

Churches Update

News from the Labour Party

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At Labour's Conference, Gordon Brown discusses his Christian roots and declares:

“This is my moral compass”

In his first speech to the Labour Party Conference after becoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown discussed the influences that have shaped him into the man he is today. He made particular mention of his roots as the son of a Church of Scotland minister.

Speaking to a packed auditorium in Bournemouth, the Prime Minister recalled his childhood, and the sermons preached by his father “Sunday after Sunday”. “I will never forget these words he left me with: ‘we must be givers as well as getters,’” Gordon explained. “This is my moral compass”. This upbringing has had a lasting influence on Gordon Brown’s politics.

Gordon spoke passionately about his commitment to a society in which every person has the tools with which to achieve their potential: “I want a Britain where there is no longer any ceiling on where your talents and hard work can take you”. And he explained how his father’s sermons had helped him reach this conclusion.

“We all remember that biblical saying: ‘suffer the little children to come unto me.’ No Bible I have ever read says: ‘bring just some of the children.’”

“My father was a minister of the church, and his favourite story was the parable of the talents because he believed—and I do too—that each and every one of us has a talent and every one of us should be able to use that talent.”

In the same way, Gordon has been keen to ensure that all children are given the best possible start in life—whatever their family background. Since 1997, child poverty rates have fallen faster in the UK than in any other European country. But there is more to do. In his speech, Gordon reaffirmed his goal that this generation must finally abolish child poverty in the UK.

The Prime Minister also outlined his enduring commitment to ending international poverty and injustice. Since 1997, Labour has more than doubled



development aid to £5 billion. In his Pre-Budget Report, Chancellor Alistair Darling announced that this will rise even further—to £9 billion by 2010. At the Conference Gordon stated his aim that we should be the first generation to ensure that every child in the world has the right to attend school.

The twenty-first century world must be one in which human beings are valued and their rights respected. To realise this goal, Gordon committed Britain to standing against injustice, declaring: “human rights are universal and no injustice can last forever”.

The Prime Minister also pledged to introduce vital measures to protect the environment. He told the Conference hall: “we must all be stewards of the environment”. Under his leadership, Britain will build new eco-towns with low-carbon homes. We will invest in energy efficiency and new environmental technologies. And we will “become the first country in the world to write into law binding limits on carbon emissions.”

Gordon Brown’s vision of Britain is of a society in which people are included and rights are respected. It is a society in which everyone is equipped to reach their potential and realise their goals. His is a vision which is desperately needed in the world today.

First ever faiths reception at Labour Conference

At this year's Conference, the Labour Party held its first ever reception for Faith Groups. The event was hosted by Harriet Harman MP and Stephen Timms MP, and was attended by around a hundred people, including several MPs and Government ministers.

The event launched a new initiative by the Labour Party to work with people of faith. When Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, he asked Stephen Timms to become the Party's first ever Vice Chair for Faith Groups. Stephen also advises the Government on issues concerning faith communities at the new Government Equalities Office.

Speaking as the reception began, Harriet welcomed the contribution of faith groups in our society and expressed her enthusiasm for Labour's commitment to developing strong links with faith communities. Parmjit Dhanda MP, the Government minister who co-chairs the Faith Communities Consultative Council, also welcomed the Labour initiative.

In his speech, Stephen Timms said, "what we want to say as a party is that, in our view, faith is a very good starting point for politics." He added, "we want people whose starting point is faith to come and work with us, join us, tell us your ideas."

Stephen acknowledged that the Labour Party has sometimes in the past shied away from talking about faith. But he was clear that this would no longer be the case.

A message from Harriet Harman MP



Labour's Chair & Deputy Leader

Throughout our history, the Labour Party has championed a fairer, more equal society in which every person is valued and respected. As I meet people from across the country, I find that there are many who share this vision who are motivated by religious faith.

That is why Gordon has appointed a Vice Chair who is responsible for working with faith groups. Stephen Timms is very well placed to fulfil this role, and I am looking forward to working with him in it.

Gordon has outlined his vision of a Britain "of all the talents", in which everyone has a part to play. Faith groups continue to perform a vital role in many communities, and I want to see this continue.



Parmjit Dhanda MP and Stephen Timms MP, both of whom spoke at the Faith Groups Reception at the Labour Conference

"You are welcome in our party and we respect the commitment which you have made," Stephen stressed. "We are not going to ask you to apologise for your faith, or demand that you justify it – we simply want to listen to what you have to say, to welcome the fact that your thinking starts with faith in God, because we think you can help us develop the policies which will be the right way forward for Britain."

Speaking after the event Stephen added: "This evening's reception demonstrates the lasting influence that faith has within our Party. I am delighted that so many Labour activists—including several MPs—were able to attend and I look forward to working alongside them again in the future".

CSM at Labour's Conference

The Christian Socialist Movement organised a strong programme of fringe events at this year's Conference, on issues from climate change to digital exclusion. A number of Government ministers spoke, including Hilary Benn, Stephen Timms, Jack Straw, Gareth Thomas and Ed Miliband. The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, gave one of the readings at CSM's Conference church service, which attracted a large congregation.

The Chair of CSM, Alun Michael MP, said: "This year CSM was able to put on an excellent programme of events – most of them undertaken jointly with other organisations to the benefit of us and them. They demonstrated that we are serious about tackling complex issues in co-operation with others, and they were all very well attended."

CSM is the Christian organisation affiliated to the Labour Party. See www.thecsm.org.uk.

