

SPECIAL AGENDA IV

DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION

VOICE OF THE CHURCH IN PUBLIC LIFE

A background paper from the Diocese of Chester

"That this Synod, mindful of the questions raised in public debate about the role of the Church in civic society, invites the Divisions of the Archbishops' Council to report to the General Synod, before the end of the quinquennium, on their work:

- *to foster clearer understanding of the Christian faith among the institutions and organisations of society; and*
- *to reinforce the claims of the Church to take its place in public life in Britain."*

Introduction

Our motion began life in the Wirral South Deanery Synod as a reaction, and out of a sense of frustration, to the news in 2006 of a British Airways employee, Nadia Eweida, who had been asked to remove her cross whilst wearing her British Airways uniform. The issue appears to have revolved around whether the cross around her neck was an item of jewellery or a religious symbol. Eventually, the matter was resolved, but at the time it was seen by many as evidence of the present uncertain position the Christian faith enjoys in this country's post-modern, multi-cultural and multi-faith society.¹

Too often it seems an individual's faith is presupposed by their ethnic or cultural background. The truth is, of course more confusing. The recent Balkan wars showed that a person can be ethnically white, culturally European and by faith, a Muslim. This is almost certainly not how popular opinion would have categorised someone from the former Yugoslavia.

There has always been a tension in British society and culture as to whether faith is a private or public matter. That it was founded upon Christian values and principles is undoubted. But what influence those principles now have, and what influence they should have as society develops, is the issue.

Context

The 2001 Census asked respondents, for the first time in many years, to state their religious convictions or otherwise. The following table² shows that the Christian faith still enjoys a dominant position in the life of Great Britain (i.e. England, Wales and Scotland).

¹ Reference may also be made to the recent case, London Borough of Islington v Ladele which concerned a Registrar of Marriage who was disciplined by her employer because she had refused to be involved with civil partnerships as they were contrary to her Christian faith. The Employment Appeal Tribunal held that she had not been discriminated against on the grounds of her faith because *inter alia* not to do would have been 'inconsistent with [the Council's] strong commitment to the principles of non-discrimination.'

² Focus on Religion. Office for National Statistics: October 2004

Population of Great Britain: by religion, April 2001			
	Total population		Non-Christian Religious Population
	Numbers	Proportion	Proportion
Christian	41,014,811	71.82%	n/a
Muslim	1,588,890	2.78%	51.94%
Hindu	558,342	0.98%	18.25%
Sikh	336,179	0.59%	10.99%
Jewish	267,373	0.47%	8.74%
Buddhist	149,157	0.26%	4.88%
Any other religion	159,167	0.28%	5.20%
No religion	8,596,488	15.05%	n/a
Religion not stated	4,433,520	7.76%	n/a
Total population	57,103,927		
All non-Christian religious population	3,059,108	5.36%	100%

Of course, there is a distinction between religious conviction and practice. At the very least this table is a challenge to the churches of all denominations to ask themselves how to turn conviction into participation in organised religious activities.

This disparity between adherence and practice helps to fuel the argument that the Christian faith is in decline. Thus civic society increasingly takes less notice of what the organised churches say. In turn, this feeds an anxiety on the part of active practising Christians and Church structures that nothing will change no matter what is done. One solution then would be to let events take their seemingly natural course with civic society and the organised churches each going their separate ways.

The Alternative

Taking no part in civic society is a very attractive option for the believer if all they experience is indifference or, even worse, hostility. Why engage with a process or get involved with a situation that causes worry and opens one up to insult? Better, surely, to stay on the outside where at least one's beliefs are not challenged, and where all one has to do is to listen to one's own voice of self-righteous indignation.

This is not the biblical approach. Scattered throughout the Old and New Testaments are incidents where the believer is encouraged, and at times mandated, to get involved. Jeremiah in a letter to the exiled people of Israel in Babylon exhorts them to:

'seek the welfare of the city ... and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'³

³ Jeremiah 29:7; NRSV

St Paul reminds the young Church in Rome that Government and public bodies derive their authority and existence from God:

'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement.'⁴

Jesus warns His disciples that it will not be an easy time, but it is the reward and outcome that makes it all worthwhile:

'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles ... but the one who endures to the end will be saved.'⁵

Experiences of Engagement

In a society where seemingly nothing can be started unless it can be audited, measured and evaluated, it is very hard to say exactly what difference has occurred as a result of the engagement of Christians and the Church with civic society. However the evidence of benefit from that engagement, albeit often empirical, subjective and hard to quantify, is very real.

