



# Churches Update

April 2019

## HOME OFFICE CRITICISED OVER ASYLUM REFUSAL

**Home Secretary agrees to review case after embarrassing blunder by officials**

**The Home Office has agreed to reconsider an asylum application after rejecting an Iranian applicant by using Bible verses out of context to argue that Christianity is not a peaceful religion.**

Last month, the Home Secretary admitted it was *"totally unacceptable"* for his department to quote the Bible to question why the asylum seeker had converted to Christianity. He - belatedly - ordered an investigation into what happened.

The letter that accompanied the refusal notice contained quotes from Matthew, Revelation and Exodus to argue that the claimant had made an error in assuming Christianity was : *"about peace, forgiveness and kindness"*. It went on to say *"...these examples are inconsistent with your claim that you converted to Christianity after discovering it is a 'peaceful' religion."*

The Bishop of Durham, Rt Rev Paul Butler, said the case shows the Home Office must radically change its understanding of all religious beliefs. He said: *"I am extremely concerned that a Government department could determine the future of another human being based on such a profound misunderstanding of the texts and practices of faith communities."*

*"To use extracts from the Book of Revelation to argue that Christianity is a violent religion is like*



*arguing that a Government report on the impact of climate change is advocating drought and flooding."*

Answering questions in the House of Commons, the Home Secretary said he had not seen the letter, but added: *"It is not in accordance with policies of the Home Office in any way."*

Speaking to Churches Update, Labour's Faith Envoy, Stephen Timms MP said: *"This case is deeply troubling."*

*"Worryingly, I have seen similar cases before in my constituency advice surgeries. This perhaps indicates a wider problem about the lack of religious literacy among some civil servants considering these types of applications. This is something the All- Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, which I chair, may now look at."*

# CHARITY CRITICISES SPRING STATEMENT

## Chancellor of the Exchequer admonished for not making much needed changes to benefits

**The Trussell Trust has criticised the Chancellor's Spring Statement for not ending austerity as promised.**

While Philip Hammond used his statement to commit £100m to fund police over-time to help tackle knife crime in England, the Christian charity said more needed to be done to help the most vulnerable in society.

The Trussell Trust's chief executive, Emma Revie, said it would not end austerity as promised but keep people in poverty. *"The Chancellor has missed a real opportunity to do the right thing and give people on the lowest incomes financial support and certainty before Brexit,"* she said.

*"We have seen a record demand in food bank use - our network gave out 1.3 million three-day parcels in the last year, a 13 per cent increase in need. The key driver for this rise was incomes not covering the cost of essentials - and the majority*



*of these incomes came through benefits."*

Emma's comments were echoed by Margaret Greenwood MP, Labour's Shadow Work and Pensions Minister: *"Behind the Brexit headlines, the Chancellor chose to press on with austerity for millions of low income families by allowing the benefits freeze to continue. The benefits freeze is the single biggest driver of rising poverty levels. Families with children will be hundreds of pounds worse off next year as a result,"* she said.

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## SADIQ PRAISES CHURCH RESPONSE TO WINDRUSH

**The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has described the way churches across the UK have been responding to the Windrush scandal as "fantastic".**

Sadiq Khan said the way some members of the Windrush generation had been treated amounted to a *"stain on the nation's conscience"*.

He went on to say in an interview with Premier Radio: *"There is no better example of the advocacy role of churches in our city and country*

*than the fantastic role they've played helping the Windrush generation, their children and their descendants."*

Sadiq was speaking as he unveiled £20,000 to help affected families seek legal advice via the Windrush Justice Fund and apply via the Home Office Windrush scheme for citizenship.

Church leaders joined Sadiq in urging the Government to ensure members of the Windrush generation are treated fairly.

# CHURCHES AND LABOUR: "LIFT THE BAN"

**A number of Labour MPs have joined a coalition of businesses, charities, trade unions and churches in calling on the government to allow asylum seekers to work.**

Under current rules people seeking asylum can only apply for the right to work twelve months after submitting their claim.

The Home Office aims to process all initial asylum claims within six months, but 48% go beyond that target. This means that asylum seekers are essentially banned from working while they wait for a decision on their application, living on the £5.39 a day the government provides in Asylum Support. Even after twelve months, individuals can only apply for jobs on the 'Shortage Occupation List' which includes roles like a classical ballet dancer and nuclear waste disposer.



Shadow Immigration Minister, Afzal Khan, welcomed the campaign, saying, *"Labour is committed to treating asylum seekers with dignity and respect. We would allow them to work unconstrained by the Shortage Occupation List."*

In response, the government has committed to reviewing of the Shortage Occupation List.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### **Battle of Orgreave**

Labour MPs have criticised the Home Secretary after he refused to set up an Independent Panel to investigate the Battle of Orgreave. He had been asked to do so by the Bishop of Sheffield, who described the decision as a *"kick in the teeth"*.

Since the announcement, it has been revealed that the Home Secretary has also refused to meet with Labour MP, Sarah Champion, and members of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign to discuss the confrontations in the year-long miners' strike. Diane Abbott, Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, has said any future Labour government would set up an inquiry.

### **Concerns about new FOBT games**

Labour's shadow culture minister, Tom Watson, has criticised gambling firms for trying to cheat rules curbing fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs).

A handful of bookmakers were found to be launching new, *"roulette style games"* hours after new restrictions - such as a maximum stake of £2 - were brought in.

Tom said: *"These new games seem like FOBTs by the back door...they appear to be trying to cheat the system. The gambling industry fought FOBTs reform tooth and nail. If they won't reform themselves a Labour government is determined to do it for them."*





## A CALL TO ACTION ON POVERTY

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

**The government recently published its annual 'Households Below Average Income' statistics. The figures were damning and highlight the devastating impact of austerity.**

Figures now show that 14 million people, including 4.1 million children, are living in poverty. The number of pensioners living in poverty has increased by 100,000 in 2017-18, a 400,000 rise since 2010.

In the past, the government has responded to criticism of the rises in relative child poverty by suggesting that it is absolute poverty that matters. These figures, however, show that last year the number of children living in absolute poverty - before housing costs - increased by 300,000, and after housing costs by 200,000. And the number of people in absolute poverty before housing costs increased too.

The Bible says a lot about poverty. According

to the American Christian activist Jim Wallis, poverty is the second most prominent theme in the Old Testament, after idolatry.

This month, I hosted the launch of a book called *'Living Hand to Mouth'* published by the Child Poverty Action Group. Researchers at and University College London interviewed children in families living below the poverty line about their experiences. The children's comments were striking and moving. They often went hungry, despite sacrifices by their parents.

I encourage you to read the report. The children's voices underline the need to eradicate the poverty that underlies children's hunger.

The last Labour government had an enviable record on child poverty. As a Minister, I was responsible for the Child Poverty Act. Sadly, the progress made between 1997 and 2010 is being reversed. Urgent action must be taken.

## WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

More than ever, the Labour Party is committed to listening to and learning from those of religious faith—including those in the churches. We realise that many will not commit to supporting any particular political party, and we respect that. But we are interested to hear what you have to say. 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. Tell us how we can help you.** Write to Stephen Timms MP (Faith Envoy), c/o The Labour Party, 105 Victoria Street, Westminster, London SW1E 6QT. Alternatively, email [stephen@stephentimms.org.uk](mailto:stephen@stephentimms.org.uk).
- 3. Ask to display this newsletter in your church.** Ask your church leader if they are willing for this newsletter to be displayed so others can read about what Labour is doing.