

Churches Update

News from the Labour Party



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Ed Miliband thanks church communities in UK

Labour leader reaffirms commitment to working with churches at Christmas reception

Ed Miliband has urged Christians to “show up and get involved in politics.” His comments came at a Christmas reception hosted by *Christians on the Left* at the Labour Party’s Head Office in London. Ed was joined at the reception by the Party’s General Secretary, Iain McNicol, as well as many senior Labour MPs.

Speaking about the general election in 2015, Ed said: “*The future of the UK will be determined by those who show up.*” He added, “...if we in this room get involved, we can create a movement which will change this country for the better.”

There were also speeches from Patrick Regan, the founder and CEO of urban youth work charity XLP; Lisa Pearce from the Christian anti-persecution charity, *Open Doors*; and Chis Mould, the Chair of the *Trussell Trust* which runs a number of foodbanks in the UK. Each demonstrated how their personal faith drove much of their work in reaching out to those in need both at home and abroad.

Speaking afterwards, Ed said: “Over the last four years this Government’s policies have been hurting the most



vulnerable. Going around the country, I’ve seen the vital work Christian communities are doing. Their efforts truly inspirational and I wanted to come this evening to thank everyone who is involved in this important work.”

Andy Flannagan, Director of Christians on the Left, said: “As we approach the General Election it is vital that political parties recognise the work being done by the churches. Our Christmas reception was a great opportunity for church leaders to hear how the Labour Party values their work. Ed showed that he gets it.”

A message from Ed Miliband

As we approach Christmas, I want to thank the thousands of Christians all over the country who work with their churches, and other organisations, in making their communities a better place.

You show an admirable dedication in serving your local areas—running homeless shelters, helping out as street pastors or organising youth groups to name but a few examples. Your compassion to your neighbours, whatever their circumstance and background, is admirable. You show that everyone should have a stake in our society.

The Labour Party has worked closely with churches in recent years. It is something I want to see us build on in the future as I believe the Christian community is a natural ally in the fight for justice. Look, for example at

how we worked together on projects such as Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History, or perhaps more recently in supporting foodbanks.



With the general election in May, is an important year for our country. I would urge churches to engage with all politicians and get involved, whether it be discussing politics, encouraging voter registration or hosting election hustings.

But, before then, I would like to wish you and your families a happy and peaceful Christmas, and all the best for 2015.

“No Weather Vane, He”

Earlier this year, the Labour MP, Jim Dobbin, died whilst on a visit to Poland. Jim had served as the MP for the constituency of Heywood and Middleton in Greater Manchester since 1997. Here, Rob Carr, who worked as his researcher for over 2 years, writes a tribute to Jim. Rob is now the communications manager for *Christians on the Left*.

Some people wear their hearts on their sleeves. Jim Dobbin didn't. He kept his on his walls.

Walk into his office, as I did almost every day, and you would see photographs of his family (mostly his grandchildren), a poster of St Thomas More, a pen and ink drawing of St Jerome (actually it was Jesus when I drew it but a priest visiting from the Vatican declared it was a fantastic likeness for St Jerome and so it became), the minutes of the first ever Labour Party meeting, and a photograph of the 1982 Celtic squad with his cousin in the side.

Family, faith, politics and football. That is where his heart was. The order changed depending on whether he was in the terraces of Celtic park or elsewhere. But those were his passions.

Jim cared deeply about people and worked hard and constantly for the people of Heywood and Middleton, and also the people he met around the country, and indeed the world, who he thought needed a voice. He was an advocate for people with involuntary addiction to tranquilizers and campaigned on the topic of immunization in some of the poorest parts of the world.

As well as his work for the people of his constituency, Jim served on the Transport Select Committee, and chaired the All-Party Parliamentary Pro-Life Group. He was a Labour Party member of the British delegation to the Council of Europe where he used his 30 plus year career as an immunologist to work on health issues.

Above all these things, though, Jim was a gentleman and a thoroughly decent human being. Before I worked for him, he fed me when I was hungry, he made sure I got home to my family one Christmas, and he always asked after my welfare. If only all Members of Parliament were such good employers.

I did not always agree with everything Jim stood for, but he knew that and liked to debate ideas and principles with me and his other staff. He was not close minded and often took on board points that I made. But he was a principled man and stood by those principles even when he knew they would not be popular. And those he disagreed with would never have seen him be anything



other than polite and forthcoming with them.

Tony Benn once said there are two types of politician: the signpost and the weathervane. The signpost would point in one direction no matter what. The weathervane would spin one hundred and eighty degrees depending on which way the wind was blowing on any particular day. Jim was definitely a signpost politician.

Before his death, I was lucky enough to go and spend a weekend up in his constituency. A working trip, but a pleasure nonetheless. The sense of pride as he drove me around showing me the various places where he had made a difference. A footpath here, a lamppost there, a new road crossing and so on. There were loads of them of course. A quick spin around the constituency to help me orientate myself lasted over five hours and was filled with stories of people he had helped and differences he has made. It was a real joy to spend that time with him. Time I'll now treasure.

As a knight of the Roman Catholic church, I don't think he'd be offended that, every time I saw him, he made me think of Micah 6:8 – *“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”*

I have lost not only an employer, but a good friend and mentor. The people of Heywood and Middleton have lost a tenacious, principled and caring Member of Parliament. His family have lost a loving husband, father and grandfather. A great loss to the Labour movement.

Rest in Peace, Jim.

