

## GENERAL SYNOD

### **The Common Good - the Church and Politics Today**

#### **A paper from the Mission and Public Affairs Council**

1. The theme of contributing to the common good was explored in (GS 1815), “Challenges for the New Quinquennium”, with action points set out in GS Misc 995. In 2013, Synod received a progress report (GS 1895) on all three goals. The purpose of the present paper is not to enumerate all that is happening across the church under the heading of “the common good” but to reaffirm the centrality of the common good in Christian discipleship and the mission of the church, to celebrate and affirm all that our churches and congregations do to build up the common life of the nation, and to consider the place of the common good in contemporary political thinking and how we can help to bring it centre stage in a shared vision of what a good society might be.

#### **The Common Good in Theology Today**

2. The Synod papers launching the three Quinquennial goals included a substantial theological section on the common good. For convenience, extracts from the theological section are attached as an annexe to this paper.
3. The theme of the common good has been part of Anglican thought and liturgy for many years but is more fully developed in Catholic Social Teaching. One interesting development since 2010 is the extent to which Catholic and Anglican theologians have been revisiting the theme of the common good together. For instance, in September 2013, Liverpool Hope University hosted a conference entitled “Together for the Common Good” which revisited the famous partnership between Bishop David Sheppard and Archbishop Derek Worlock and looked again at how the two churches could work together in that spirit for the common good. Much new work, theological and practical, is flowing out of that event, and this is just one example of the new impetus among theologians to explore the theme of the common good.<sup>1</sup>
4. Indeed, theological interest in the common good is far from confined to Anglicans and Roman Catholics – whether in the burgeoning of social action by the independent evangelical and Pentecostal churches, or the work of the Methodist/URC/Baptist Joint Public Issues Team, “the common good” is becoming a shared theme across the churches. Much of this will be drawn together in a forthcoming report from the Theos think tank entitled *Good Neighbours: How Churches Help Communities to Flourish*. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and Church Action on Poverty have

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<sup>1</sup> See also, for example, the new book to be launched at Synod in July 2014, *Anglican Social Theology: Renewing the vision for today*, edited by Malcolm Brown (CHP, 2014)

recently released a report entitled “The Good Society” which stresses the ecumenical nature of much of the churches’ work to support the common good.<sup>2</sup>

### **The loss of the common good in public life today**

*“Important Enlightenment virtues of autonomy, individuality and property rights have unleashed a monster that threatens to carry all before it ... sweeping away not only democracy but also our values.” Jurgen Habermas.*

5. Much of the work in the churches and among academics flows from the growing consensus that the financial crisis of 2008, and subsequent recession, marked a more fundamental challenge to our society’s values and structures than was immediately obvious. The dominant economic model, in which the individual, largely divorced from culture and community, is the main building-block, and which assumes self-interest as the basis for all decisions, has both reflected and contributed to a society which weakens the bonds between people, privileges autonomy over inter-dependence and undervalues aspects of life which have no obvious cash value.
6. That perception deepened as the impact of recession widened material inequality. But whilst a more materially equal society would ease numerous social tensions and ills,<sup>3</sup> the pursuit of the common good entails much more than a fairer distribution of wealth. In short, there can be no sense of the common good without a deep understanding of what we have in common. It is about our common humanity first, but it is also about maximising the commitment to shared values and a sense of community. Our society has tended to emphasise individual autonomy. This is not in itself wrong, but it should be balanced by valuing also the promotion of the common good in the interests of community, both current and future.<sup>4</sup>
7. At the heart of “common good” thinking is a commitment to “intermediate institutions” – structures much smaller than the state but much wider than individuals and their families, which are substantial enough to be part of how people define the values they share. Paradoxically, the more individualistic a culture, the greater the burden on the state in managing and enforcing the social structures that prevent a descent into anarchy. Individualism, often associated with right-wing market economics, and the tendency for the state to grow which has been characteristic of the political left, go together in ways which “traditional” adversarial politics does not always recognise. This is why the restoration of strong intermediate institutions is a common theme in important strands of new thinking on both right and left today.

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<sup>2</sup> See: [www.agoodsociety.org](http://www.agoodsociety.org) and reports in the *Church Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level, Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, Allen Lane, 2009. It is, however, worth noting that material inequality has gone on widening for over 30 years, through times of prosperity as well as recession.

<sup>4</sup> Another aspect of inequality is the perception that a gulf is opening between London and the South East and the rest of the country. It may be that metropolitan values stress autonomy and individualism more enthusiastically than in other communities, but the weakening of communitarian values affects us all.

