

Churches Update

News from the Labour Party



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Faith in the Neighbourhood

The Labour Party believes that Britain works best when power is in the hands of local people. We want to see community groups and organisations given the support and power they need to serve their communities well. Central to this vision is a positive role for churches and other faith-based initiatives.

The Government's latest commitments are outlined in two documents published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in July 2008. The first, "Communities in Control", provides a framework for enabling local people to play an active role in their communities. The second, entitled "Face to Face and Side by Side", considers the specific contribution of faith groups.

Writing in the foreword of "Face to Face", the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, commented: *"For many, faith is not passive, but active. The values of care for the vulnerable, and responsibility towards others, are lived out through practical acts of social concern. When there are problems in a neighbourhood—whether it is drugs, crime, violence or pollution—faith communities are often the first on the scene."*

"People of faith make a huge contribution to our society: to the economy, arts and culture, politics. And I believe faith has the potential to be an immense force for good in all our communities."

-Hazel Blears

One of the measures is a "Communitybuilders" fund worth £70 million, which has been introduced to support the work of community organisations. This is alongside the Grassroots Grants programme, which will disperse £80 million in small grants between 2008 and 2011. We hope that many church-based initiatives will be among those to receive support.

Faith groups have sometimes found that local authorities and agencies have been reluctant to commission their services. We are committed to removing any barriers to involvement so that churches



and other faith groups can play a full role in serving local communities. We will therefore build on the example of the Faithworks Charter, an existing set of fifteen principles which many Christian organisations have already signed up to.

For a vibrant local community, a wide range of local people must play their part. For this reason we have introduced new measures to make it easier for people to stand for local elections or to take on other local responsibilities. We would be delighted if church members were among those able to serve in this way.

Finally, the Government has announced new funding worth £7.5 million, which will support local faith forums and provide a new Faiths in Action fund. The money will support the work of faith groups in their communities, helping them to foster active and trusting relationships and encouraging opportunities for faith-based dialogue and social action.

Hazel wrote: *"I am proud to live in a society where people of faith, and those of none, can come together as equals. I do not believe that government should be afraid of working with faith based organisations."*

The Labour Government is deeply committed to seeing faith continue to play a central role in British society. For information about the funding opportunities available, see www.cdf.org.uk.

Tough action to combat climate change

In October 2008, Gordon Brown announced the creation of the Department for Energy and Climate Change, a new government department led by Ed Miliband. One of Ed's first actions was to strengthen the Government's Climate Change Bill and to ensure its passage through Parliament.

The legislation is a world first, making the UK the first country in the world to have a legally binding long term framework for cutting greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change. Upon taking office, Ed announced that the Government would strengthen Britain's target to an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050—up from 60%.

The bill will set up a new independent Committee on Climate Change and will require the Government to carry out regular assessments of the risks of climate change. A new system of Carbon Budgets will also be introduced, requiring all new Government policies to be examined for their impact on climate change. The first "low carbon Britain" plan, setting out how we will meet our targets, will be published in spring 2009 alongside the Budget.

Some Christian organisations have welcomed the news. Vikki Mills, of the Catholic development charity CAFOD, said: "People living in poverty will be amongst those most affected by climate change. By passing

A message from Ed Miliband Labour's Climate Change Secretary



The challenge of climate change is one of the most serious that the world faces in the twenty-first century. Left unchecked, we will all feel the negative effects of it in the years to come, but the impact will be particularly devastating for the world's poorest people.

That is why we in the Labour Party are so serious about tackling it, and why I will ensure we take the necessary action. I am very grateful for the support of millions from our churches who have been tireless in their vision of, and campaigning for, a better world.

this more ambitious Bill, the UK is showing real international leadership in ensuring that climate change doesn't cause a financial and humanitarian crisis on an unprecedented scale."

Paul Cook, of Christian charity Tearfund, said: "We are pleased the government has announced a target that matches the science and gives the UK integrity on the international stage. This signals justice for people in the poorest countries who contribute least to carbon emissions, but are bearing the brunt of climate change."

Stewards of the environment

A message from Stephen Timms MP, Labour's Vice Chair for Faith Groups

I am very proud to be a member of the government that has led the way in combating global climate change. If we are to see lasting progress, countries around the world will need to follow our lead.

Some Christians have—I think rightly—been vocal in their support for decisive action on climate change. Others may have wondered what all of the fuss is about: *If the world is coming to an end, what is the point of trying to save it?*

I think there are very good reasons for Christians to care about the environment. Our response to climate change is very definitely a "moral issue".

First, we should look "back" and remember that God created the world and cares about it. According to the Genesis account of creation, once God had brought the world into being He declared that it was "good". The Psalms tell us that creation reflects God's character and declares His praise. According

to the apostle Paul, God continues to work to keep creation together. We should care about this world because God does.



Second, we should look to our "present" relationship to creation. In Genesis God gives humanity responsibility for taking care of it. And, as people called to love our neighbour, we should remember that our attitude towards the earth has serious implications for others—especially for the poorest.

Third, we should look "forward" to God's final plan for creation. The Bible teaches that ultimately God will make "all things new" and that creation will be "liberated". Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham, writes: "the gospel of Jesus Christ announces that what God did for Jesus at Easter he will do, not only for all those who are 'in Christ', but for the entire cosmos". As Christians we should point to this hope through our actions and attitude towards the world.

