



Churches Update

December 2020

STARMER PRAISES CHURCHES DURING PANDEMIC

Labour leader thanks churches for their work and calls on Christians to help build a better society

Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, has praised the *"inspirational and practical"* ways in which church communities are working to restore our communities against the background of Covid-19.

Keir's comments came as part of an online Christmas carol service hosted by Christians on the Left and Faith in Labour.

In his contribution, Keir noted that the pandemic had exposed the reality and hardship of social isolation. He told the gathering that as a society there was an urgent need to recognise the scale of loneliness that occurs, particularly in care homes. He said this could only be done by creating a more caring society, and called on Ministers to copy what faith groups and charities have been doing to restore connectedness in our communities.

Keir highlighted the *Love Christmas* initiative, which has been led by Holy Trinity Brompton. The project has partnered with churches across the UK and aims to deliver one million Christmas Boxes to the most vulnerable and isolated. He praised the work saying it was an *"inspiration and an example of the practical ways we can show compassion, and meet people's needs."*

Keir also spoke about the importance of Jesus to Christmas. He said there was an *"undeniable*



and overwhelming message of inclusivity and unity," to the Christmas story as people came together to embrace the peace and hope that the birth brought about.

Speaking about the divisions in our society, Keir urged those watching to come together with the common purpose of building a better future.

He recognised that Christian communities will play a vital role, saying *"...we must look to these fundamental lessons of Christianity as a blue print to find a better society for everyone."*

You can watch the Christian on the Left's Celebration of Christmas **here**. As well as Keir Starmer, it features contributions from Jonathan Reynolds MP, Baroness Maeve Sherlock, the Salvation Army Band, St Martin's Voices and David & Carrie Grant.

ARCHBISHOP LAMENTS CUTS TO FOREIGN AID

Coalition of Labour MPs and churches pour scorn over cuts to international development spending

Labour MPs have joined the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in criticising the Government after it cut the UK's overseas aid budget from 0.7% of national income to 0.5%.

In a significant intervention, the Archbishop said he had seen first-hand the impact of UK aid and how *"...our generosity and strategic input has genuinely changed lives and communities for the better."*

"Keeping our aid commitment is a strong signal that the UK is a reliable partner for long-term economic, social, environmental and educational advancement across the globe," he said.

Prior to the announcement, a coalition of almost 200 charities and aid groups urged the Government to denounce any cut to the spending target. The alliance - which included Save the Children, Christian Aid and VSO International - estimated that the decision to cut aid spending to 0.5% in 2021 would mean a



reduction of over £4.6bn, or 30%, compared to 2019.

Speaking after the announcement, Labour's Shadow International Development Secretary, Preet Gill said: *"The Government are turning their backs on the world's poorest. This move will damage the UK's reputation around the World and will only show our allies that Boris Johnson is no longer interested in fulfilling our responsibilities or leading on the global stage."*

LABOUR MP CALLS FOR BLACK HISTORY LESSONS

A Labour MP has urged the Government to ensure students are being thoroughly educated about black history all year round.

In a video with Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, Labour MP Marsha de Cordova, said schools have a part to play in ending racism, especially in light of racial unrest this year.

De Cordova said in the video: *"The Black Lives Matter movement shone a light on racism in the UK and around the world. One way for the*

Government to act would be to ensure that young people learn about Black British history and understand Britain's role in the transatlantic slave trade." She added *"If we want to be a progressive society, then we really should be looking at ensuring that our history, black history, which is British history, is part of the curriculum."*

Marsha's comments came after a recent study by Teach First revealed that students could leave secondary school without having studied any literary work by a non-white author.

CALLS TO PROTECT LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Labour chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, Stephen, Timms, has welcomed comments by the Bishop of Kensington, Dr Graham Tomlin, who said that low-income families should not be forced into “unsustainable debt”.

Bishop Tomlinson was speaking about the government’s Debt Respite Scheme. It aims to protect people with debt problems from action by creditors for 60 days. Government loans, however, including advance payments for Universal Credit claimants, are not currently included in the reprieve.

Campaigners, have expressed concerns that those on low incomes may struggle to cover basic needs, including food and energy bills, while repaying benefit loans.

Speaking in his role as vice-chair of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Housing, Church and Community, Bishop Tomlinson said *“A growing number of private rented tenants face a difficult choice between not paying their rent and borrowing money they can’t afford to pay back. New Universal Credit claimants, in particular, are being encouraged to take out advances to pay their rent while they wait for their first payment, pushing them into debt and adding to the financial pressure on families that are already struggling to make ends meet.”*

Stephen echoed Bishop Tomlinson's comments, saying *“All debts should be included, so that the scheme is effective at giving people release from the immediate pressure of debt, in order to be able to seek help and advice.”*

NEWS IN BRIEF

Conservative MP Steve Baker has suggested that the Prime Minister could sever ties with senior church leaders if they continue to criticise Government policy.

His comments came after senior Bishops wrote to the Prime Minister criticising elements of the Government's Internal Market Bill.

The former Brexit minister told *The Times* that a new parliamentary motion may be required to create more space between church and state. *“I wish the Archbishops were better advised legally...[they have] inadvertently sown division where they might have promoted unity”.*

The Government has received criticism from church leaders and politicians when it emerged that Dr John Sentamu did not automatically receive a life peerage despite retiring as the Archbishop of York earlier this year.

Although archbishops do not have an automatic right to life peerage, Dr Sentamu's predecessor, Lord Hope, and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, were both made life peers when they left their Church roles.

Labour MP, and Chair of Christians on the Left, Jonathan Reynolds told *Premier Radio* that the decision was *“completely indefensible”.*



KEEPING THE FAITH AFTER COVID-19

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

I was struck very early on in the first lockdown by the reaction of faith groups to the Covid-19 crisis.

In some areas there had been very little history of the local authority working with faith groups. This was completely turned on its head. Council officers realised quickly that faith groups could provide food and other assistance as well to needy families reliably during this crisis.

Anecdotal evidence emerged from around the country that local authorities were working with churches and faith groups in new ways. I chair the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society. We wanted to take a closer look at what was happening. So, over the summer, I worked with researchers at the Faiths & Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London. We sent a survey to all 408 UK local authorities. We also conducted

55 in-depth interviews with local authority leaders and co-ordinators of faith-based projects.

Over two-thirds of local authorities surveyed reported an increase in partnership working with faith groups in the pandemic. 91% of councils described their experience of partnership with faith groups as '*Very Positive*' or '*Positive*'. And 76% expect the new partnerships with faith groups to continue after the pandemic.

People sometimes think that religious faith is on the way out. It is often seen as irrelevant, or possibly harmful, to community well-being.

Our report, "*Keeping the Faith*", shows that faith groups – far from being on the way out – have vital resources which are crucial for community well-being, and which cannot be found anywhere else.

You can read the report [here](#).

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.
- 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.
- 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.