

Churches Update

News from the Labour Party

w: labour.org.uk/faith Issue 10, 2010



Standing up for fairness

Labour pledges to work with Britain's churches in the face of massive spending cuts

Labour's Shadow Chancellor, Alan Johnson, has pledged to work with churches who have concerns about the impact on the poorest of massive Government spending cuts.

Chancellor George Osborne unveiled wide-ranging public service cuts in October. The measures extended earlier cuts that were announced in Osborne's June Budget. Under the Government's plans, Britain's welfare budget will be particularly hard hit, with £18 billion of cuts per year by 2014-15.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies, a respected think tank, has already described the impact of the cuts as "regressive", as the poorest will be hit hardest. Alan Johnson added: *"The Treasury's own figures show the poorest in society will pay more to reduce the deficit than almost anyone else. This is a reckless gamble with people's livelihoods and the case for it is unravelling fast."*

"The Labour Party shares many of the churches' concerns and will work with them to stand up for those who need our help"

John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, echoed Mr Johnson's concerns. He said: *"To cut investment to vital public services, and to withdraw investment from communities, is madness. You do not escape an economic downturn by cutting investment and by squashing aspirations."*

In an interview for BBC West Midlands, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, also raised his concerns. When asked about the Government's intention to reduce Housing Benefit payments, Williams said: *"My worry there is that people's housing is part of their sense of stability, part of a sense of having a secure future, and I'm also a bit worried about the way in which this could lead to a kind of social zoning: middle class areas get more middle class and other people are pushed out onto the edge, so those are concerns I'd like to see addressed."*



Other church leaders have criticised figures in the CSR which they claim exaggerate the cost to the taxpayer of welfare fraud. Graham Sparkes of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, said: *"There is already deep concern that the severe reductions in welfare provision will cause immense hardship to the most vulnerable. This misuse of figures to exaggerate the scale of benefit fraud only adds to the sense of injustice."*

Simon Loveitt, from the United Reformed Church, added: *"The coalition government is very keen to talk about fairness and the false notion that 'we are all in this together', but the Chancellor's exaggeration of fraud and last week's Comprehensive Spending Review confirm the grim reality that it is those who are most vulnerable who will pay the price for that which is so clearly not their fault."*

Mr Johnson welcomed the intervention of church leaders. He said the Labour Party would continue to support churches in the years ahead: *"Churches will undoubtedly provide extremely significant support to those in need in the year ahead. We have heard church leaders say that they are concerned over the fact that they will be made to 'fill in the gaps' as the Government attempts to pass the buck as their cuts take effect. The Labour Party shares many of the churches' concerns and will work with them to stand up for those who need our help."*

Andy Burnham speaks to Christians in Manchester

Labour's Shadow Education Secretary, Andy Burnham MP, has told Christians in the North West that the Labour Party must continue to work with faith communities. His comments came as he spoke to the new Manchester Branch of the Christian Socialist Movement.

During the evening, Andy, who is the MP for Leigh, told the audience how his personal faith had helped both inspire and shape his politics. The discussion was led by former North West MEP, Terry Wynn.

Andy, who stood to be Labour leader earlier this year, spoke warmly of the support he had received from fellow Catholics around the country during the leadership campaign – with many of them sending him Mass cards. He also highlighted a number of occasions where his Christian faith had helped him through his political career.

Speaking to Churches Update, Andy said: *"Christians and the Labour Party share a great common agenda in trying to deliver social justice. It is important that*



against the background of cuts and looming unemployment that we continue to work together in spreading Labour's message of justice, equality and fairness for all."

For more information about the new CSM branch in Manchester, please email manchester@thecsm.org.uk.

Churches and welfare-to-work

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

After Ed Miliband was elected Party Leader, he appointed me Shadow Employment Minister. I am very pleased to have the brief. My first ministerial appointment, in 1998, was at the Department for Social Security.

Ensuring sufficient employment should be one of the highest priorities of Government. Of course, increasing employment boosts economic growth and reduces welfare spending. But, more than that, it makes a huge difference to individuals. My most inspiring experiences as a politician have been seeing people—perhaps out of work for years, often depressed—whose lives have been transformed because someone took the trouble to help them back into work.

Employment is a moral issue. The Bible pictures God as a "worker", and the theologian John Stott has said that *"our potential for work is an essential part of our God-likeness"*. The Churches' Report *"Unemployment and the Future of Work"*, published just before the 1997 election, set out the compelling moral argument that it is wrong, in a society as prosperous as ours, for large numbers of people to be deprived for long periods of the means to earn a living. They were right, and Labour's New Deal was introduced in response.

The new Government will commission private and third sector organisations to deliver welfare-to-work services through the Work Programme. It contains some good ideas, drawn from the New Deal. We will scrutinise details of the Work Programme as they emerge. The biggest problem will be availability of jobs. Spending cuts will cost many thousands their jobs. Many are sceptical at the Government's claim that the private sector will create more than enough jobs to fill the gap.

I recently met with representatives of the Salvation Army, which hopes to participate in the Work Programme. The Army is one of the biggest welfare-to-work providers in Australia, alongside Mission Australia. As employment minister I saw great welfare-to-work initiatives being undertaken by church-based groups. For example, in London: City Gateway in East London, Spear in Hammersmith and Pecan in Peckham.

I hope that churches and other groups will be able to contribute fully to the Work Programme. We want to scrutinise the Government's programmes closely. If your church is involved in helping people into work, I would be pleased to hear about your experiences.



