

# Churches Update

## News from the Labour Party

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## Labour MP urges people to speak up for Christians

**Shadow Foreign Secretary says persecution is a “story that goes largely untold”**

Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary, Douglas Alexander MP (pictured right), has urged people to have the courage to speak up for Christians without fear of causing offence.

In an article for the Daily Telegraph, Douglas suggested that public figures have allowed “*political correctness*” to prevent them talking about the growing harassment and attacks suffered by Christians in places like the Middle East, Pakistan and Nigeria. He warned that the mounting persecution of Christians is a “*story that goes largely untold*”. Commenting that going to church is, for some, not an act of faithful witness, but an act of life-risking bravery, he said: “*That cannot be right and we need the courage to say so...People of all faiths and none should be horrified by this persecution. We cannot, and we must not, stand by on the other side in silence for fear of offence.*”

He later wrote: “*It is simply wrong for any faith to be persecuted. And yet, across the world, religious groups, of any faith, are being attacked for their beliefs. So, just like anti-Semitism or Islamophobia, anti-Christian persecution must be named for the evil that it is, and challenged systematically by people of*



*faith and of no faith.*”

Douglas's intervention came shortly after the Prince of Wales said he had become “*deeply troubled*” by the plight of Christians in the Middle East.

The Bishop of Reading, the Rt Revd Andrew Proud, echoed Douglas' comments: “*When leaders in public life have the courage to speak out...it is a huge encouragement to those who otherwise feel isolated and forgotten. Christians in the Middle East are facing hostility and danger on a regular basis, many losing their homes and their lives because of their faith.*”

## Stephen Timms: “Churches making a difference”

In an article for the Church Times, Labour's Faith Envoy, Stephen Timms, has praised churches in driving social action and providing hope to communities across the country at a time of dire need.

Writing about the increased use of foodbanks in the UK, Stephen said: “*Imagine, five years ago, that you were asked: 'What would happen in Britain if hundreds of thousands of people were no longer able to afford enough food?' If it was me, I think I would have guessed that local councils would have organised something. What has actually happened, however, is that the churches have stepped up to the plate.*

“*Most people think the churches in Britain are experiencing a slow but inexorable decline into irrelevance. The truth about Britain in 2014, however,*

*is rather different. Only the churches have had the capacity to address a sudden crisis of food poverty.*

“*And it is not just foodbanks. Debt advice, street pastors, helping jobless people into work, tackling homelessness, and international development: in all these areas - and many others - the churches are making a remarkable social impact...In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where many institutions have pulled out, the Church is sometimes the only one left. In those situations, it represents hope.*”

Speaking to Churches Update, Labour leader, Ed Miliband, commented: “*I very much admire churches who respond in these tough times with dedication and compassion. These are values I want to see at the heart of the Labour Party.*”

## Labour welcomes Cardinal's intervention

Labour's Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Rachel Reeves MP (pictured right), has welcomed comments made by Britain's most senior Roman Catholic cleric who accused the Conservative-led government of leaving increasing numbers of people facing "hunger and destitution".

Speaking to the Daily Telegraph, Cardinal Vincent Nichols said the welfare system had become increasingly "punitive", often leaving people with nothing as a result of being sanctioned. He said: *"The basic safety net that was there to guarantee that people would not be left in hunger or in destitution has actually been torn apart. It no longer exists and that is a real, real dramatic crisis. The Cardinal added: "...in this context, the administration of social assistance, I am told, has become more and more punitive. So if applicants don't get it right then they have to wait for 10 days, for two weeks with nothing...For a country of our affluence, that quite frankly is a disgrace."*



Speaking to Churches Update, Rachel said: *"The Cardinal is one of a number of members of the Christian community who have highlighted the damaging impact of the government's welfare policies that are causing pain and heartache to millions. Ministers should listen to the serious concerns that are being raised about the impact of government policies on the poorest and most vulnerable."*

## My visit to Bangladesh

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

Last year, I became an honorary vice-president of the charity Tear Fund. In February, Caroline Spelman MP and I visited Bangladesh with them. We stayed at the Lamb Hospital, Syedpur, close to the border between Bangladesh and India, motto: *"that all may have abundant life"*. It serves an area of 1.7 million people.

The hospital has its origins in missionary work in the 1950s, and opened in 1983. Tear Fund has supported it for 25 years. It has 1000 staff, including 30 long stay expatriates, 115 in-patient beds and a nurse training centre. Specialising in care for mothers and children, it hosts on average ten births per day.

It is the centre for a programme of disaster preparedness through churches. Bangladesh is particularly vulnerable to damage from climate change. Only about 0.5% of the population are Christians, so I was surprised that Tear Fund, deploying its "Umoja" strategy, can work through village churches in most areas. We visited a tiny Methodist Church where residents were animists until ten years ago. They became Christians through a South Korean Methodist outreach. In other villages, mosques and churches were side by side.

Backed by Tear Fund, an inter-church network was established in 2011. It comprises 39 churches with 1200 families. Through its work, communities are

becoming more resilient. We saw electricity being generated by solar panels, and cooking on gas made from cow dung – five cows can sustain three hours gas cooking per day! These villages are far from any mains supply. As a collective, the network also ensures the Government pays these church-based communities attention.

It was very impressive to see how – even in a country where Christians are tiny in number – modest support via Tear Fund from the UK is transforming communities.



*Speaking on a visit to the village of Cheerakuta*

## Christians on the Left discuss social action

Labour MPs and councillors joined members of Christians on the Left at a summit to discuss the Church's role in promoting social action and working towards social justice.

