

# Churches Update

## News from the Labour Party



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## UK Pledges £250 million to universal healthcare

### Gordon Brown calls for countries to commit in helping the world's poorest

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has announced that the UK Government will commit £250 million in aid, as part of an international commitment worth £3 billion to ensure that people in developing nations can get free access to healthcare. The initiative will help over 10 million people in some of the world's poorest areas.

The UK's contribution of £250 million will help expand the International Financing Facility for Immunisation. Countries such as Nepal, Malawi, Ghana, Liberia, Burundi, and Sierra Leone will develop their health care services by expanding access to immunisation for women and children as part of a drive to reduce maternal and infant mortality. It is estimated that 100 million people have already receded back into poverty as a result of the financial crisis.

The Prime Minister, who has long campaigned on the issue of universal healthcare, has spent the last year co-chairing the Taskforce on International Innovative Financing for Health Systems with Robert Zoellick, Director of the World Bank. Their objective was to establish how best developed countries can help finance the gap in the health systems of developing countries.

Speaking in New York, the Prime Minister said: *"The UK is ready to stand with countries ready to provide free healthcare, and in addition to providing resources, the UK will also share our expertise."* He added: *"universal healthcare has been the work of generations, the great achievement of some and the great dream of many. It is an ideal that this generation can make real for all."*

Mr Zoellick underlined the importance of creating new income streams to improve health care for mothers and children, saying that the launch of initiatives, such as those announced, will *"stem the unnecessary and preventable deaths of women and children around the world."*

The proposals build on the progress that has been made over the past ten years to improve the quality of health for millions of women and children in developing



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**Above:** The Taskforce on International Innovative Financing for Health countries. The UK previously joined fellow donors, developing countries, and all of the global health agencies to launch the International Health Partnership (IHP) in September 2007. This helped deliver doctors, drugs, and clinics that have saved millions of lives. The IHP is now recognised for its support of health services in developing countries.

The plans drew wide support from NGOs. Oxfam Chief Executive Barbara Stocking said: *"This announcement is a real turning point. Gordon Brown's unequivocal statement that user fees are killing poor people is really heartening. Perhaps now we can stop this debate and all of us can get on with getting free health care to all poor people."*

The Labour Government has a strong record on international development. The Government has previously announced that its aid package to Africa is set to double from £1.3 billion in 2004 to over £3 billion in 2010. In this year's Queen's Speech, the Government announced draft legislation to ensure 0.7% of Gross National Income will be set aside for international development: the highest a UK Government has ever committed to spending. And the Department for International Development has announced it will double the amount of aid funding channelled through faith groups, recognising their record of successful delivery.

## Government supports churches over “rain tax”

The Labour Government has announced plans to change the law to ensure that churches and other community organisations do not face disproportionate and unaffordable increases in their water bills as a result of surface water drainage charges. The change in the law will allow water companies to establish concessionary schemes which will be fairer to a number of community groups.

Speaking at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton, the Rt Hon Hilary Benn, Labour’s Environment Secretary said: *“Some churches have been hit by huge increases in their water bills for surface water drainage. The Government will legislate to allow water companies to run concessionary schemes for these organisations so they can get on with the great job they are doing instead of worrying about unaffordable water bills.”*

Huw Irranca-Davies MP (right), Minister for Marine and Natural Environment has been working closely with OfWat, the water companies, and community



organisations over the past year to ensure a fair deal could be reached.

Shortly after the announcement, he stated: *“The Government’s new laws will allow water companies to apply concessionary charges. I am confident that this will provide a national solution that will mean a fairer deal.”*

The Rt Revd Jonathan Gledhill, Bishop of Lichfield, said of the proposed legislation: *“Enabling water companies to charge community groups lower tariffs for surface water drainage will allow churches, scout huts, community halls and others to focus on worship and work in the community, rather than fundraising to meet increasing bills. We thank the Minister and hope that the Bill will make it into law in the time available.”*

The Government will continue to consult on the guidance to companies on how the concessionary scheme will work.

## Clamping down on tax avoidance

**A message from Stephen Timms, Labour’s Vice Chair for Faith Groups**

*“Taxes are the price we pay to live in a civilised society”,* so goes the old saying. The taxes individuals and companies pay fund our roads, our schools, the NHS.