Standing with churches for global justice

Anglican bishops from across the world were in London in July to take part in the Lambeth Conference. On 24 July many of them marched through the streets of London to demand that the world's leaders do more to tackle global poverty. They were addressed by the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown.

Gordon was handed a letter by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, urging the world's leaders to keep to the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs are a set of eight promises made by UN member states in 2000 to promote development.

"The consistent global leadership of the UK government towards meeting these targets is particularly welcome", wrote the Archbishop. "But Christian pastors and other faith leaders cannot stand by while promises are not kept, when nations are tempted by the easier path of preserving their own wealth at the cost of other people's poverty."

Speaking to the crowds, Gordon Brown welcomed the march as *"one of the greatest public demonstrations of faith that this great city has ever seen"*. He praised the commitment of Christians and other people of faith for their role in campaigns such as Make Poverty History,



which have already transformed the lives of millions. He said: *"it is because of your efforts in Make Poverty History that there are two million people who are receiving treatment for Aids today, where otherwise they would not be alive"*.

The Prime Minister commented: *"I believe you have marched because whenever you see suffering you want to heal it, whenever you see injustice you want to rectify, whenever you see poverty you want to bring it to an end. And has that not been the message of the churches and faith groups throughout the ages?"*

News in brief

Andy Flanagan appointed CSM Director

The Christian Socialist Movement has appointed Andy Flanagan as its new Director. Andy, who takes his new post in January, recently stood for election to his local council as a Labour candidate. However, he is best known for his work as a singer-songwriter and worship leader, which has seen him perform to packed-out venues at Spring Harvest, Greenbelt and New Wine.



Prime Minister speaks at New York faith meeting

On 13 November 2008, Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke at a Faith Conference in New York, held under the auspices of the United Nations. Gordon praised the role faith has played in social movements, such as the abolitionist movement which ended slavery, the US civil rights movement, and today's efforts to combat global poverty. He said: *"We can become the first generation to consign extreme poverty to the history books for all time. We can become the first generation to do so by demonstrating by our actions what this conference has been all about today. That the greatest of social changes are built from the strongest of ethical foundations"*.

Labour Conference 2008

At this year's conference, the Labour Party hosted its second annual faith groups reception. Speakers included Stephen Timms MP, Labour's Vice Chair for Faith Groups, and Hazel Blears MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. Hazel thanked churches and other faith groups for their positive contribution to British life and promised that the Labour government would continue to support them in their work.

The Christian Socialist Movement also organised a number of events at the conference. This year's Conference Church Service was attended by a number of senior party figures including Gordon and Sarah Brown. CSM also hosted a debate with the British Humanist Association entitled *"What has the church ever done for us?"*, at which John Battle MP, Matthew Frost (Tearfund) and Andrew Copson (BHA) explored the role of faith in society today. CSM's Director, Andrew Bradstock, commented: *"We heard powerful stories about how people of faith are changing the world, but were also reminded we are not the only ones, and that religion has not always been a force for good. We need more opportunities for open, constructive dialogue like this."*

Christianity and Labour politics

by **Alun Michael MP, Chair of the Christian Socialist Movement**

The Christian Socialist Movement is living through interesting times. Our Director, Andrew Bradstock, is leaving us to head up a new project on faith and society in New Zealand and will be succeeded by Andy Flannagan. CSM's membership is rising, particularly amongst young people, and Andy is just the person to continue our work.

A key part of Andy's role will be to reach out to every Christian tradition to make it clear that the CSM's message is relevant to all Christians. It is an old message – but it is a fresh and exciting message too. It is a message of hope and passion for a world that seems to take a jaundiced view of politics.

CSM was founded in 1960 by Donald Soper, among others. Soper was also president of the League Against Cruel Sports for over 30 years – living proof of the close links between politics and religion. The values of justice, tolerance and a desire to help others are values that are common to the Labour Party and to Christianity, and these are the values that drive us.

I am not simply a Labour MP; I am a Labour and Cooperative MP. The idea of cooperation is something that informs my politics and my faith. Shortly before I took over as Chair of the CSM our statement of values was reviewed. It had stood the test of time and kept its relevance. One of the key changes was to add 'cooperation' as a value in its own right. I believe that it makes sense.

Getting people to work together, as a team, comes naturally to few people and the media extol tough, aggressive leaders. Cooperation gets things done, from shops to schools and banking and sports clubs



and foundation hospitals the cooperative model is increasingly a part of our everyday lives, and it is a model designed with users in mind.

As we enter a new phase in the life of CSM, there is a place in our Movement for people of all Christian traditions. We want to cooperate with all Christians who want to work for social justice. And we want to reach out to people in all the major religions which are now a part of British Society whose faith-based values lead them to share our passion for social justice.

That is why I have accepted the invitation from Stephen Timms MP to chair the Labour Party's taskforce on interfaith action for social justice. Andy Flannagan and I will drive this forward – demonstrating faith in politics of the 21st century and showing the relevance of our own faith within the Labour Party. Do join us on the journey!

For more information see www.thecsm.org.uk.

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.** 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.

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