politics needs that commitment. And we need there to be confidence that politics will be carried out in a trustworthy way.

We need to stand up for those who are left out by the rest of society. Christians will always keep commitment to social justice at the centre of their aims. There is so much conflict and hatred in the world. Christians will reach out in reconciliation to serve others, not just fight their own corner.

We need to get beyond the detachment and disengagement that so many feel. Christians, following in the footsteps of Jesus, will never be apathetic, never give up. And politics needs that too.

Mixing politics and Christianity

Too often nowadays, both Christians and politicians alike receive a bad press. Politicians are called dishonest, power-hungry and self-serving. Christians are

accused of hiding in their churches waiting for heaven without a care for the world outside.

The question for both Christians and politicians is this: Will we live up to these stereotypes? Or can we live up to our true calling instead?

I believe that, for both, the answer is the same. If people of faith bring together an unyielding allegiance to Jesus, and a deep commitment to politics, then both politics and Christianity can be what God calls them to be.

I do hope that churches in Newham will support those among their members who are called to follow this political path. I have had wonderful support from my church in Plaistow and I could not have survived without it. I hope others will have that support too.

It's not difficult to get involved, to join and become active in a political party. There is always much more to do than there are people to do it. It can be a very demanding commitment. But it is a way to have a deep impact on our community.

Should we mix Christianity and politics? My argument is that it is our Christian calling to do so. Thank you for giving me the chance to present that case to you tonight.