

Churches Update

News from the Labour Party

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Ed Miliband: "Britain's churches give me hope"

Labour leader wishes churches a happy Christmas and looks to the year ahead

At this time of year our thoughts turn to our family and friends as we look forward to spending the Christmas season with them.

For many people however this will be a difficult time—for the one in five young people out of work, for those made redundant and struggling to pay the bills, for young parents faced with rising childcare costs and for the increasing number of homeless people on our streets. The impact of a global downturn and a eurozone crisis is plain to see in the lives of people we know and care about. Churches across the country are providing help in these difficult times, supporting people both here in the UK and in other countries. I wanted to use this Christmas message to thank you all for this vital work you are doing in our communities.

Over the past year I have had the privilege to meet leaders of many different faiths. A party which fails to recognise the importance of faith to so many people in our country will fail to connect with something that matters hugely to millions of people and families, but it would also be a party that fails to recognise the extraordinary work in communities that is done by people of faith day in, day out. The values the Christian faith instils are values which are central to the British way of life, values which I believe we must put back at the heart of the way we run our country. Values of responsibility, fairness and concern for each other.

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As I visit different parts of the country, speaking to people from all walks of life—from business owners to the unemployed, from manufacturers to teachers—I discover this desire for more fairness, more responsibility and a stronger ethic of caring for one another every day.

The absence of these values in some parts of our society has been highlighted in the scandals of phone-hacking, abuse in care homes, bankers' bonuses and MPs expenses'. That is why I am talking about the



need for us to put these values back into the way we run our economy and the way we run our country.

The challenge of unstable growth, rising unemployment and high inflation is a worry for millions of families, and I believe there are steps that can and should be taken now by the government to help provide greater confidence and support. But the longer-term challenge, which is no less important for our country, is to change the way our economy works, ensuring that it serves the long-term interests and welfare of people of all generations, and drawing on the contributions, talent and generosity of all. It is a challenge that requires the broadest possible alliance.

And it is a profound challenge with no instant solutions. But I believe it can make our country a better, more prosperous, and fairer place to live. For just as the Christmas message has hope at its heart, we too must work to give hope to those in need now; and to the prospects for future generations.

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Bishops ask ministers to act on Welfare Reform

In November, eighteen Church of England bishops signed an open letter criticising some of the government's proposed welfare changes. The letter was publicly backed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and by the President of the Methodist Conference.

The letter demanded that ministers rewrite their flagship plan to impose a £500-a-week benefit cap on families. It is estimated the cap would result in 50,000 families being on average £93 a week worse off. Labour have supported the principle of the benefit cap, but have argued that the way the government plans to do it will be deeply harmful.

In an open letter in Observer, they say the cap could be "profoundly unjust" to the poorest children in society, especially those in larger families and those with unavoidable housing costs. They argue that the Church of England has a "moral obligation to speak up for those who have no voice". The bishops called on the government to back a series of amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill which were tabled by the bishop of

Leeds and Ripon, The Rt. Rev. John Packer.

Following the letter, Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster told MPs and peers in Parliament that the government cuts were "already being felt disproportionately by the most vulnerable".

London is expected to be one of the worst affected areas, because of the high cost of renting. A study by London Councils found that over 133,000 households in London would be unable to afford their rent if the proposed changes went ahead.

Speaking to Churches Update, Labour's Shadow Work and Pensions spokesperson, Liam Byrne MP said: *"The bishops are right to bring the government's attention to their concerns over the Welfare Reform Bill. Since its publication, the Labour Party have argued that although we agree that work should pay, the ham-fisted way the Coalition is proceeding will hit the poorest in our society, and hard-working families, hardest. The government must listen to Labour's concerns, and make changes to the Bill."*

Faith and society

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

Over the last few months I have been chairing an Inquiry on Faith, Community and Society. This has been done with the help of think-tank, Demos. The Inquiry is exploring the relationship between religion and civic and political engagement. The initial findings, drawn from the UK Citizenship Survey (UKCS) and the European Values Study (EVS), are fascinating.

I am pleased with one conclusion that has been drawn already. Namely, that those campaigning for progressive political causes – in this grouping I would include the Labour Party – should find faith communities a natural ally. This is a view I have had for many years, even before coming into frontline politics.

After all, the Labour Party and churches have proved that they can be natural allies on issues such as international development, the environment and poverty. It was such an alliance that made the Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History campaigns the successes they were.

I have seen firsthand how effective churches are at reaching out to the communities that they serve: for example by caring for the homeless or training street

pastors. It is likely that Britain's network of churches will become even more important in their local communities as the Conservative-led government continues with its programme of ideologically-driven cuts to public services.

The challenge to politicians of all persuasions is to build on the work that churches are doing and strengthen their voice. At the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool I met with church leaders who want to mobilise their members to be catalysts for positive change in their communities. Some even had visions for more national initiatives in the mould of Street Pastors and Foodbank. This enthusiasm and initiative is exciting and it is much needed. We want to continue these conversations and ensure that, as a party, we give a political expression and recognition to such efforts.

We would like more people of faith to be actively involved in the Labour movement. We see church communities building among their members key values – such as fairness, responsibility, patience, solidarity, truthfulness and compassion – which we need in order to make progressive politics work.