Faith and politics do mix

A message from Stephen Timms MP, our new Vice Chair for Faith Groups

When Gordon Brown took over as Prime Minister last year, I was delighted that he asked me to be the Party's first ever Vice Chair for Faith Groups. I am looking forward immensely to working with churches and other faith communities across the country.

It is often assumed that faith and politics should never mix. It's easy to see why people come to this conclusion: you only have to look across to the United States to see the possible dangers that arise when faith is too closely aligned to a particular political party. But I believe it is a step too far to argue that faith should have nothing at all to do with politics. In fact, I am convinced that faith is a great starting point for politics.

I started in politics because of my own Christian faith. While at University in Cambridge, I was involved in a Christian outreach project to Newham in East London. What I saw there inspired me to move to the area when I graduated. I still attend the church that was set up as a result of that project and I am now also one of Newham's MPs.

This year in Westminster we have been celebrating

the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. It is no secret that many of those at the centre of that campaign were motivated by their Christian faith.



Today, Christians continue to play a positive role in our society—working alongside many other groups. I often meet people from churches who are involved in essential work, such as youth activities, regeneration projects, and campaigning for a better world.

After the Government launched the *New Deal*, I got to know the work of the diocese of Birmingham. I particularly remember the story of one man. Although he had been convicted of 117 offences of burglary, he was taken on a project to decorate a church complex in Edgbaston. Because that church was willing to give him a chance, I am told that he has since started up a painting business of his own.

I see the churches playing an increasingly important role in our society. Our Labour Government will continue to help churches like that one to continue their important work.

News from Westminster

Since being elected in 1997, Labour has been working hard, both locally and nationally. Here is some of the latest news from Westminster.

Celebrating the Abolition of the Slave Trade

This year saw a number of events marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, during which the shocking issue of contemporary slavery was highlighted. Just as the abolition movement 200 years ago had at its heart the Christian commitment to the equality of all people, churches and Christian charities across the UK have been working hard to ensure that the horror of contemporary slavery is ended. To mark the anniversary, John Reid, then Home Secretary, signed the European Convention on Human Trafficking at a desk once used by Wilberforce.

Super Casinos

In July, Labour MP Andy Reed told Gordon Brown in Parliament that "many in the faith community and elsewhere, like me, still have concerns about super-casinos" and asked the Prime Minister to reconsider the policy. Gordon agreed and stated that he hoped to find a "better way" of promoting regeneration in these deprived areas of the country. Christian groups including Church Action on Poverty and the Evangelical Alliance welcomed the announcement.

Oasis Academies

Oasis UK, a Christian charity, is sponsoring several new Academies, three of which opened in September. They already have permission to open a further three next year. This work has been made possible through Labour's policy to enable sponsors such as business, faith or voluntary groups to help establish schools. Lord Andrew Adonis, a minister at the Department for Children, Schools and Families, said: "We have every confidence in Oasis – it is a fantastic organisation, which I believe can make a real success of these schools."

Deputy Leadership Hustings

Earlier this year, the Labour Party elected Harriet Harman as its new Deputy Leader. The Christian Socialist Movement held a hustings in London, at which all six candidates set out their cases. Speaking on the Christian contribution to the Labour Party, candidate Hazel Blears said: "It is important that our politics has a moral dimension, a strong sense of right and wrong, and a benchmark against which to measure our actions."

Government Minister speaks at Traidcraft AGM

Stephen Timms MP, the Labour Party's new Vice Chair for Faith Groups and the Government Minister for Competitiveness, gave the keynote speech in Durham at the 2007 AGM of Traidcraft plc, a Christian company which has pioneered fair trade in Britain and made it possible for supermarkets to introduce a growing range of fair trade products.

Stephen congratulated Traidcraft on their role in making fair trade products popular. "You can point to changes for the better on a big scale which have happened because of what you have done as supporters of Traidcraft", he told his audience.

According to Traidcraft's annual report, around 80% of the volunteers on whom they depend are from the churches. Commenting on this, Stephen noted: "Today—as perhaps not for a very long time—activism rooted in faith is having a huge, creative and positive impact on our national life".



Siji Jose with her five-year-old son, Abin, in her tea field in Kerala, India. Photo: Shailan Parker/Traidcraft

"Of course", he acknowledged, "not everyone in Britain believes that.... Plenty of people think that faith plus politics guarantees conflict and perhaps violence".

"But in Government we recognise increasingly that faith communities are sustaining families, building cohesion, reaching the disadvantaged, communicating positive values into the heart of communities the length and breadth of Britain. And we need more of that, not less".

As the Government minister responsible for company law at the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, Stephen noted the contribution that Traidcraft Exchange made to the Companies Act 2006.

"It is the first time that 'community', 'environment' and 'supply chain relationships' have been mentioned in UK company law in this way, and Traidcraft has played an important part in getting us there".

Stephen concluded by encouraging Traidcraft to continue their groundbreaking work. "Vision and values will not achieve a revolution," he said. "It requires ideas, people and hard work. That is what you have provided. That is why your work is revolutionary—changing the way business is done and changing it for the better".

Speaking after the event, Stephen said: "People from many different backgrounds—from a variety of faiths and none—continue to play an essential role in the fight against world poverty. As Traidcraft demonstrates, Christians have often been at the forefront of the effort. The Government is keen to encourage this sort of progressive action."

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.
- 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.** Contact Stephen Timms MP, the Party's Vice Chair for Faith Groups by writing to Stephen Timms MP, The Labour Party, 39 Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0HA.

To join the Labour Party visit www.labour.org.uk/join or telephone us on 08705 900 200.