

Churches Update

 News from the Labour Party

Issue 23

Ed Miliband MP

Leader of the Labour Party



 Ed Miliband on a visit to the Premier Radio studios.

Photo by Steve Fanstone

I am delighted to have this opportunity to contribute to the election edition of Churches Update. Over recent months I have been privileged to visit a number of Christian events, projects and initiatives. I have been inspired and challenged by the very real difference that so many congregations and organisations make to people's lives.

In December I went from a discussion with Lisa Pearce of Open Doors about the terrifying challenges being faced by Christians who are persecuted around the world just because of their beliefs, to visiting an inner city women's refuge run by the Church Army. Both in their different ways are powerful reminders that the centuries' long tradition of Christian care for the most vulnerable continues at home and abroad.

Recently I had the privilege of meeting Patrick Regan from XLP. This remarkable organisation mentors teenagers, many with extremely challenging backgrounds from across London. And XLP are not alone. Across the country an estimated one hundred thousand volunteers turn up week in, week out, to support Christian organisations and congregations running clubs and projects for young people. Government funding for initiatives like these has all but disappeared. As a result, this kind of investment in the next generation has never been so necessary.

At the Labour Party's Christmas reception we heard from Chris Mould, Chair of the Trussell Trust. It is unacceptable that nearly one million people have received

emergency food from local food banks in the last year. The large majority of these are run by local churches. It shouldn't be the case that so many families in Britain are having to rely on food banks. But it is and the churches are at the forefront of the response.

As the Leader of the Labour Party I am proud of our movement's roots in the Christian tradition. That tradition underpins our conviction about the importance of social action and our belief in the power of community transformation. One of my hopes for the years ahead is that we can find new ways to work in partnership in pursuit of our shared goals without compromising the independence and identity of church-based initiatives.

As we approach the election, it is good to know that the church's passion for social action is matched by its commitment to facilitate political debate and engagement. At a time when many feel detached from politics, I am grateful to the many churches who will host hustings in weeks ahead and enable local people to question local candidates. I thank those church leaders who have challenged the political parties to take careful account of the needs of their communities. That is part of their role and I respect that.

As this year's Christians in Politics campaign declares, the big decisions in our democracy are made by those who 'show up'. In this important year I rest assured that Christians all over our country will not only show up on election day but will continue to show up and daily build a better Britain. ●



Stephen Timms MP Labour Party Faith Envoy

Evangical Alliance recently published a report on its supporters' political views. Under the headline "Evangelical Christians turn away from coalition parties" Premier Christian Radio reported that: "Since the 2010 election the number of believers backing the coalition has fallen dramatically with support for the Conservatives declining by nearly a third, while the Liberal Democrats lost over half of their support ... Labour is the main winner with the highest level of support." The survey found the most important policy concern for evangelical Christians was ensuring religious liberty and freedom of expression, with poverty and inequality a close second.

It is often said that you shouldn't mix faith and politics. But the truth is that faith is a great starting point for politics. Faith in Christ is the source of exactly the values we need to make politics work: responsibility, solidarity, patience, persistence, compassion, truthfulness.

Andy Flanagan, Director of *Christians on the Left* has just published a great book called "Show Up". It is part of the wider "Show Up" campaign, which Ed Miliband mentioned in his article, and is backed by an impressive list of Christian organisations and denominations. The campaign encourages Christians not just to vote, but to be actively involved in politics.

As a student, I helped out on a Christian outreach project to Newham in East London. What I saw there inspired me to move to the area when I graduated. I still attend the church that was set up as a result of that project, and 21 years ago became a local MP.

In talking about faith in politics, what we are really talking about is hope. Hope is at the heart of Christian faith. Christians therefore can inject new hope into our politics. If there is one thing that needs to be done to repair politics in Britain, that's it. But hope in the Bible is not a wishy washy kind of hope that things will be better someday, somewhere beyond the blue. In the Bible, hope is a down to earth, pull up your sleeves, work hard kind of hope. Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham put it like this in his book "Surprised by Hope": "People who believe in the resurrection, in God making a whole new world in which everything will be set right at last are unstoppably motivated to work for that new world in the present".

We need more and more of that unstoppable motivation inspiring people in politics in the years ahead. ●

It is The word on the street

Mark Russell, CEO of the Church Army and local Labour activist.

