

Joel Edwards' opening speech at the Faith and Nation Report launch, Monday 23 October 2006

This is an independent report to the Council of the Evangelical Alliance. Having received the Report the Council wanted to make it widely available for public discourse about **the role of faith** and the Evangelical contribution to national life.

No doubt some of the Recommendations will prove more controversial and attract more attention than others. However, today I want to commend all one hundred Recommendations to you. This Report is a renewed challenge for the Church and the wider Christian community to **"devote significant energy and resources to strengthening helpful expressions of community with the aim of creating quality social capital that enables societies to flourish"** (Rec 100).

It is a declaration of how Christians should engage, participate and work for the Common Good. Its roots are evangelical, but its range concerns the entirety of life in Britain today.

It would be a shame to miss the wood for the trees here. As Citizens in a plural and democratic society, the report commends **Active Christian Citizenship** and the role of faith communities in Social Cohesion. **The Prime Minister encouraged Church leaders and others to do precisely this when he addressed Ruach Christian Ministries in Brixton last April.** But we are already motivated, because it is a Biblical injunction to participate and be Active Citizens in social transformation. In the words of an Old Testament prophet, we work and pray for the peace and prosperity of our cities, our towns and diverse communities. And the Report commends this.

Secondly, we are all conscious of the current controversy about Islam and what I want to call **faith dialogues** in the public square. We welcome that debate which is nudging us away from the climate of intimidation which exists in our discussions about Islam. The tragic offences of 9/11 and 7/7 have consolidated the concerns about terror and faith. Much of this has been linked

specifically to Islam. As the Report suggests, “it is important for the state to restrain those who would use the cloak of religious liberty to incite hatred against others” (Rec 4).

Recently, a journalist asked me whether Faith is a Friend or Foe? It can be both. Faith is at its best when it puts away the wagging finger and challenges us through assertive love to talk together without fear. **Assertive love sees people of other faiths not as political or cultural entities, but as people made in God's image.**

However, in this dialogue, Islam should hear that many of us have been made to feel afraid, and are disappointed that not enough has been said by Muslims about the persecution of Christians in Islamic states. But equally, Christians have a moral and biblical responsibility to stand with Muslims who have been misrepresented or treated unjustly by the press or police. This point has been made very stridently in Recommendation 3.

As an Alliance, we have not been standing idly by in the debates on religion, terrorism and community cohesion.

My own involvement came immediately after 9/11 when the Prime Minister called a meeting of senior faith and community leaders to discuss the crisis. In September last year I attended the Home Secretary's consultation on Preventing Extremism Together. Our senior staff and members have often been at the centre of these issues, working with the Home Office on legislation affecting diversity and community relationships.

But in sustaining the distinctives of our Christian faith, the Report has also boldly identified the secular undercurrent which is challenging the wearing of religious symbols and the meaning of religious iconography: *this* is the **Clash of Civilizations** we fear. When British Airways asks a member of staff to make their cross invisible, it strikes us as a new metaphor of things to come.

Thirdly, the Report is committed to the view that our Judaeo-Christian values sustain and enhance relationships which are critical for healthy communities; namely co-operation, marriage and family life. We urge the Government to pursue policies which strengthen these institutions.

The Report has also concerned itself with the debate around the future Monarch as the constitutional **Defender of The Faith** as opposed to **Defender of Faiths**.

As a movement committed to presenting Christ credibly as good news for spiritual and cultural transformation, the Evangelical Alliance stands in a long line of individuals who have championed social reform, such as Shaftesbury and Wilberforce. As the Report highlights, our social engagement flows from our conviction about God's passionate love for all communities. From this place of confident servanthood, the Report affirms the place of co-operation and co-belligerence **"where theologically appropriate, and where a socially beneficial outcome is likely to ensue, make common cause with those who do not share an evangelical, Christian or religious worldview."**

In summary, this Report is committed to Christian witness in which 'some will be saved, but everyone will benefit'.

Joel Edwards

23 October 2006, Fatih and Nation Report launch