The event was held at Vauxhall Foodbank. Two panels debated the role of faith in social and political action. The first was chaired by John Kuhrt of the West London Mission and featured Matt Barlow, Director of Christians Against Poverty (CAP); pioneer minister the Reverend Annie Kirke; and Chief Executive of London City Mission, Graham Miller. Together, they looked at the question: *'Why do we hide the faith aspect of our community work?'*

The second panel discussion included Chris Mould of the Trussell Trust; CEO of Housing Justice, Alison Gelder; and David Lammy MP. They discussed whether or not Christians become too focussed on social action to bring about social justice.

Speaking afterwards, Stephen Beer, Political Communications officer at Christians on the Left said: *"We wanted to bring people together to network with each other and share stories about the social action*



Labour MP David Lammy speaking at the summit

*projects they're working on. We also wanted to talk about building on social action to take political action. We believe the church needs to address the underlying causes of social injustice as well as do the vital work of treating the symptoms."*

Attendees were invited to bring donations for the Vauxhall Foodbank. Overall, 90 kilograms of food—enough for around 140 meals—was collected.

## News in brief

### Labour MP co-chairing foodbank inquiry

It has been announced Labour MP Frank Field is to co-chair a major parliamentary inquiry into foodbanks and food poverty in Britain with the Bishop of Truro, the Rt Revd Tim Thornton. It will focus on the underlying causes of food poverty. Speaking about his appointment, Frank said: *"Tim Thornton and I are bringing forward this inquiry because at long last the debate on hunger in this country has taken off."* The Bishop added: *"The stronger our understanding of the reasons for hunger in Britain, the more effective that response can be."*

### Labour win vote on smoking in cars with children

The House of Lords has backed a Labour plan to ban smoking in cars carrying children, despite opposition from the government. Labour peers tabled an amendment to the Children and Families Bill detailing their proposal for England, which they said was about *"protecting children"*.

### Kate Green MP: "People let down by Atos"

Kate Green, Labour's Shadow Disabilities Minister, has responded to reports that Atos is to seek an early exit from the fit-to-work tests contract, saying: *"It's time for the government to fundamentally reform Work Capability Assessments so that disabled people who can work are given support they need to find a job."*

### Bishop outlines his worries about Universal Credit

The Bishop of Warrington, the Rt Revd Richard Blackburn, has said that changes—along with austerity cuts—had hit the most vulnerable hardest. In a letter circulated to clergy in the Diocese of Liverpool, the Bishop said: *"It's clear from conversations with churches in Warrington and Wigan, where universal credit is being piloted, that there are grave concerns as to whether we are losing the safety net that the benefit system should provide."* He added: *"We daily hear the stories of those forced into desperate choices between food, rent and clothing."*

### Death of Paul Goggins

The funeral has taken place for the former Labour MP, Paul Goggins. Paul represented the constituency of Wythenshawe and Sale East for sixteen years. He entered national politics via the campaigning organisation, Church Action on Poverty, and was appointed their national co-ordinator in 1989.

### Campaign for a Labour Majority

Christians on the Left have held a joint event in Liverpool with the think-tank, Progress. Entitled *'How can Labour win a mandate in 2015?'* the event looked at what the Labour Party needs to do to engage with Christian voters to gain their support in the run up to the next General Election.



## Labour to grant councils power to ban FOBTs

### Labour MP leads campaign against Fixed Odds Betting Terminals in bookmakers

The Conservative-led government has come under increased pressure to stop the spread of Fixed-Odds Betting Terminals (FOBTs) after Ed Miliband announced plans to give councils the power to ban the gambling machines which have been dubbed the “crack cocaine of the high street”.

Speaking to the BBC, Ed said FOBTs were “spreading like an epidemic” causing “debt and misery” and acting as a magnet for crime and anti-social behaviour. “Somebody has got to step in and stand up to the betting industry,” he added.

As part of the plans, Labour would legislate to put betting shops in a separate use class so that councils can use planning powers to control the number opening in their area. This will prevent them from opening in old shops without applying for a change of use licence.

Ed also outlined plans to review the number of high-speed, high-stakes FOBTs allowed in bookmakers. A future Labour government would act to make machines less addictive by cutting time between plays, requiring pop-up alerts and breaks in play.

Earlier this year, the government won a Commons vote by 314 to 232, in a vote on Labour’s plans to introduce tighter controls on FOBTs. Speaking afterwards, the Culture Minister, Helen Grant, told the House of Commons that the future of FOBTs was “unresolved”. She added that bookmakers themselves must take immediate action to increase protection for players and the government would wait to decide what further action may be needed.

#### A message from Clive Efford MP

##### Labour’s Shadow Minister for Sport



*“Over the last two years the government has persistently refused to acknowledge that local councils in many areas are losing the battle against betting shops.*

*“The industry has been reluctant to accept that there is a problem. Our measures will give local councillors the powers to respond to local concerns about the impact of these machines where necessary. They also introduce safety measures to protect vulnerable adults which this Conservative-led government has completely refused to do.”*

Commenting on Labour’s plans, Ed said: “In the poorest areas, they [betting shops] are spreading like an epidemic along high streets with the pawn shops and pay day lenders that are becoming symbols of Britain’s cost-of-living crisis.

*“Currently, there is almost nothing that can be done to stop the spread of FOBTs. Laws passed restricting betting shops to a maximum of four of these betting machines has meant more betting shops in clusters sometimes open from 7.30am to 10pm at night.*

*“The time has come to give local communities the right to pull the plug on these machines - the right to decide if they want their high streets to be the place for high stakes, high speed, high cost gambling,” he said.*

## 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](http://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](mailto:stephen@stephentimms.org.uk).

To join the Labour Party visit [www.labour.org.uk/join](http://www.labour.org.uk/join) or telephone us on 08705 900 200.