

Churches Update

News from the Labour Party



w: labour.org.uk/faith Conference 2010 Edition

Churches join leadership debate

Hundreds attend hustings hosted by the Christian Socialist Movement

Christians from across the denominations joined Labour's leadership debate in July. The hustings was organised by the Christian Socialist Movement, which is affiliated to the Labour Party. The five candidates were quizzed on a wide range of issues: the economy; education; the relationship between Church and State. Held in Westminster Central Hall, the event was attended by more than 300 people.

All five candidates acknowledged the contribution of religious faith to the Labour Party, rejecting the claim that the party does not "do God."

Speaking on how his own faith shapes his politics, Andy Burnham said: "*The basic tenets of the Labour Party and socialism are one and the same with those of Christianity*". He told the audience that, as Health Secretary, he sometimes found himself taking positions that other Christians disagreed with. He argued that Labour and the Churches can engage in a more constructive dialogue in future.

"We could do worse, as we go forward as a Labour movement, than return to those values of faith, community and family."

Diane Abbott

something about it." He pointed out that the Christian Socialist tradition teaches us about society. He later challenged those within the Labour Party to reclaim the language of "love, compassion [and] caring."

David Miliband argued that Labour needs "real understanding" of the word "community". The former Foreign Secretary spoke of his initiative to channel some of his campaign funds into retraining 1,000 Labour supporters as community organisers. He told the audience: "Community is the way in which we

The former Environment Secretary, Ed Miliband, said that, although not a Christian, he believes in a "simple faith" that revolves around the principle that "...if you saw an injustice then you had to do



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come together to have a countervailing power against the abuse of power by corporate interests and the state."

The importance of strong political values was highlighted by Ed Balls, Shadow Children's Secretary. He highlighted the success of faith-based campaigns such as Jubilee 2000 in setting a popular agenda for fairness and justice. He also set out his support for faith schools.

Diane Abbott spoke of her faithful church-going grandmother from Jamaica who influenced her early life and, at a later point, her politics. She said: "We could do worse, as we go forward as a Labour movement, than return to those values of faith, community and family."

Andy Flanagan, Director of CSM said: "The hustings really tested the candidates' ability to win people over to Labour. The audience contained people who are involved in their local church communities; just those who the leadership candidates say they want Labour to reach out to."

The event was recorded by Premier Christian Radio, and clips from it were broadcast on its news programmes. The full recording can be accessed at www.premier.org.uk.

Christians help Labour to hold marginal seat

Gavin Shuker became Labour MP for Luton South last May in a race that attracted huge media attention. *“The media attention was unreal”,* he recalls. *“We had TV crews from Germany, France, America and Japan, to name a few”.* Gavin won the seat—in the area where he grew up—with a majority of 2,329, beating a strong Conservative candidate and the former TV presenter and independent candidate Esther Rantzen.

Gavin was a full time church leader in Luton. He decided to seek the Labour nomination after the de-selection of the incumbent MP: *“I felt that, in all honesty, I couldn’t stand up on a Sunday night and preach to my church that we should engage with society at every level whilst letting this ball fly past. Politics to me has always been more than just sending an email or a postcard. People of faith are uniquely equipped to engage and this was an opportunity to jump in and stand for up something that I believe in.”*

Four months later, Gavin was selected and a five month campaign began. Citing the support of local churches, he said: *“Obviously not everyone agreed with my politics, but the reaction of many within my local church and other Christian communities in and around Luton spurred me on. Many came out to knock on doors, deliver flyers and chat to voters. Others provided equally valuable support by just being available to talk.”*

Gavin is particularly grateful to volunteers who came from across the country to help him campaign including many from the Co-operative Party and the Christian Socialist Movement. *“To know there were other people of faith in the Labour Party from other parts of the country not only wanting me to succeed, but also willing to come and help me on the doorstep was as incredible as it was humbling. Many of them were campaigning in an election for the first time.”* Andy Flannagan, Director of the Christian Socialist



Movement, said: *“The result was an incredible encouragement to CSM members, who have invested time, support and prayer in Gavin’s campaign. We hope it will encourage many others to see what is possible when Christians engage with rather than escape the world of politics.”*

Gavin is keen to encourage more Christians to get involved in politics. *“It may not necessarily mean everyone has to become an MP, but each person has their own story to tell. As Christians we must have a sense of commitment, a desire to draw different communities together bound together by a passion for justice. It’s too easy to stand at the sidelines—sometimes you just have to get yourself in the game.”*

Gavin is keen to seek opportunities for Christians to engage with the Labour Party, through using campaigning tools such as the Churches Update newsletters: *“Churches Update allows people to see that faith and politics are not mutually exclusive. Without people of faith, the effectiveness of our politics is much the poorer.”*



Hugh Bayley MP

“Churches Update is an extremely useful publication. It enabled me to start dialogue with many Christians in my constituency who share my desire to see a more just society.”

Hazel Blears MP

“Many people in churches and faith groups make a massive contribution to improving our communities. If we in Labour want to make a real difference by working together, Churches Update can help us do it.”



To download previous editions of Churches Update and to receive future editions by email, visit www.labour.org.uk/faiths. To enquire about obtaining printed copies of future editions to distribute in your constituency, email stephen@stephentimms.org.uk.

