**Social Action and London Churches**

**Looking to the future**

**Address to the London Churches Refugee Network (October 18th 2012)**

**Introduction**

It is often said that we live in interesting times and I suspect that this is a fact of life at any time in history. The question that must follow on the statement must be one of how ironic is the comment meant to be or is it equally intended to be a subtle threat that we should be prepared for a fall from whatever pinnacle we are on?

In this paper I want to address four issues that I think are crucial to our understanding of the Churches ministry in London, they are:

* The policy issues and implications that come from the many social problems that Londoners face
* The practical outworking of our ministry in response to the social problems
* The theological underpinning that is so important to the work we do
* Looking to the future – in particular how do we ensure that Church Leaders and local Christian communities are informed.

In addressing the questions in the context of the London Churches Refugee Network I want to add that all that I will say does have wider implications because social problems and inequality are inter related. In addressing any one aspect of the issues we cannot avoid looking at the wider social context.

It is important to note that in exploring the issues that the Churches whilst playing a key role are heavily reliant on committed volunteers. We are past the days when dioceses and denominations had specialist advisers to take on the responsibility of being able to give dedicated time to the work.

In the Anglican Diocese of Southwark at the beginning of the 1990’s we had specialist advisers in:

* Housing
* Community Development (2)
* Economic and Industrial Mission
* Fund raising for the parishes with the highest IMD scores
* A Director of Social Responsibility

In 2011 they have all gone and it is also the case that this is true across the whole of London. We are now reliant on volunteers or, at best, part time workers and this I believe offers us an opportunity to think seriously about how we work together in the future.

We may have little in the way of financial resources but we do have good will, enthusiasm and an ability to keep the flag of justice waving within our many communities of worship and discipleship.

In the days when we had specialist advisers the London Churches Group for Social Action (LCGSA) offered a space for all the advisers to share insights and to learn from one another. The next stage of the life of LCGSA will be very different but id does not mean that it is not needed and in fact it may be more important now than it ever was.

In looking forward we can ask what we can learn from the past that will inform our future activity.

**Policy**

In addressing the specific issues associated with refugees I want to suggest that we cannot avoid seeing them within the wider context of the social and political scenario in which they are set. The specific example must of course be the Coalition Governments policy and rhetoric of austerity. We may be all in it together but the reality is that some are facing the threat of austerity with fewer resources than others.

The commitment to cut the welfare budget by £18m with a further £10m announced at the Conservative Party Conference is the challenge that we face in seeking to work for the common good. It is of course the poorest who will be hardest hit and it is refugees and those who are most reliant on state benefit support that will be at the fore front of the changes.

The Churches will offer a safety net and the exponential rise in Food Banks is a one such response, with examples as one might expect in areas where social need is prevalent. In addition they are increasingly to be found in what might best be described as middle class where we do not expect to find social need.

I’m ambivalent about this particular development and even more so when I hear that local authorities might be setting them up. It is a moral question that needs consideration as to whether in the 21st century a Food Bank is a positive response to the problems of poverty.

As an aside in the Churches we discuss moral issues in the context of sexuality but very rarely consider the immorality of poverty in 21st century Britain. In fact it often seems that in the Churches we prefer to talk about our internal policy matters for the Church of England, women bishops, gay marriage etc. to the detriment of asking why so many people are in financial hardship and poverty.

I suspect that the other denominations are equally caught up in similar debates and every Church seems to be more concerned with the finances of managing the organisation than the finances of the poorest in our communities.

In some ways these are cheap criticisms that are easy to make but they are also a reminder that we need to remember that our call to faith is about service to others and if we look to Isaiah 61, Luke 4 and Matthew 25 and consider the words of the Prophets we can find a mandate for a wider ministry.

It is important that we are prepared to be informed about government policies that are detrimental to the underpinning of an equitable society.

The message of austerity may be important in overcoming the financial problems that we face as a nation but if policies have a negative impact on the way we live it is important that they are challenged.

It is of equal importance that we recognise that we are part of a much bigger community and take a particular interest in Europe. In the New Internationalist magazine of September 2012 the following was written:

*“As if Europe weren’t already hard to reach for those with the wrong sort of passport, the EU plans to ramp up spending on border controls and bring in unpiloted drones to patrol the seas beyond EU territory.*

*Part of the wider European external border surveillance (EUROSUR) scheme to thwart would be migrants setting off from the North African coast; the $410 package will include helicopters and satellite tracking systems”.*

The shrinking borders of the EU become even more secure from the unwanted migrant and we see yet another example of the way in which the poorest of the world are seen to be a threat.

In the UK we are more than aware of the measures that are in place to seek to keep people out of the country. In the Last 20 years and more we have seen the implementation of harsher and harsher laws to ensure that it is more difficult to allow entry into the UK. Sadly this is not the work of any one political party.

The policies put in place are based on the argument that immigration has reached historically high levels and even with the policies no serious reduction has been achieved.

