

## **Local Engagement with Politicians – MP Breakfast forum**

The Forum for Change concerns the question 'What would society influenced by the Christian faith and worldview begin to look like?' With reference to Politics, it aims, amongst other, for a greater level of engagement by the Christian community in the political process at every level. The local church contributes significantly to help create the conditions for human flourishing. Engagement with the political process on a local level is a vital part of the empowerment of the community and in seeking its peace and wellbeing. A grass root example of building relationships with those who represent us in parliament is found in the constituency based bi-annual breakfast forum between Christian leaders and Members of Parliament Greater Manchester. Over the last ten years, the meetings have developed into relevant times that are instrumental in a further political engagement, bringing about change in the city and holding out a vision and hope for the good of the wider community.

### **Sharing information**

The regular meeting gives both parties the opportunity to be informed. Listening to the MP's perspective informs us and has proven to be instrumental to the church's mission in the city, adding knowledge to our faith. It is significant that we listen to someone who speaks from a different perspective. As Stephen Timms, MP, advocates, the church needs to make use of the windows of opportunity given by the Government for action.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the meetings give the church the opportunity to inform the MP on Christian involvement, projects and concerns. Bridging the information gap is an essential first step. Furthermore, the meetings have raised our awareness of the pressures the MPs face, have given us a wider vision and concern, and perhaps stopped us from sound-bite simplicity.

### **Partnership**

The church belongs to the city and is characterised by a tireless commitment to see regeneration on a personal and community level by demonstrating God's love in word and action. We are increasingly aware that the relationship between the church and those in authority is relevant to our work. Several church leaders acknowledge that the MP has been most helpful on many occasions, by arranging meetings with some key people, directing them towards involvement in regeneration committees, etc. The church should consider itself challenged at local level to develop partnership and engage in programmes that aim for change. Often the Christian approach to Government has been that of criticism or disassociation. David Sheppard, former Bishop of Liverpool, states that there is an alienation for which the church is

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<sup>1</sup> Timms, S. "The Practical Gospel" in *Third Way*, June 2000.

responsible.<sup>2</sup> By engaging, the church not only serves the community and the structures in society, it also helps to channel funding. By opting into the public process (i.e. regeneration committee, business forum, Local Strategic Partnership), we take part in the decision-making process.

On the other hand, where the church is leading by example, the government is invited to take up their rightful responsibilities. The breakfasts are instrumental in lowering the threshold of approaching the MP. Although the breakfast meetings do not allow time for in-depth discussion, they at least provide the opportunity to raise the topics and initiate more focussed follow-up meetings. An Anglican vicar comments, "It has been surprising to see how much overlap there has been between his [the MP's] desires and ours for seeing improvement in peoples lives. He has offered practical help with our plans for the area. One can not help but feel that there is a growing desire to work in harmony together."

### **Advocacy**

As politics is ambassadorial in nature, so is church. Over this last decade, Christian leaders in the city region have sat down at these meetings and discussed what the government policies mean 'on the ground': what the voucher system means for the asylum seekers; what the 'name and shame' policy means for the working girls; what the proposals of the homeless Zsar mean to the rough sleepers in the city, etc.

The church has a biblical mandate to represent the people. The prophets' passion for justice included advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable in society. They consistently spoke out on a number of issues in both public forums and private audiences. The individual stories help those in authority to understand whether their legislation is instrumental or detrimental to the people concerned. It is of vital importance that the Christian voice is heard on a *national* level and echoed on a *local* level, so that our message has indeed its effect on an *individual* level.

### **Support and challenge**

We have a two-fold responsibility towards our MPs: to pray for and challenge them. Before we challenge anyone, have we asked ourselves whether we have answered the biblical call to pray for those in authority? Our faith demands that we are persistent in prayer.

Subsequently, our challenge should be posed in a sensitive, intelligent, gracious and clear way. The moral imaginations of those who torched the Jubilee 2000 campaign,

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<sup>2</sup> Sheppard, D., *Bias to the Poor* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983),167.

Make Poverty History, Stop the Traffik, Micah Challenge, et al. is exemplary of such challenge; not just critiquing the government on the basis of a biblical concept, but offering a clear alternative, and persistently keeping it on the political and public agenda. On a local level, our advocacy is developing. A church leader writes, "The regular breakfasts have given the opportunity for developing relationship and support from which the challenge follows. The spirit of criticism has given way to genuine, constructive and open dialogue."

### **Prayer**

There is a simple command in Scripture to pray for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1). The Evangelical Alliance survey in 1998 showed that less than 10 percent of churches pray regularly for their MPs. The regular breakfast meetings add knowledge to our faith and fuel our prayers. Although prayer is usually the last section of the breakfast programme, it is first on our agenda.

### **In conclusion**

Cotterell states, "there is a need today for ...a social conscience for church and nation: ...it needs a prophetic sense of a direct commissioning from God".<sup>3</sup> The prayer and prophetic components of our engagement have a clear biblical mandate. Considering that God ordains both government and church, we should work with those who share our concern, yet do not share our faith.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the values church holds are needed where policies will never bring about change.

Where the church is responsible for disassociation with the structures that make up society, we should change. While politics may not a natural arena for most of us, my angle is initially relational in character and founded on prayer - two characteristics that should be the hallmark of Christian leadership. Initiating to meet is a simple enough step. Exchanging vision and concern is not too difficult either. There is a need for our theology to engage hermeneutically between faith and the network of opinions and structures that make up society. The mission of the local church needs to develop a balance between serving the structures in society, prophetic advocacy and the proclamation of the gospel in order to come to wholeness and integrity in its mission. Considering that prayer is often the beginning of many things, we can expect beyond what we ask for, having our eye on the ultimate goal for people.

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<sup>3</sup> Cotterell, P., *Mission and Meaninglessness* (London: SPCK, 1996),198.

<sup>4</sup> Chalke, S., "Religion and Politics don't mix" in *Christianity* (Nov.2000).

The question whether a vision held by a minority, can commend itself to a great society as something that can generate goals and give cohesion,<sup>5</sup> is a valid one. The answer should be formulated on a local as well as a national level. Our witness to an alternative vision based on the Christian faith and worldview helps us to imagine the world anew and motivates us to bring about change on a personal and community level. It is like 'the critical yeast'.<sup>6</sup> Or, to speak in biblical language: "The Kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough" (Mt.13:33).

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October 2007

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<sup>5</sup> Forrester, D.B., "Politics and Vision" in *The Bible in TransMission* (Autumn 1999), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Term borrowed from Lederach, J.P., *The Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford, University Press, 2005), 181.