This article has been reproduced and adapted for *Churches Update* from *LabourList.org*. To view the original article, visit here: <http://labourlist.org/2014/09/no-weather-vane-he/>

News in brief

Labour: Government is failing Syrian refugees

Labour have accused ministers of a "shameful" failure to help the most vulnerable refugees from the Syrian civil war. Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has written to her Home Secretary urging her to take steps to make sure the UK takes in more of those most at risk. Earlier this year the Government launched the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, and has taken only 100 people since the beginning of 2014.

Abortion (Sex Selection) Bill

Labour MPs have helped back the Abortion (Sex Selection) Bill which seeks to clarify the law on sex-selective abortion. Labour's Virendra Sharma told the BBC that the practice was not cultural or religious, and called for a legal framework to ban it. He said: "*What is most needed is the woman who is carrying the child needs to be empowered that she gets the support from society and from the system that if she is put under pressure, she can take the legal remedy against those people who are putting her under pressure.*"

Labour calls for more action on FOBTs

Clive Efford MP, Labour's Shadow Minister for Sport, has criticised the government for renegeing on a promise to publish information on how levels of stakes and prizes on Fixed odds Betting Terminals (FOBTs) impact on problem gamblers. Urging the government to take action more quickly, especially in areas of deprivation, Clive said: "*More research is required if we are to understand the patterns of behaviour of people who have gambling problems.*"

Aid Bill moves to the House of Lords

Labour has supported a Private Member's Bill which, if made law, would ensure the UK spends 0.7 per cent of its national income on aid. The bill overcame opposition in the House of Commons from Conservative backbenchers. Mary Creagh, Labour's Shadow International Development Secretary, said Britain's aid spending was not only "*morally right*", but in Britain's national interest. She added: "*Few votes in this place can with certainty be said to save millions of lives. This one will.*"

A covenant in good faith

A message from Stephen Timms MP, Labour's Faith Envoy

Earlier this month I was in Birmingham to mark the adoption—jointly by the City Council and faith leaders—of the 'Faith Covenant' drawn up by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society which I chair.

Like all local authorities, Birmingham City Council—the biggest local council in Europe—faces an immense financial challenge over the next few years. It believes that working with churches and other faith groups could be one way to maintain vital services in the City.

The APPG was set up three years ago to support the work of faith-based organisations in their communities. The organisations often report tensions with their local council. Council officers worry about the risk of public funds being used to try and convert people; or that services will be targeted only at members of the faith group. Good opportunities for community service are being missed as a result.

The 'Faith Covenant'—set out on the website of the APPG, www.faithandsociety.org—contains principles for faith groups to sign up to, such as "*serving equally all local residents seeking to access the public services they offer*", and for councils to sign up to, such as "*sharing training and learning opportunities between faith communities and the*

local authority." The hope is that the covenant will help build trust and promote joint working.

Birmingham is the first city to sign the covenant. I joined Cllr James McKay, Birmingham's Cabinet Member for Social Cohesion, Equalities and Community Safety, Rt Rev David Urquhart, the Bishop of Birmingham, and other faith leaders for the launch in the city's iconic central library.

Members of the APPG will watch progress in Birmingham with great interest. Other local authorities are now looking to follow Birmingham's lead.



With Councillors and leaders of faith communities in Birmingham

Labour welcomes debate on UK foodbanks

Archbishop is right to raise his concerns about food poverty in UK, says Faith Envoy

Ed Miliband has welcomed an intervention by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, asking the government to do more to prevent families in the UK going hungry.

Writing for the *Mail on Sunday*, the Archbishop said that hunger “stalked large parts” of the country. He also backed a parliamentary report, which aims to end hunger in the UK by 2020. The report, *Feeding Britain*, is the work of an All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty, led by the Labour MP Frank Field and the Bishop of Truro, Tim Thornton.

The report found that an unknown number of children are going to school unfed “...because their parents could not, or would not, wake up to make them breakfast or bring them to the school breakfast club.” It also found the benefit sanctions and delays are leaving people without the money to buy food.

The inquiry also found that, since the establishment of the Trussell Trust network in 2004, numbers of emergency food assistance providers have grown to at least 1,500, including 800 food banks - around half of them operated by the trust. Citing evidence from the trust that its 420 food banks provided help to 913,138 people in 2013/14—up from 128,697 in 2011/12—the report said it was “...clear that demand for emergency food assistance is increasing, and sometimes increasing dramatically.”

It continued “Although practically every respondent to this inquiry has asserted that the food bank movement should not form a new version of a residual or Poor Law kind of welfare state, it became clear from our evidence that food banks are here to stay—for more



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than the immediate future.”

Speaking at the launch of the report—and the day after his article in the *Mail on Sunday*—the Archbishop, said the scale of food poverty in Britain is “shocking”.

Stephen Timms MP, Labour’s Faith Envoy welcome the Archbishop’s intervention, saying: “*The Archbishop is right to raise his concerns on the issue of food poverty in Britain. He speaks on behalf of thousands of churchgoers across the country who week-in, week-out volunteer at foodbanks. When the leader of such a well-placed organisation expresses concern about the risks to families from government policies, the government needs to listen.*”

Earlier this year 43 Christian leaders, including 27 Anglican bishops, signed a letter urging David Cameron to ensure people get enough to eat, saying “*cutbacks and failures*” in the benefits system were driving people to food banks.

We want to hear from you

More than ever before, the Labour Party is committed to listening to and learning from the churches. We realise that many will not support a particular political party. We are nevertheless keen to hear what you have to say. Labour recognises the immense contribution of the churches in communities 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.** Write to Stephen Timms MP (Faith Envoy), c/o The Labour Party, 1 Brewers Green, London, SW1H 0RH. Alternatively, email stephen@stephentimms.org.uk.

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