The work that is undertaken by the Churches and other agencies with refugees in my view offers a very important example of the working out of what might be described as either the big society or the good society. In saying this I’m not suggesting that the work that is undertaken should be a response to an ill thought out political idea rather that it is already there and is an example of what can happen when good people work together for the common good.

In responding to the specific needs of refugees and the way they are treated by government agencies should be also a reflection of the policies that are intended to reduce the number of individuals and families who rely on state benefits.

The contribution of the Churches and other agencies in this context is always to offer a place of safety where practical care and compassion is offered. In equal measure we should be wary of the potential tyranny of compassion, practical assistance is important but it must be in the context of empowering those we seek to support. The tyranny to which I refer is when our care is more important than assisting those we work with to find a better way of life.

One of the problems we face is the knowledge of the economic problems that must be addressed by all governments. Whilst we recognise the need to make cuts in national budgets it is important that the government take into consideration the effect they will have on the hardest hit.

In reflecting on the challenge it is important that we also consider the implications of opposing the cuts and work hard with partners in the wider Third Sector to identify creative and practical policies that are affordable.

**The theological challenge**

I’ve suggested that the Biblical mandate for challenging social need is encapsulated in specific texts. In addition the Churches history and tradition gives us many examples of how those who went before us met the needs of the most dispossessed in the past.

The theological argument is rooted in the Biblical mandate but it also draws on centuries of interpretation and analysis. The Roman Catholic concept of the common Good is perhaps the most accessible way of describing the theological challenge, though it must be seen within the wider context of ecumenical social teaching.

The challenge for all of us is to be prepared to reflect theologically and be informed by contemporary thinking that will lead us to better critique government policies that cause us concern.

In the 1997 document from the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and wales ‘*The Common Good and the Catholic Churches’ Social Teaching’.* Stated in the introduction:

*“The gospel imperative to love our neighbour entails not only that we should help those in need, but also address the causes of destitution and poverty. The deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbour, and thus with social action.”*

In these words we are reminded that action must be underpinned by theological reflection and consideration of the wider policy issues.

**Looking to the future**

In seeking to address the issues outlined above it is important that the London Churches in partnership with others are able to work together and in speaking out on issues of shared concern. The recent conference on the housing problems in London is one example of how a problem can be analysed and potential solutions be offered. The mix of speakers from the Churches and academics was a potent mix that ensured that the content of the conference was both relevant and informed.

In the recent past The LCGSA would have been the place where these issues were discussed and reflected on from both a theological and practical manner. The world moves on the Advisers who with the representatives of different agencies are no longer in post.

The gap that this creates needs to be addressed and I want to suggest that a new way of working is necessary.

The LCRN is an example of how we might build on our past experience; the membership represents a wide range of experience of work with refugees. The experience is both practical and rooted in both theological and political analysis. That shared knowledge is an immense resource to the London Churches if used effectively.

The work of Housing Justice likewise is another example of knowledge and experience and the report of the London Housing conference will offer a challenge to Churches and public authorities.

Zacchaeus 2000 with its work on poverty and debt also offers another important resource to those who want to be informed on poverty and benefit reforms. A key contribution that they bring to the table are well informed briefings on government legislation and campaigns that aim to mobilise those who are critical of policies that are seen to be unfair on the weakest in our society.

The wide range of issues that are constantly on our agenda include the environment, economic issues and unemployment. All of which have implications for how we work together in building a more equitable society.

The other side of being informed is of course to be active in combating the iniquitous policies that will leave people in increased poverty. The call to Christians must be to work together in offering practical support that underpins our analysis of the issues.

It means working ecumenically and ensuring that the Church Leaders and the wider Christian community are better able to reflect on our shared commitment to gospel values and being fully informed on issues of public policy.

The new model for the LCGSA might be to draw together a representative group from these various areas of concern and disciplines to share ideas and to reflect together theologically. The outcome being informed briefings that can be shared across the Churches and where appropriate other faith communities in London.

A key element of the work of such a partnership will be to offer a resource to the London Church Leaders who could commission them as and when appropriate to undertake specific projects.

**Conclusion**

To be better informed in our activities it is my view that in sharing insights across different areas we will be more effective and better able to show that we not only offer practical assistance but are able to contribute to the debate about appropriate policies.

The call to ministry and discipleship in the world is central to why we do what we do. Underpinning al that we believe and what we are working for must be a commitment to the common good.

The challenge for each one of us is to be open to serving others and working together for justice. In the introduction to the book ‘Catholic Social Conscience’\* edited by Kevin Chappell and Francis Davis the following appears:

“*Truth comes from God, even if we don’t particularly like the way he communicates it to us.*

*This then is the challenge – to renew, to discuss and debate the Catholic social conscience, tradition and action in our times”.*

In our context let’s take the word Catholic to mean universal and take the challenge to heart and together work on the renewal, discussion and action.

Terry Drummond

Chair London Churches Group for Social Action

Bishop of Southwark’s Adviser on Urban and Public Policy

12 November 2012

(Updated in consultation with Elizabeth Simon)

\*Gracewing 2011