

## **Festival of Life – Let God Arise**

**Excel Centre, 27 November 2009**

Its wonderful to see so many people here tonight. I am one of the local MPs, so if you are visiting our area tonight, let me bid you a very warm welcome.

Faith changes individuals, and it changes communities. Some of the changes are more visible than others. If you walk along the Barking Road a mile or so from here, you can see some of the changes. You might feel this is a bit superficial, but you can see it in the shop names: *Redeem Travels*; the *Amazing Grace Minimart*; and – my favourite – *Signs and Wonders Hair Stylists*.

That always makes me give thanks when I see those names! But we are probably interested in other kinds of changes tonight.

Jesus promised in John 10:10 *'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full'*. That's the kind of change we want.

Not just normal life; a getting by kind of life; but life to the full. We need to claim that promise for ourselves and for our great city of London.

*But what is life to the full?*

Let me tell you what it isn't....

We all know of young people who have been knifed and killed – far too many in our community here in East London. Whatever this full life that Jesus brings is – it does not include such things.

If we are committed to living life to the full – we must be committed to fighting against the things that undermine it.

Life to the full.....

- Is not hateful families; - instead it is loving families
- not cold congregations – but warm, dynamic congregations
- not weak communities – but strong connected communities
- not a depressed country – but a hopeful country
- not an unjust world but a world where justice reigns.....

1) I believe when Jesus promised life to the full – this promise included strong and loving families....

Our families are the most important relationships we have.

Earlier this month, at a Trade Union conference, the Archbishop of Canterbury said we all begin life dependant on our family. He talked about the family as central and said '*a culture, especially a working culture, that consistently undermines the family is going to be one that leaves everyone more vulnerable*'.

He's right. What happened to Baby P in Haringey – not only shocked us – but shamed us. We want far better for the children of London.

So its right theGovernment is working to give mums and dads support as they balance work and bringing up children.

Guaranteed holiday pay, the minimum wage, maternity and paternity rights have helped. And 3000 new Sure Start Children's around the country are helping too.

This action is important because strong and loving families will help bring *life to the full* in London.

2) I believe when Jesus promised life to the full – this promise included warm and dynamic congregations....

Beyond family it is our congregations that bring purpose and belonging.

We talk of each other as ‘brothers and sisters’ because we are as close as brothers and sisters. In our congregations we nurture and teach our children to care for each other.

That’s what happened in Acts 11 – when the disciples provided help for their brothers in Judea who were suffering famine.

When Gordon Brown our Prime Minister appointed me as Labour’s Vice Chair for faith – he wanted to acknowledge the work being done by Churches. He spoke to Premier Radio about these issues.

He called on Christians to make a positive difference in society, saying “*stand up for what you believe*”. He wants to see Christians practically involved in our communities as so many now are, but also speaking up for the kind of society you want this to be.

Incidentally, one of the things I am responsible for as party vice chair is for the series of Labour Party *Churches Updates*. We publish once per quarter. We distribute by e-mail. You can sign up to receive them on the faith page on the Labour Party website. And on my website you can see all six of the issues we have published so far. The new issue leads on the Prime Minister’s interview with Premier.

This support is important because warm and dynamic congregations will help bring *life to the full* in London.

3) I believe when Jesus promised life to the full – this promise included strong and connected communities....

In the story of the good Samaritan, the expert in the law asked ‘*who is my neighbour?*’ The answer was the ‘*one who showed mercy*’.

I’ve seen a huge range of inspiring projects that Churches are involved in: youth work, parish nursing, caring organizations, street pastors, employment projects – the list is endless. Many Christians, active in their communities, putting their values into action in every part of our nation. It is where faith hits the streets.

The Government’s wants these to thrive. Because strong and connected communities will help bring *life to the full* in London.

4) I believe when Jesus promised life to the full – this promise included a hopeful country....

The Bible teaches ‘*work is a gift from God*’ and a chance to work – and get on in life – is what most people want.

A church report 12 years ago “Unemployment and the Future of Work” said unemployment “causes social breakdown and

personal tragedy”. They said that: “*it is wrong in such prosperous times as ours for men and women to be deprived for long periods of the chance to earn a living*”.

When the crisis and recession broke last Autumn the Government had to make a call - either to invest to help people through the recession, or sit back and let the recession take its course. A lot of people said we had no alternative but to sit back.

But action taken by Government and the Bank of England has supported up to ½ million jobs. And UK unemployment is strikingly below what has happened in recessions in Britain in the past. Government support – Government guarantees for young people, especially in this economic downturn are important to give hope for the future.

That support is important because work and hope for the future will help bring *life to the full* in London.

5) And I believe when Jesus promised life to the full – this promise included a just world....

When the Bible calls on us to love our neighbour – it is not only loving our congregation, community or country – but those who suffer in other countries. In Mathew 25, Jesus said we will be

judged on what we did to *'those least able to defend or care for themselves'*.

So I welcome reports saying the UK "remains the clear leader" amongst developed countries on international aid and supporting education. Which say the UK played a "vital role" in putting Africa, and the situation of the poorest countries at the heart of the London G20 summit, here in Excel in April, convened by Gordon Brown.

I welcome the Department for International Development's doubling of funding for faith based organisations because faith groups are often best placed to reach those most in need.

This is important because supporting a just world will help bring *life to the full* in London.

### Faith and politics

Faith changes society, and it changes politics too. People often say you shouldn't mix faith and politics. And that if you do mix them, you are asking for trouble. I don't agree with that. In fact, my view is the opposite.

My view is that faith is a great starting point for politics. We need many more people coming to politics from a starting point of faith in Jesus. Because those transformed values are exactly the values we need to renew our politics. Responsibility,

honesty, compassion, commitment to family, serving the community – those are just the values we need to make politics work – to give people life to the full.

Thank you for what you are doing. Thank you for being here. I wish every blessing on this festival – and that it will be a key step in bringing life to the full to this city.

Let's pray.