Here, writing in a personal capacity for Churches Update, Mark shares his insights as a local Christian campaigner

"You are all the same!" "I wouldn't trust any of you!" "Life is just getting harder!" Whether I've been campaigning on the doorsteps in South Yorkshire, or in Dundee during the Scottish Referendum, people are saying the same things. Westminster feels a long way away. A long way geographically, but even longer away politically, as people feel a disconnect between what happens in the Westminster bubble and where they live.

Whether it's people on low incomes, or families struggling to pay the bedroom tax, or a young person out of work, or the disabled coping with benefit cuts, life is very hard for millions of people across the country. One million people need a food bank to feed their families, whilst others are employed on zero hours contracts. Thousands more are trapped in a housing crisis that is getting worse. The Tories say the economy is recovering, but the reality is very different.

Many people have lost faith in politics to deliver real and lasting change. As a Christian leader and as a member of the Labour Party, I am passionately committed to a new agenda for our nation. It is an agenda of hope and for change. Growing up in Northern Ireland I learned that fear is caustic and hope is infectious. A politics of hope is about tomorrow being better than yesterday. It is about having the vision and drive to address the big issues facing our nation. Ed Miliband understands this. Just before Christmas I had the privilege of showing him around our project that supports over five hundred homeless women each week in London. He met some of our clients, heard their stories, and saw close up the reality of a country where homelessness funding has been slashed.

We need to help people have hope in politics once again. Time and time again on the doorsteps I have to persuade people to vote at all, before I have a chance to try to persuade them to vote Labour.

I talk to people about our Jobs Guarantee for young people and about our commitment for thousands of new nurses and doctors funded by a mansion tax. I also tell them of Labour's commitment to scrap the bedroom tax and our promise to ban exploitative zero hours contracts. These policies are designed to help people earn their way out of poverty, and help them get a hand up, rather than just a hand out.

Between now and May I will be out on the doors in my home constituency of Sheffield Hallam helping my friend Oliver Coppard who is our local Labour candidate. I will be playing my part in helping us have the four million conversations Ed has challenged us to. We are all working hard for a Labour government, but we are also working to bring faith and hope back into our political life. ●



From church plant to Parliament

Gavin Shuker, Member of Parliament for Luton South



Election season is an exciting time for anyone who follows politics. But five years ago, I had a particular interest. Unexpectedly, I found myself standing for parliament in the marginal seat of Luton South, and winning! And if you had asked me six months earlier, I would have had no idea.

I'm a born-and-bred Lutonian, who grew up there, went to university and then moved back in 2006. I led a church, establishing a newly planted church with a team, particularly focused on those who have little or no experience of church before.

And on the same day I moved back, I joined the Labour Party. An unusual step - just one per cent of our population are members of a political party - but I was inspired by those missionaries who shipped their belongings away in a coffin. It was a statement of intent; of commitment to the town, as despite the understandable cynicism, local politics remains one of the places of greatest decision making and service. My coffin was the Labour Party!

In the intervening years, members of our church community pushed into many of the hardest to reach places - women who found themselves trapped in prostitution; those who

find themselves homeless, or marginalised because of their mental health; children growing up in poverty. I grew tired of just pulling people out of the river - like many who enter politics, I started to ask how do we stop the forces that push them in, upstream?

So, in 2009, when an expenses scandal rightly prevented the incumbent MP from standing, I stood, as an ordinary party member, to be selected. From a field of forty-four, I won a gruelling competition. I was the candidate for the General Election.

Despite odds of 5-1 against Labour retaining the seat, I won. The upshot was this: by choosing to engage with politics, a twenty-eight year old church leader was elected as a Labour MP. So when I hear Christians say that engaging in politics is unnecessary, undesirable or impossible, I feel a need to challenge it.

Our country faces many challenges. They are tackled by creating a space in which all can come together - people of faith and of none - to systematically tackle those forces that push people to the margins because they have a lack of power, influence and voice.

For all the talk of us "*not doing God*," consider engaging - the results just might surprise you. ●

Agenda for Change.

As the election approaches it has become clear that Christians have certain key subjects on their mind. Whether it's poverty and inequality, persecution and religious liberty, children and young people, food banks and welfare or human trafficking and international development, there are certain sections of the manifestos that will draw particular attention from the church community. With this in mind we asked four CEOs of leading Christian organisations what they were hoping for from the next government...



...On human trafficking and modern day slavery: Ruth Dearnley OBE, CEO of Stop The Traffik

Since the outset of the Modern Slavery Bill, *Stop The Traffik (STT)* has been asking one thing of the Government. This was for the proposed Modern Slavery Bill to address the issue of supply chains, whereby companies are required to report on whether any part of their business relies on the labour of trafficked and enslaved people. This is core to the preventative campaigning approach around the world. From the outset, STT spoke out about the need for company directors to be engaged and accountable alongside consumer voices.