Ed Miliband encourages churches to play their part

Christians in the Labour Party have welcomed the election of Ed Miliband as its new leader at the annual Party Conference in Manchester in September this year.

One of Ed's first engagements after securing his victory was to attend a reception celebrating 50 years of the Christian Socialist Movement. The event was held at Manchester Cathedral. Ed was joined by the Archbishop of Southwark, Most Reverend Peter Smith, and The Dean of Manchester Cathedral, The Very Revd Rogers Govender.

Speaking at the reception, Ed said that CSM was at the forefront of Labour's renewal. In particular, he highlighted the organisation's Labour Neighbours project which was officially launched at the Party Conference. Ed said afterwards: *"I want to encourage church leaders to play a greater role in the Labour Party. In Government, we looked to support faith groups and it is vital that we continue to work with them in Opposition. Against the background of cuts, the Labour Party and churches must speak up for the vulnerable."*

A breakdown of the leadership election results showed



that CSM members voted for Ed on the first preference round of voting.

Speaking about the election of Ed as leader, CSM Director Andy Flannagan said: *"We're really excited at being part of the work of renewing the Labour Party and the signs from the new leader are very positive. We're looking for more people to join CSM and join us on the journey."*

To find out more information about CSM, log on to: www.thecsm.org.uk

News in brief

Labour Neighbours

Labour MPs, Douglas Alexander and Jon Cruddas attended the launch of Labour Neighbours at this year's Party Conference in Manchester. Labour Neighbours seeks to develop a new gateway for Labour activism through serving and empowering local communities. Ian Geary said: *"Labour Neighbours is looking to revive Labour's tradition of 'service', providing a gateway from community activism into political campaigning."* The launch was one of many events hosted by CSM at Conference, including the annual Church Service.

Labour's reaction to the G20 Summit

World leaders gathered in Seoul in November. Amongst the items on the agenda, they discussed how the international community can continue tackling global poverty. Speaking to Churches Update after the Summit, Labour's Shadow International Development Secretary Harriet Harman MP said: *"The G20 communiqué stated that the poorest countries need growth and they need aid too. Although this is encouraging, it is now vital that world leaders back up their words with actions. The Labour Party will continue to push the Government to meet its commitments to the developing world."*

Calls to sign Human Trafficking directive

The coalition Government has been accused of sending the "wrong signal" to human traffickers after they decided not to endorse an EU directive designed to co-ordinate European efforts to combat the trade in sex slaves. The document includes a common definition of the crime of trafficking, to make it easier to convict offenders in the EU's 27 member states. Yvette Cooper MP said: *"It's appalling that in the 21st century, slavery still exists. Many vulnerable people all around the world are still exploited and made to suffer at the hands of criminal gangs. That's why the government must back Europe wide action against trafficking."*

Reception for faith leaders

Andy Slaughter, the Member of Parliament for Hammersmith, recently held a reception for religious leaders from across his constituency. Mr Slaughter, who fought off a strong Conservative campaign in the General Election, said afterwards: *"Whenever I come into direct personal contact with religious groups, I am always impressed by the example they set us all regardless of our beliefs. It is one of tolerance, respect and cooperation. In a diverse community like Hammersmith, these values are the source of our cohesion."*

Working with street pastors in Bridgend

Churches are often at the heart of local communities, providing help and support to those in need. In response to a number of problems in Bridgend town centre, such as homelessness and antisocial behaviour, a network of local churches set up the Bridgend Street Pastors scheme. The local Labour MP, Madeleine Moon, has praised their contribution to the community.

The initiative provides help and support in the town centre on Friday and Saturday nights. Madeleine recalls: *"The initiative was led by Pastor Mark Thomas, whom I met at the launch of a new unit for homeless young men. Mark was frustrated by the gap between the life of many church members and what he saw happening every Friday and Saturday night outside of his church."*

"We talked about his idea for his church to reach out to those he saw in pain and distress outside of the church, literally drowning their sorrows in alcohol because none was willing to listen or take an interest. Mark had heard of the street pastor concept in England and wanted to bring it into Bridgend. Great ideas need the right people with vision and determination; they also need the right time. Also at that launch was Superintendent Tim Jones the divisional police commander for Bridgend. Here were two men with vision and determination open to new ways of tackling old problems."

Those who volunteer to be street pastors are trained by the police, with whom they work side by side on weekends. The pastors wear high visibility jackets and have strict guidelines to follow.

Twenty three churches are currently involved in the



Madeleine Moon and Pastor Mark Thomas at 10 Downing Street

Bridgend Street Pastors scheme, providing a pool of fifty pastors, from which a small group walk the streets from 10pm until 4am. Madeleine stresses that their work is far more involved than merely walking around the town centre: *"On rugby internationals and bank holidays the church hall provides a triage centre where people who have been hurt or injured are treated by St John's ambulance while their worried friends are fed tea, coffee and bacon sandwiches while they wait."*

"The work of the street pastors has helped cut night time violence and disorder in both the town centre and in the local hospitals A&E department", she said. "Street pastors provide a caring, listening, helping service, which defuses situations and sometimes diverts people whose behaviour may have resulted in criminal convictions."

She continued: *"They deal with a wide variety of problems; helping the homeless; reuniting friends who have lost each other whilst on a night out; and by providing medical assistance. The scheme shows that churches in Bridgend are making a real difference every weekend and not just on a Sunday."*

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.