

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

A Letter from the House of Bishops to the People and Parishes of the Church of England for the General Election 2015

The full 56 pages are at <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2170230/whoismyneighbour-pages.pdf> It was issued on 17th February 2015

(Everything in italics is a direct quote from the letter. The paragraph numbers are those of the letter)

A call to a new direction that our political life ought to take

2. As bishops we support policies which respect the natural environment, enhance human dignity and honour the image of God in our neighbour.

5. We should use our votes.....for the good of others in mind, not just our own interests.

Background

12. Christians everywhere and throughout the ages have prayed, as part of The Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven". That is why politics and the life of the Christian disciple cannot be separated.

25. But in the UK as a whole, numerous polls show that a majority of people think that it will make no difference whichever party is in power.

32. The time has surely come to move beyond mere "retail politics", where parties tailor their policies to the groups whose votes they need, regardless of the good of the majority.....Instead of treating politics as an extension of consumerism, we should focus on the common good...

33. Since the Second World War, two administrations have offered visions of society that "changed the political weather" – Clement Attlee's Labour government of 1945 and Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration of 1979.

An Alternative Vision

Not a Society of Strangers?

46. The central character in the way we discuss economics and politics today is the autonomous individual exercising choices..... The individualism of consumer economics and political life today makes the individual sovereign. In Christian theology, God is sovereign and the individual and the community are the focus of God's choice to love and nurture his people.

48. And yet we are not entirely a society of strangers.....The extent of loneliness in society today, with the attendant problems of mental and physical health, is one indication of how far we have drifted into a society of strangers. But that drift is far from complete – and few people, if asked, would say that a society of strangers represents a vision of society which they desire.

But a Community of Communities

52. The need today is for a strong corrective to the tendency to become, more and more, a society of strangers. The corrective is likely to be found in strengthening the idea that our nation is still, to a useful degree, a community of communities.

53. One important principle here is the idea of subsidiarity – the principle that decisions should be devolved to the lowest level consistent with effectiveness. Subsidiarity derives from Catholic social teaching, and it is a good principle for challenging the accumulation of power in fewer and fewer hands.

The Vision of a Community of Communities

The Person in Community

58. Our hope for a stronger politics of community is driven by the conviction, founded on experience and evidence, that individuals flourish best when they belong with confidence to networks of relationships, institutions and communities which extend well beyond the nuclear family but stop well short of the state or the corporation.

59. Our society celebrates the autonomy of individuals but does too little to acknowledge that dependency on others is what makes human beings social creatures.

60. *When individuality is thought to stem from autonomy and freedom of choice, a particular image of the ideal individual – young, free, attractive, and materially comfortable – becomes the archetype against which everyone is measured and most are found wanting.*

62. *For instance, when those who rely on social security payments are all described in terms that imply they are undeserving, dependent, and ought to be self-sufficient, it deters others from offering the informal, neighbourly support which could ease some of the burden of welfare on the state.*

63. *This is why it is important to move away from the focus on the individual to a richer narrative of the person in community.*

The Community of Nations

66. *Just as the myth of personal autonomy distorts human communities, so the illusion that a nation can flourish without strong international alliances distorts the bigger picture of our shared humanity. World trade has demonstrated how intertwined the national economy is with other nations’.*

72. *On Trident: Shifts in the global strategic realities mean that the traditional arguments for nuclear deterrence need re-examining.*

74. *Supporting developing nations without creating unhealthy dependencies is politically challenging and yet absolutely necessary. The government is to be commended for committing 0.7% of GDP to overseas aid when budgets have been so hard pressed. For any party to abandon or reduce this commitment would be globally irresponsible in pragmatic terms as well as indicating that the moral imperatives of mutuality and reconciliation counted for nothing.*

Strengthening Institutions.