More often than not the individual Christian or church body finds it very difficult to identify the value and effect of their contribution. Yet the comments from those parties involved in the debate, but whose contributions do not come from an overtly Christian point of view, are almost always affirming and encouraging. Christian individuals and bodies can find such plaudits uncomfortable because that was not the purpose of their involvement. Perhaps they need to be more pro-active in proclaiming the benefits of their contributions.

The Motion

Our motion is an attempt to provide a platform and an opportunity for Divisions of the Archbishops' Council to tell the Church how they engage with civic society and to say how they might like to develop their contribution to its future direction. We recognise that much has been and is being done. We also recognise that resources are stretched and that there is no easy way of changing the views of the self-appointed opinion formers and commentators that like to portray Christians and the churches in a particular light. Just as individual Christians and churches have to adapt to post-modern society, so perhaps should they.

This motion is not an attempt at special pleading. Nor is it a plea to go back to some halcyon time when churches in general, and the Church of England in particular, enjoyed a privileged position in civic society. Similarly, it is not to be seen as encouraging a debate on the nature of the 'Establishment,' or otherwise, of the Church of England.

⁴ Romans 13:1-2; NRSV

⁵ Matthew 10:16-18,22b; NRSV

We want to encourage more active engagement in civic society at all levels. We want to empower those involved and exhort others to get involved. We hope that it will provide a chance for those charged with communicating the good news story of individual Christian and church involvement to continue in their efforts. The appendix to this paper comes from the Church of England's website⁶ and is an example not only of what is being done but also of how such information can be published and distributed. This level of engagement needs to be celebrated and acknowledged.

We acknowledge that a lot needs to be done. The recent report from the Von Hügel Institute 'Moral, But no Compass: Government, Church and the Future of Welfare'⁷ demonstrates some of the ways in which Government's understanding of the Church of England can be both incomplete and inconsistent. Even in so saying, we recognise that in certain areas, and education immediately comes to mind, there are very good relationships where respect is shown by both sides of the other's view. We welcome the report's view that its conclusions provide 'a framework for further conversation, research and possible action in this arena.'⁸

Conclusion

Although it may be a cliché to say that we live in an ever-changing world, it is nevertheless true that the pace of that change is faster than ever before. Methods of communicating that change are virtually immediate. As a result the message can get lost. The intended audience often fragments into smaller and smaller groups thereby defeating the impact of the message. In a world that was created out of chaos and which resulted in order, certainty and form, a speedy, dynamic and organic change process is a threat to those who prefer a more measured and reasoned response.

But if there is no response, the contribution does not get heard and does not influence the outcome. We hope that this debate on the relationship between civic society, the Christian faith and the Church, of which our motion is simply a starting point, will continue long after the vote is taken. We hope that it will produce in time, God's time, consequences for civic society far greater and beneficial than any of us could have foreseen.

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On behalf of Chester Diocesan Synod
January 2009

⁶ <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/thechurchofenglandtoday/>

⁷ F.Davies, E. Paulhus and A.Bradstock 2008; Matthew James Publishing Ltd Chelmsford.

⁸ *op.cit.* page 95

The Church of England today

A Christian presence in every community

The Church of England plays a vital role in the life of the nation, proclaiming the Christian gospel in words and actions and providing services of Christian worship and praise.

Its network of parishes cover the country, bringing a vital Christian dimension to the nation as well as strengthening community life in numerous urban, suburban and rural settings. Its cathedrals are centres of spirituality and service, and its network of chaplaincies across continental Europe meet important local needs.

The Church of England plays an active role in national life with its members involved in a wide range of public bodies. Twenty-six bishops are members of the House of Lords and are engaged in debates about legislation and national and international affairs.