Labour calls on government to act on metal theft

Yvette Cooper, Labour's Shadow Home Secretary has warned the government that laws governing the scrap metal industry needed updating if there was to be a crackdown on theft. Her calls came as the Church of England announced a conference examining ways of tackling the sharp rise in the theft of metal from church interiors and lead from roofs.

Yvette has told the Home Secretary, Theresa May MP, that it is too easy for people to get away with metal theft. Currently, scrap metal dealers must register with the local authority, but if they do not, police have no powers.

Speaking about the rise in metal theft, Yvette said: *"It is becoming an epidemic, and urgent action is needed from the Home Office to put a stop to these sickening and dangerous attacks. The government should back the police, and the churches, in their campaign against metal theft by pledging to change the law to make it easier to stop this organised crime."*

St Olave's Church, Marygate, in the Diocese of York is one such church to be affected. Speaking to Churches Update, Rev Jane Natrass (above, centre) said: *"We have had two recent roof lead thefts, one in July and*



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another at the end of September. The total damage from the July theft is estimated to cost about £50,000 to repair as the rain water came down the walls, bringing gravel and various debris from the unprotected roof. The repair estimate to the organ alone is £15,000."

The Labour Party has published a four point plan to tackle metal theft which is supported by British Transport Police, Association of Chief Police Officers and by Neighbourhood Watch. The plan involves the licensing of scrap metal dealers and giving police authorities the power to close down traders who they suspect of selling stolen metal.

News in brief

Government criticised over climate change

An influential committee of MPs has warned the government about its *"schizophrenic attitude"* towards climate change. The Environmental Audit Committee has noted Chancellor George Osborne's assertion that the UK does not intend to cut emissions faster than other European countries. This is despite David Cameron previously pledging that his administration would be the *"greenest government ever."*

Commenting on the report, Labour's Shadow Energy and Climate Change Secretary, Caroline Flint said: *"This report exposes the chaos and confusion at the heart of the Tory-led government's energy policy."*

CSM at the Labour Party Conference

The Christian Socialist Movement organised a number of events at this year's Labour Party Conference in Liverpool. Over one hundred people attended the annual church service on Sunday morning. The service carried the theme: *"Local, National, and Global – our responsibility in the created order"* and was supported by Tearfund and World Vision. After the service Rob Carr of CSM said: *"Each year the conference church service provides an opportunity to show that faith and politics really do work well together."*

Government called to tackle corruption

Christians have joined Tearfund's campaign Unearth the Truth which calls for greater transparency among extractives companies working in developing countries. Handed directly to the Treasury by the leaders of New Wine UK, John and Anne Coles, the Unearth the Truth report urges the UK government to create robust legislation, requiring companies to publish what they pay to developing country governments for mining, gas and oil contracts. Labour's Shadow Minister for DFID, Tony Cunningham MP, said of the campaign: *"Unearth the Truth is leading the way in seeking justice for communities that have been exploited."*

Christians seek action on tax evasion

A delegation of church leaders have handed an open letter to Chancellor George Osborne, urging him to reduce the need for budget cuts by clamping down on the *"widespread"* practice of tax evasion. The letter, whose signatories include the Rt Reverend David Walker, the Bishop of Dudley, Niall Cooper, National Coordinator for Church Action on Poverty and Revd Jonathan Edwards, General Secretary The Baptist Union of Great Britain, asked the government for *"stronger and more decisive action to crack down on the unjustifiable tax avoidance measures"*.

Working with churches in Glasgow

Margaret Curran was elected as the Labour MP for Glasgow East in May 2010. She was appointed the Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland in October. Margaret recently held a roundtable discussion for faith groups in the city and was joined by Labour's Faith Envoy, Stephen Timms MP. Here, Margaret speaks to Churches Update about the importance of working with churches in her constituency.

"Church leaders from all backgrounds joined Stephen and me for an informal roundtable discussion where we explored ways in which the Labour party can better communicate and work with churches in our constituencies.

"What was particularly striking was not only the need for the Labour Party to offer practical support – for example, joining congregations to campaign against the theft of lead from church roofs – but for the need to work in partnership with the faith community to tackle the deeper, social problems facing our communities, such as antisocial behaviour, exclusion and inequality.

"The latter is especially important in Glasgow East where unemployment hovers consistently above the 12% mark and life expectancy can be as low as 67 years in certain parts of the city. As we witnessed from the riots in London this summer, underlying social problems have the potential to spill out into violence on our streets, and although the riots were confined to cities in England, Glasgow can have its own share of problems with inner city gangs and street violence – not least in parts of my own constituency.

"The churches in Glasgow East already take a lead in helping to address the social causes of societal breakdown by working directly with the people



themselves. For example, Lochwood Parish Church in Easterhouse run a brilliant Brigade club for young children, while Cranhill Church operate a fantastic community project, helping to reach out to local residents and include them in key decisions affecting their own community.

"The Labour Party is a movement with its roots in social justice and equality, and what's more, we share these values with those in the faith community. We are proud to be the party that introduced the National Minimum Wage and that committed our country to the international development budget - and some of our biggest voices of support in these campaigns came from the churches.

"It is vital that we continue to work alongside religious groups throughout the country in order that we gather momentum behind policies that will help further lasting social change and protect the vulnerable in order to allow our communities to flourish."

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 (Faith Envoy), 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.