

**Manchester Prayer Breakfast
Manchester Town Hall, 27 September 2006**

Thank you for your welcome, and let me express thanks on behalf of the Labour Party for the welcome which has been extended to our Conference this week. It is the first time the Labour Party has held its annual conference here since 1918, and its turning out to be an excellent venue. I want to say a few words to you on the subject of regeneration, which I know has always been a theme of these prayer breakfasts - even before the devastation of the IRA bomb ten years ago and the remarkable transformation since.

The new prosperity - physical regeneration

I have been coming to Manchester all my life. I was born in Oldham and the first family home I can remember was in Wye Avenue, Failsworth. But there does seem to me to be a remarkable new vibrancy about Manchester. I have always enjoyed passing through Piccadilly Station, but this weekend it was positively sparkling. I have always admired the fine Victorian commercial buildings around Piccadilly Station, because they proclaim civic pride and bear testimony to toil and sweat. But for years they have always seemed to me rather sad and neglected. On Saturday as I went past in the bus they seemed to be humming with life and energy.

Tom Bloxham writing in our conference programme says *"There's been a change in the way we think about our city. Mancunians no longer think as their city on a par with Bradford, Bolton or Stockport, but think of Manchester as a rival to Los Angeles, Sydney or Barcelona."* Manchester today is a shining example of the physical regeneration our Government has been working to bring about for the past nine years, and bristles with a new prosperity which is very good to see. I asked Councillor Richard Leese, the Leader of the City Council, what had been the turning point for Manchester, and he said it was the Olympic bids when all the agencies in Manchester - the council and wider public sector, the businesses and the community and voluntary sector - when everyone came together and became partners - and, of course, the Commonwealth Games which resulted was an important boost to the City. My constituency is in East London, and we will be wanting to learn from Manchester's success with the Commonwealth Games as we prepare for the 2012 Olympics.

In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 29:7, God commands his people to: *"Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."* I believe God rejoices too in the prosperity of this city.

One of the books I read as a student which influenced me most was *"Built as a City"*, by David Sheppard who sadly died last year. The title came from Psalm 122. He was best known of course for his work as Bishop of Liverpool, but the book was based on his experience in the borough which I represent in Parliament, the London Borough of Newham. And, reading that book, I understood for the first time how faith could be worked out in a tough city situation. After reading it I visited Newham, and then went to live there - I still live there and now I am the MP.

When I was a Councillor in Newham, I started the campaign to bring the Channel Tunnel Rail Link to a station at Stratford. It was a great campaign, though it took a lot longer than any of us expected. When the station at Stratford is completed next year, it will be almost twenty years since that campaign started. A lot of people prayed for the station to go ahead, to bring back economic vitality into an

area whose prosperity had always been linked to the railways. Like Manchester's Olympic bids, the campaign brought everybody together. Our prayers were answered, and I have no doubt at all that the contribution of these prayer breakfasts since 1990 is part of the reason for the prosperity which is so evident in Manchester today.

Peace in the city - Community regeneration

But Jeremiah refers not just to seeking prosperity, but also to seeking peace in the city. We can rejoice at physical regeneration, but we need community regeneration too. And increasingly across Government we are acknowledging the vital potential contribution of the churches to community regeneration.

And there are more and more examples where that potential is being successfully realised. In a couple of weeks time, I shall be at a presentation evening for the Peckham Evangelical Churches Action Network, which has been a very important and effective contributor to the Government's New Deal programme, helping young unemployed people into work. Over a period of years, volunteers from Pecan knocked on every door of the huge Council estate in Peckham, not just once but regularly, inviting people to come to the employment preparation courses Pecan was running, and, over a period of years, the whole economic base of that estate was improved and strengthened. That takes commitment and determination - and those are qualities which the churches have in abundance and which can make an enormous contribution to community regeneration. In November I shall be at The Vine in Walsall, where the churches are working together, alongside the local further education college, to provide alternative education provision for deeply disadvantaged young people who have dropped out of school. And this afternoon I am looking forward to visiting a youth club in Michael Meacher's constituency in Oldham run by The Message, which I know is doing a great job in contributing to community regeneration in Manchester and the surrounding area.

In the Budget, Gordon Brown announced that we would be setting up an Office for the Voluntary Sector, and he made the point deliberately that it would be "*for faith as well as non faith charities*", which would undertake a nationwide consultation with the voluntary sector to inform spending decisions. We recognise in Government that we have not done a good job of working with faith groups in the past, but we also recognise how valuable the potential contribution is. The consultation is now drawing to a close, and this time tomorrow morning, as the final event in my conference schedule, I shall be meeting with faith groups in Manchester to discuss how we can improve the links between churches and the Government, and how we can overcome the hurdles to faith organisations being able to draw on public sector funding which have always been an impediment to their making the greatest possible contribution to community regeneration.

So we have seen the physical regeneration of this city. We are working on its social regeneration too. But its important that we don't lose sight of another kind of regeneration - another kind of new birth - as well.

Personal regeneration

Why is it that those church-based initiatives I have mentioned - and hundreds of others like them around the UK - are making such a distinctive and effective contribution to the regeneration of their communities? What is the source of their impact and their potential?

If I had been at the Conference this morning, if you hadn't given me the opportunity to escape, I would have been attending a breakfast meeting hosted

by the Refugee Council. It is one of the last public engagements of the Council's outgoing Chief Executive, Maeve Sherlock, before she embarks on a year of study.

Maeve first came to public prominence as Chief Executive of the Council for One Parent Families. I met her after that, when she was working at the Treasury as one of the Chancellor's special advisers and I was a new Treasury minister. We were working on tackling social exclusion - Maeve had a particular interest in involving the voluntary sector and I wanted to encourage faith-based organisations to contribute. We worked quite closely together. Then I went off to another ministerial job and Maeve later joined the Refugee Council.

Earlier this year she got in touch again and we met up. She told me what had happened to her. Travelling around the country for her work, visiting refugee support organisations, it became clear to her that, right across the country, a number of the local projects working to help asylum seekers were in fact church-based projects. In particular, she noticed that many of the people who were giving so much, often sacrificially, to help individual asylum seekers, were Christians. This made Maeve wonder if she had really understood what Christianity was about. Last year, and with a fair amount of trepidation, she took the step for the first time of going to a church near her home in North London.

To her surprise, she was made to feel at home. The church was advertising what they called an Alpha course. She decided to sign up. The course had a profound impact on her. At the course weekend away, she took the step of making a personal commitment to Christ. And next week, excited in her new faith, she is starting a one-year MA in Theology & Religion at the University of Durham.

Today, she says, if anyone had made the connections for her between Christianity and speaking up for the poor and oppressed, she would have become a Christian long ago. And I am grateful to Maeve for giving me her permission to tell you her story this morning.

Conclusion

Personal regeneration through faith in Christ to transform the way individuals relate to the people around them, making a priority of the needs of people often ignored by most people in our society. Transformed people coming together through their churches to change their community in social regeneration as we can see under way in Manchester. Physical regeneration and a new prosperity for a city which God cares deeply about. All three kinds of regeneration deeply and inextricably linked.

Prayer breakfasts like this one are making their contribution to all three of them. I give thanks for that, and just in closing want to underline the importance of all three - personal, community, physical - all three kinds of regeneration continuing in this great city in the years ahead.

Thank you.