As Financial Secretary with oversight of the UK tax system the issue of tax avoidance and tax evasion has been firmly at the top of my in tray. Tax evasion and avoidance are different – tax evasion is illegal but tax avoidance is not, often making use of legitimate reliefs but in ways that were never intended. However, they both undermine tax revenues, and investment in public services.

It is often the vulnerable who are harmed the most by irresponsible tax dodging. In a recent Christian Aid report, *Tax and Theology*, it was estimated that the world’s poorest countries are deprived of US\$160 billion per year in tax revenues as result of tax avoidance/evasion. If that money was available to allocate according to current spending patterns, the amount going into health services alone could save the lives of 350,000 children under the age of five every year.

So what have we been doing? This year, working with the G20, we have persuaded countries such as

Luxembourg, Singapore and Switzerland to adopt the OECD standard on transparency and to sign tax information exchange agreements.

With Liechtenstein we were able to go even further, by signing an additional Memorandum of Agreement so that UK taxpayers with money in Liechtenstein banks will have to regularise their affairs with HM Revenue & Customs or see their accounts closed down.

Another high priority for the UK has been the establishment of a multilateral tax information exchange agreement so that developing countries can benefit from the new tax transparency. Developing countries will sign just once to obtain the information they need, instead of having to negotiate separately with each country.

Tax is a tricky and often emotional subject. However, we are stronger as a society if we all recognise our duty to pay our taxes, as this is one of the most practical ways we can express our belief in something bigger than ourselves – something which comes naturally to Christians.



## UK leads the way on Climate Change

World leaders are meeting in Copenhagen to discuss a make-or-break agreement on Climate Change. Items on the agenda include the need for collective action on extreme weather, rising sea levels, and water and food shortages.

Prior to the summit in Denmark, the Government made clear its commitment in pushing for a deal that was ambitious, effective, and fair. In June, the Government published *"The Road to Copenhagen"*. This was the first time the Government has published their position in advance of global climate talks. Ed Miliband, Labour's Climate Change Secretary, set up 'Ed's Pledge' ([www.edspledge.com](http://www.edspledge.com)) where people could sign up to pledge their support to his efforts to secure a truly historic agreement.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown, said: *"In every era there are only one or two moments when nations come together and reach agreements that make history... Copenhagen must be such a time."* He went on to say: *"if we do not reach a deal at this time, let us be in no doubt: once the damage from unchecked emissions growth is done, no retrospective global agreement, in some future period, can undo that choice. By then it will be irretrievably too late."*

## News in Brief

### Labour Conference 2009

The Christian Socialist Movement organised a record number of events at this year's conference. The Annual Church Service was attended by a number of senior party figures, including the Prime Minister, who gave the scripture reading. CSM hosted a total of thirteen events which tackled issues such as Climate Change, Morality in Banking and International Development. CSM partnered with churches and NGOs such as Oxfam and Christian Aid. Speakers included the Rt. Hon. Douglas Alexander and Jon Cruddas. There were even musical performances by Director Andy Flanagan and David Hart of Lynfield at a local pub! Read more at [www.thecsm.org.uk](http://www.thecsm.org.uk).

### MPs sign Shared Values Document

Labour MPs from various faiths signed a *Shared Values Document* at the Annual Labour Party Faiths Reception. The document affirms the values that unite different faiths. It was signed by MPs including Stephen Timms, Louise Ellman, and Sadiq Khan. Afterwards Rt Hon Alun Michael MP said: *"The document provides a starting point for a journey of discovery for people of different faiths who care about social justice."*

### A message from Ed Miliband



Labour's Climate Change Secretary

Climate change is one of the most serious challenges that faces us in the twenty-first century. The alarming signs of climate change are well underway. This is why world leaders at the Copenhagen Summit must be bold. With collective—and fair—action, we can help protect generations to come. So here is the challenge: Britain needs to show the way to a low-carbon future, but we also need to get all countries signed up to acting as well.

Labour has led the way internationally on Climate Change. Whilst chairing the G8, the Government ensured that the environment was high on the agenda and were the first to call a UN Security Council meeting on Climate Change. The Government signed the Climate Change Act into law in 2008 – a world first. This binds the UK into reducing carbon emissions by a third by 2020 and by 80 per cent by 2050.