Labour needs the churches—and they us

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



The pope's visit to the UK—attracting large, multi-racial crowds—has highlighted the continuing vibrancy of faith in Britain. Latest statistics indicate that the decades long decline in church attendance has halted. And, in the 2001 census, over 70% of respondents identified with the Christian faith.

People sometimes argue you shouldn't mix faith and politics—that to do so is asking for trouble. I don't agree. My view is the opposite—that faith is a great starting point for politics. Because faith inspires, on a large scale, exactly the values we need to make politics work: responsibility, solidarity, patience, compassion, truthfulness, tolerance.

I sometimes hear that the Labour Party can't work with the churches. After all, the Church of England used to be known as the Conservative Party at prayer! Again I disagree. It was the moral imagination and energy of the churches—in the Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History campaigns—which supported Labour's successful renewal of Britain's international aid. The churches are our

natural allies as we work for a fairer and more just world.

Labour MPs often report that local churches are their best partners as they work to improve their local communities—working with young people, tackling over-indebtedness, helping jobless people into work. The Conservative-led government will step up its programme of ideologically-driven cuts to public services. Britain's vast network of churches will be on the front line, seeing the effects in local communities. They will demand better, and we must give them a political voice.

It is three years now since Gordon Brown appointed me Labour's first Vice Chair for Faith Groups. Churches Update has been one of our most successful initiatives. The leader of one of the main UK denominations wrote to me recently to let me know how much he and his colleagues valued it. We want to continue to build our links with Britain's churches in the years ahead.

Conference 2010 diary

Sunday 26 September

► **The Conference Sunday Church Service**

CSM and Christian Aid, 10:30am
Manchester Cathedral, M3 1SX

► **CSM 50th Anniversary Reception**

CSM, 11:30am
Manchester Cathedral, M3 1SX

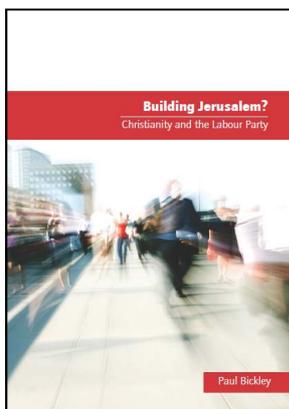
► **Those who show up!**

CSM, 6:00pm
Inspiration and training for Christians exploring political engagement
Andy Flannagan, Gavin Shuker MP, Paul Goggins MP
King's Church, Sidney Street, M1 7HB

Monday 27 September

► **The Labour Party and Christianity: a marriage made in heaven?**

CSM, 1:00pm
Launch of *Building Jerusalem: Christianity and the Labour Party*
Paul Bickley (author), David Lammy MP, Maurice Glasman (London Citizens), Jim Dobbin MP
Main Hall, Friends' Meeting House, 16 Mount Street, M2 5NS



Tuesday 28 September

► **Nowhere to call home: how can we address the crisis in affordable housing?**

CSM, Free Church Leaders, Housing Justice, 8:00am
Prayer breakfast
Alun Michael MP, Susan Elan Jones MP
Main Hall, Friends' Meeting House, 16 Mount Street, M2 5NS

► **Labour neighbours: reshaping what it is to be local and Labour**

CSM, Co-operative Party, LabourValues, 7:30pm
Jon Cruddas MP, Ed Miliband MP, Douglas Alexander MP, Maurice Glasman (London Citizens), Michael Stephenson (Co-operative Party)
Main Hall, Friends' Meeting House, 16 Mount Street, M2 5NS

Wednesday 29 September

► **Gambling with someone else's money**

CSM, 1:00pm
Rachel Reeves MP, Andrew Gwynne MP, Stephen Beer (CSM)
Main Hall, Friends' Meeting House, 16 Mount Street, M2 5NS

Working with local community groups

Stella Creasy was elected MP for Walthamstow in May. She works closely with community groups—including local churches—worried about the effect locally of cuts announced by the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition.

Speaking about their work, Stella said: *“Our aim is to develop a team of people determined to find practical ways of tackling personal debt and poverty in our community.”*

“Whilst this project is being led by the local Labour Party, we have actively encouraged the inclusion and involvement of anyone who shares our progressive concern to prevent local families getting into debt. We’ve been helped by support from the Movement for Change to train up local activists and then together decide what kind of action to take.”

Stella is particularly keen to continue the relationships she has built with local churches in Walthamstow: *“We have sought input a wide range of groups and organisations. This has included Christians Against Poverty, the Consumer Credit Counselling Service, R3 the insolvency practitioners agency, the local credit union and Citizens Advice Bureau.”*

The work has centred on trying to identify practical opportunities to identify and tackle the root causes of poverty, on a local level: *“Our discussions have covered a wide range of ideas, from protesting against high street loan sharks to ensuring more people have free access to financial and insolvency advice. We have also considered how we can support those who advocate for legislation on ending unscrupulous banking practices.”*



Stella and the volunteers working on this project have valued the input of these organisations to their work and urge other MPs and CLPs to do the same: *“The local community support, especially from faith groups, has been invaluable and helped us come up with all sorts of ideas for what to do.”*

“Whilst our work is at an early stage we have already held a community walk to identify where high cost credit is offered in our community and are now planning an event to promote financial advice services and the credit union. Others in the group are also developing financial literacy training which we will be offering free to schools and community groups including local faith congregations.”

To find out more about Stella’s work in Walthamstow contact her by email at stella@workingforwalthamstow.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.