79. *Because a society centred on individuals finds trust difficult, laws, regulations and contracts have entered into many areas of life that were once governed by shared understandings of ethics and wisdom. e.g. Health and Safety*

81. *This is another reason why we need new, informal and independent structures, small enough not to need every activity to be codified, through which we can learn to work together in trust, not just according to rules. Such bodies – often called intermediate institutions – are a lot bigger than the family but far smaller than the state. e.g. the churches*

83. *Intermediate institutions are too often overlooked by policy-makers, so they struggle to be as influential and beneficial as they might. Housing Associations are a good example. So are Credit Unions*

87. *This is the vision which Church of England schools, like the church more widely, seek to promote. All schools should try to model a community of communities and not a society of strangers.*

95 *The Church of England strongly supported The Big Society.*

Power, Identities and Minorities

102 *Neighbourliness, then, is not just about what we do for others. It is also about what we are willing to receive from those we fear, ignore or despise. (Story of the Good Samaritan)*

103. *The politics of migration has, too often, been framed in crude terms of “us” and “them” with scant regard for the Christian traditions of neighbourliness and hospitality. The way we talk about migration, with ethnically identifiable communities being treated as “the problem” has, deliberately or inadvertently, created an ugly undercurrent of racism in every debate about immigration. Crude stereotyping is incompatible with a Christian understanding of human social relationships.*

104 *But we also challenge the assumption that to question immigration at all must always be racist. Major trends in migration have brought about immense social changes in many parts of the country. Rapid change has often impacted most acutely on communities which are least equipped to handle it – partly because their experience has often been that change is to their detriment.*

105. *It is unsurprising that communities which have faced deindustrialisation, the destruction of familiar streets and housing, whose pride in work and craftsmanship has been destroyed by the shift from manufacturing to services and for whom poverty has never been more than one step away should find the rapid shift to a multicultural society difficult to assimilate. Suspicion of people with other national and ethnic origins needs to be understood without being endorsed or excused.*

Debt and a Humane Economy

106. *The last Parliament has been dominated by the aftershocks of the economic and financial crisis of 2008.*

108 *When the financial crisis first broke, the General Synod debated the likely impact. The prospect of years of austerity was obvious even then. But the Synod set down three criteria by which any austerity measure ought to be judged.*

109 *They were: **Is it fair?** Does it give priority to the vulnerable – the young struggling to enter the labour market, and the elderly living on fixed incomes; people in poverty both within Britain and globally? **Is it generous?** Does it embody the obligation to give and share our resources with others, especially those less well off? Does it promote fair trade and global aid? **Is it sustainable?** Have the medium and long-term implications been taken fully into account so that the interests of our children's and grandchildren's generations are factored in?*

110 *These three principles are in tension with each other and have to be balanced together. They remain sound criteria for judging how the present government's debt-reduction policies have fared in practice. They are useful questions to put to candidates who will stand before the electorate in the coming months. It has been widely observed that the greatest burdens of austerity have not been born by those with the broadest shoulders – that is, those who enjoy a wide buffer zone before they fall into real need. Those whose margin of material security was always narrow have not been adequately protected from the impact of recession.*

112 *But instead we have seen the burgeoning of in-work poverty – people who, despite working hard, cannot earn enough to live decently. The market can, and does, allow wages to rise and fall in response to demand and supply. But human lives are not infinitely flexible in the way the price mechanism expects, and people cannot live properly when their work brings in too little to sustain dignity.*

113 *This is why the Church of England has backed the concept of the Living Wage – an agreement with employers to ensure that all their staff earn a modest hourly rate that is sufficient for a full time worker to live decently. The Archbishop of York has been at the forefront in arguing for the Living Wage. It represents the basic principle that people are not commodities and that their lives cannot adapt infinitely in response to market pressures. The labour market cannot enable people to live and flourish unless the moral limits of the market are recognised.*

The Campaign Ahead

118 *The election campaign is likely to entrench the apathy and cynicism with which many people approach politics today. To accept such attitudes is a counsel of despair. Unless we exercise the democratic rights that our ancestors struggled for, we will share responsibility for the failures of the political classes. It is the duty of every Christian adult to vote, even though it may have to be a vote for something less than a vision that inspires us.*

123 *This letter is about building a vision of a better kind of world, a better society and better politics. Underlying those ideas is the concept of virtue – what it means to be a good person, a good politician, a good neighbour or a good community. Virtues are nourished, not by atomised individualism, but in strong communities which relate honestly and respectfully to other groups and communities which make up this nation.*

124 *Strong communities are schools of virtue – they are the places where we learn how to be good, how to live well and how to make relationships flourish.*

126 *The advice of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians may help to defend us against the temptations of apathy, cynicism and blame, and instead seek – because we are disciples of Jesus Christ who long for a more humane society – a better politics for a better nation.*

Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Philippians 4: 8