The Church of England is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Key facts about the Church of England:

Church attendance and visits

- **1.7 million** people take part in a Church of England service each month, a level that has been maintained since the turn of the millennium. Around one million participate each Sunday.
- **3 million** participate in a Church of England service on Christmas Day or Christmas Eve. **Thirty-nine per cent** of the population attend a Christmas service of some sort, rising to 43 per cent among households with children and, nationally, 23 per cent among those of non-Christian faiths.
- The Church of England has the largest following of any denomination or faith in Britain today. **Almost half the people in England regard themselves as belonging to the Church of England**, while 7 in 10 consider themselves Christian.
- People support their local churches in many different ways at different points in their lives. Each year **3 in 10 attend regular Sunday worship** and almost half attend a wedding in their local church, while still more attend a funeral there
- In 2007, **43 per cent** of adults attended a church or place of worship for a memorial service for someone who has died and **20 per cent** were seeking a quiet space. Both these proportions are increases on 37 per cent and 19 per cent respectively in 2003 and 29 per cent and 12 per cent respectively in 2001.
- **85 per cent** of the population visit a church or place of worship in the course of a year, for reasons ranging from participating in worship to attending social events or simply wanting a quiet space.
- Every year, around **12 million** people visit Church of England cathedrals, including **300,000** pupils on school visits. Three of England's top five historic 'visitor attractions' are York Minster, Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey.

Education

- **Seven in ten** (70%) of the population agree that Church of England schools have a positive role in educating the nation's children.
- **One in four** primary schools and **one in 16** secondary schools in England are Church of England schools. Approaching **one million pupils** are educated in more than 4,700 Church of England schools.

Ministers

- At the end of 2007, there were **20,355** ministers licensed by Church of England dioceses, including clergy, readers and Church Army officers: one minister for every 2,500 people in England. The total does not include almost **1,600** chaplains to prisons, hospitals, the armed forces and in education, nor around **7,000** retired ministers with permission to officiate.
- The Church recommended **595 future clergy** for ordination training in 2007, maintaining the upward trend since the mid-'90s. In 1994, 408 candidates were recommended for training.
- It ordained **552 new clergy** in 2007, the highest number since the year 2000. Overall, 262 women and 290 men were ordained in 2007, with nearly half ordained to full-time, stipendiary ministry: 162 men and 102 women.

Community involvement

- **More people do unpaid work for church organisations than any other organisation.** Eight per cent of adults undertake voluntary work for church organisations while sixteen per cent of adults belong to religious or church organisations.
- A quarter of regular churchgoers (among both Anglicans and other Christians separately) are involved in voluntary community service outside the church. Churchgoers overall contribute **23.2 million hours** voluntary service each month in their local communities outside the church.
- The Church of England provides activities outside church worship in the local community for **over half a million (515,000) children and young people** (aged under 16 years) and 38,000 young people (aged 16 to 25 years). **More than 136,000 volunteers** run children / young people activity groups sponsored by the Church of England outside church worship.
- Church of England congregations give more than **£45 million** each year to other charities - that's even more than the BBC's annual Children in Need appeal.
- More than **half a million** worshippers subscribe to tax-efficient giving schemes such as Gift Aid, accounting for half the voluntary income of parish churches.

Church buildings

- **Nearly half the population** (46%) think that central taxation, local taxation, the National Lottery or English Heritage should be 'primarily' responsible for providing money to maintain churches and chapels. These churches and cathedrals are largely supported by the efforts and financial support of local communities. Often, they are the focus of community life and service.
- There are 14,500 places of worship in England listed for their special architectural or historic interest, **85 per cent of which belong to and are maintained by the Church of England.**
- The Church of England has more than **16,000 churches**, serving every inch of the country and open to every local inhabitant. There are **42 mainland cathedrals**, plus one in Peel on the Isle of Man and the Diocese in Europe's cathedral in Gibraltar.
- People value their local church and **72% consider it an important part of their local community**: 58% believe it makes their neighbourhood a better place to live and 63% would be concerned if the local church was not there. Those who would be concerned include 38% of people with no religion and 38% of adherents of other faiths.
- Three church and cathedral locations are **World Heritage Sites**: Durham Castle and Cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral, St Augustine's Abbey & St Martin's Church, and Westminster Abbey and St Margaret's Church.
- Necessary repairs to all listed places of worship in England have been valued at £925m over the next five years, or £185m a year. **£110 million is currently spent on repairs** to Church of England churches per annum, 70% of it raised by the congregations and local community.

Sources:

Church Statistics 2003/4, 2004/5, and 2006/7

Opinion Research Business national polls 2000-2007

English Heritage and Church of England Cathedral and Church Buildings Division Joint Research

Church Life Survey 2001