The current government reversed its position twice by including supply chains in the legislation and then by including an

obligation for directors to sign off on the required modern slavery statement. This is one step forward but we need more. The next government must take responsibility to provide a legal framework for supply chains that everybody genuinely believes is "*world class*". It needs to listen, engage and collaborate. This is about lives not votes.

Labour's response

Having supported the move for supply chain reporting, a Labour government would work to outlaw and eradicate modern slavery. In responding to Ruth, Labour's Diana Johnson MP said: "*The Government could never claim to be genuinely committed to eradicating slavery in the UK if we did not address slavery in the supply chains of our large companies.*"





...On human persecution and religious liberty: Lisa Pearce, CEO of Open Doors

We are asking the next government to ensure that freedom of religion or belief remains a priority, and that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has the resources it needs to combat religious persecution. We want to see the freedom of religion or belief prioritised in every aspect of foreign policy, such as diplomacy, aid and trade.

We are also looking to the next government to provide a comprehensive response to international Islamic extremist groups who purposely target Christians and other religious minorities, by coordinating regional gatherings of political, religious and community leaders to address the root causes of these groups, including religious and socio-economic factors.

Labour's response

An incoming Labour government will appoint a Global Envoy for Religious Freedom, reporting directly to the Foreign Secretary. Speaking to Churches Update last year, Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary, Douglas Alexander MP said: *"The Labour Party will continue to raise the issue of religious persecution and work to make sure it is on the public and political agenda. We need to help awaken people's conscience to the plight of Christians around the world today who face persecution in more countries than ever before in our history. Christian persecution must be named for the evil that it is, and challenged systematically by people of all faith or none."*



...On poverty and inequality: Chris Mould, CEO of the Trussell Trust

The best way for the next government to tackle poverty will be to take actions which will make the minimum standards of living affordable to all citizens. This means paying serious and enduring attention to the cost of essentials like food, clothing, housing and utilities, stimulating developments in these markets which increase access and support sustainable supply.

It means a major focus on re-imagining work, stimulating and supporting the development of value-creating employment which is accessible and suitable to the widest possible range of citizens, not just the top half of the population who happen to have done better in education as children. And it means ensuring that the social security system is adequate, responsive, administered justly, to a consistently high standard, and ensuring it is effective in helping people in crisis get back on their feet.

Labour's response

Labour has pledged to bring down the number of people using food banks. The plan aims to address the root causes of rising food bank dependency by tackling low pay, ensuring a joined-up approach to food policy in government, and ensuring that the social security system treats people fairly. Speaking to Churches Update, Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Rachel Reeves MP said: *"The huge rise in the number of people using food banks in the last few years shows that the social security system in the hands of the Tories is too often letting down those who need its support, with advisers given unfair targets for sanctions rather than support to help people back to work."*



...On children and young people: Dr Alastair Jones, CEO of Frontier Youth Trust

Many young people feel alienated and disconnected from the current political dialogue and I believe young people need to be valued in a way that they are currently not. In Frontier Youth Trust, we believe every young person has the right to be trusted, not made a scapegoat for society's flaws. We believe a new government should help young people who experience mistrust from many areas of society experience a just and equal place in their communities.

Young people should be invested in as unique and precious individuals with diverse interests, hopes and dreams not merely as a cog in a machine for economic growth. By empowering young people as individuals to flourish and co-create stronger communities we will see real transformation in the UK.

Labour's response

The Labour Party is the only major political party who are investing in a manifesto specifically for young people. Over the last months thousands have contributed to the Shape Your Future consultation and churches and Christian youth organisations have played a key role in engaging young adults in the process. Writing in a blogpost last year, Ivan Lewis MP, who led Generation Y Vote says that the current government have *"trapped"* young people in a permanent cycle of anxiety and insecurity. By contrast, he says: *"Labour has a radical policy agenda on votes at 16, student finance, vocational education and the minimum wage and jobs."*

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. There are a few things you can do to help us in this work.

1. The Labour Party publishes this newsletter three times per year. Please sign up to read it, free of charge, and encourage others to do so too. Join the mailing list at <http://www.labour.org.uk/pages/faith-groups>.
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
4. Join Christians on the left. Visit www.christiansontheleft.org.uk/membership for more details.