### Interfaith Week

The UK's first *Interfaith Week* was launched in November, by the Department of Communities and Local Government together with the Inter Faith Network. During the launch, the Rt Hon John Denham MP, Labour's Community and Local Government Secretary announced that the Government was making £2 million available through the Faiths in Action Programme. Recognising the contribution of faith communities, he said: *"Faith is a strong and powerful source of honesty, solidarity, generosity - the very values which are essential to politics, to our economy and our society."*

### Child Poverty Bill

The Child Poverty Bill is continuing its progress through Parliament. It will enshrine into law Labour's ambitious and historic promise to abolish child poverty by 2020. The Bill seeks to tackle the root causes of child poverty, by prioritising co-ordinated and sustained action across all areas and levels of government. Since 1997, Labour has reduced child poverty by 500,000 and halved the number in absolute poverty from 3.4 million to 1.7 million. The UK's targets match the best currently being achieved in other European countries.

## Prime Minister calls for an “economic and social contract”

Prime Minister Gordon Brown, attending the recent G20 Summit in St Andrews, set out his vision for a renewal in the “*economic and social contract*” between the financial sector and the public.

Mr Brown called on the G20 to look at ways in which developed economies could provide a fairer balance of risks and rewards for taxpayers, citizens, shareholders, and bank employees.

Addressing Financial Ministers from around the world, the Prime Minister said it was not acceptable that banking success was reaped by the few but failure by the many. He said, *“I believe we should discuss whether we need a better economic and social contract to reflect the global responsibilities of financial institutions to society. This is a unique sector that, when it fails, imposes such a high cost to the wider economy and damage to society that government intervention becomes essential. So the taxpayer had no real choice but to step in to keep the system afloat.*

He continued: *“It cannot be acceptable that the benefits of success in this sector are reaped by the few but the costs of its failure are borne by all of us. There must be a better economic and social contract between financial institutions and the public based on trust and a just distribution of risks and rewards.”*

While noting that the G20 group have already agreed “*far-reaching*” reforms which have helped in providing proper accountability of banks and financial institutions, he said a range of options should be considered to insulate the public from a future crisis and ensure they benefit from the proceeds when times are good. This could include different types of insurance funds for a tax on financial transactions.

The Prime Minister also stated that any new proposals would have to be considered against four core principles. Measures would have to be global; avoid distortions in financial markets; should enhance action that has already been taken to restore financial stability in the global economy; and any contribution from the financial sector must be *“fair, measured and enable financial services to make their necessary contribution to future economic growth.”*



CSM Director Andy Flanagan, who has argued for a banks insurance premium, commented *“CSM Director Andy Flanagan, who has argued for a banks insurance premium, commented “It’s great to see these proposals being considered by the international community. Money raised by a financial transaction tax on banks could make a huge difference to the lives of some of the poorest people in the world. These communities have been most affected by the economic downturn. It is only fair that those whose irresponsibility has led to the current crisis play a part in easing the suffering they have caused. Along with the Prime Minister’s initiative, CSM is also calling for the separating of banking functions.” More information can be found at [www.thecsm.org.uk](http://www.thecsm.org.uk).*

A report on the Prime Minister’s proposals will be presented to the Spring meeting of the International Monetary Fund.

### We want to hear from you

More than ever before, the Labour Party is committed to listening to and learning from those of religious faith—including those in our churches. We realise that many of you cannot commit to supporting any particular political party. Even so, we are interested to hear what you have to say, and to help you to continue your valuable work across the country.

There are a few things you can do to help us in this work.

- 1. Tell your friends about this newsletter.** We want to be in dialogue with as many people of faith as possible. Encourage others to join our mailing list at [www.labour.org.uk/faith](http://www.labour.org.uk/faith).
- 2. Ask to display this newsletter in your church.** Ask your church leaders if they are willing for this newsletter to be displayed so that others in your church can read about what Labour is doing.
- 3. Tell us how we can help you.** Write to Stephen Timms MP (Vice Chair for Faith Groups), c/o The Labour Party, 39 Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0HA. Alternatively, email [stephen@stephentimms.org.uk](mailto:stephen@stephentimms.org.uk).

To join the Labour Party visit [www.labour.org.uk/join](http://www.labour.org.uk/join) or telephone us on 08705 900 200.