8. Whilst a concern for the common good is found among many people who claim no religious commitment, religious traditions in general (and in Britain the Christian churches in particular) are among the strongest and most resilient intermediate institutions. The notion of the common good is not unique to Christianity, but it is rooted in our beliefs about God's relationship to his people and is an inescapable part of a Christian world-view. From its earliest days, the church has understood its mission to be for all the world and its message of salvation addressed to all peoples and all generations. By seeking the welfare of all, the church expresses its conviction that God wants his creation to flourish (Jer. 29: 7). By living out Christ's sacrifice for us – liturgically, in prayer and in selfless service to others – the church's commitment to living as Christ lived is demonstrated in its pursuit of the common good of all.
  
9. A commitment to the common good does not emerge from nowhere. It is intimately bound up with the shared stories that people tell each other to impart meaning to relationships and to their lives. Where there are shared stories, traditions and practices, the common good moves out of the abstract realm to become “how we live together as community” – both within the church and beyond our own faith tradition.
  
10. This is why all that we do to build up the church and to draw new disciples to Christ is part of our commitment to the common good. Growing the church helps build a “school for virtue” where the good of all is explored through our stories and traditions as expressed in the gospels, the liturgy and other practices. Building a society which values the good of all requires strong churches (among other institutions). Pursuing the common good is not just “something Christians do”, it is how we live as “church” in the first place, and extends beyond those of our own faith to embrace those of other faiths and none who share a commitment to the common good.

### **Contributing to the Common Good Today**

*“A devout person pursues her daily rounds drawing on her belief. Put differently, true belief is not a doctrine but a source of energy that the person who has faith taps performatively and thus nurtures his or her entire life.” Jorgen Habermas.*

11. GS 1895 outlined some of the initiatives being taken by the Church of England at local and national levels which contributed to the common good. These activities continue, and have multiplied and developed, to the extent that no comprehensive account of all that the church is doing is practicable. Some of this work has had national profile. The churches' contribution to the food bank movement has been widely noted and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Task Group on Responsible Credit and Saving is cited in numerous reports on banking reform and credit unions. The majority of the church's contribution to the common good has only a local profile. Importantly, our Church Schools are focussed on serving their communities, including children of other faiths

and none, and in their very ethos help to embed a commitment to the common good among staff, children and parents.<sup>5</sup>

12. Secularist assumptions, increasingly dominant in the media, politics and elsewhere, tend to marginalise all religion and to denigrate and deplore the social significance of the churches. This is not how we understand ourselves. To the extent that our critics can point to past and present abuses of power by the churches, it means we are failing in our witness. But on the other side of the coin, the churches' numerous public contributions to the common good are an enormously effective advocacy for Christian faith in national life. This impact, especially during years of recession which have brought hardship and division to many areas, is a cause for celebration, even though the context which has prompted much of the work is one of pain and distress.
13. The initiatives which have grabbed the headlines are only a fraction of the church's contribution to the common good today. Small, unsung acts of neighbourliness, characteristic of most Christian lives, may be known to nobody but those most closely involved. Reticence about good works is a gospel principle (Matt.6: 2—4). Yet such acts of neighbourliness make an incalculably large contribution to the good of all: from those who are housebound maintaining a discipline of prayer for their neighbours and the community to practical help offered as a matter of course. Without lives lived in neighbourly love, community in any meaningful sense is impossible. Acts of neighbourliness spring out of awareness of the common good and simultaneously help generate a common commitment to the good by showing the extent to which lives and values are shared.
14. Perhaps the greatest need, in relation to the church's contribution to the common good, is to remind Christian people that the small things they do out of love of neighbour are far more counter-culturally important than they may realise. Especially for those who have grown up in the Christian faith, acts of generous love which come naturally may be far from "normal" in a society increasingly structured around the individual where relationships of all kinds tend to be understood through concepts of contract and commodity. That is, the way we live among our neighbours is a most eloquent and effective way to counter the idea that everyone is out for themselves and that other people are of value only in so far as they help me meet my needs.
15. So it is important that we celebrate, and maximise, the initiatives and projects through which the church makes a vital contribution to the well being of society and especially its most vulnerable members. But it is equally important to remember that, for the church, the common good is about more than projects: it is about the Christian way of life. Commitment to neighbour, community and the good of all needs to be embedded in national life, supported by the way we shape our social institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> In a number of Church of England schools, a majority of children may be of a faith other than Christianity. The pursuit of the common good across religious differences is at the heart of what these schools do.

## **The Common Good in British politics today**

16. The recent European and local elections offered evidence of growing public dissatisfaction with, and alienation from, mainstream politics. There is an emerging concern that “politics” may be incapable of creating the kind of society that people want, that politicians are in it for themselves, and that many of our social institutions are broken. Rapid change, and the sense that power is concentrating in fewer and fewer hands – consequences, partly, of a globalising economy – are disturbing for many. A focus on economic growth, promoting dynamism and responding immediately to technological developments, carries with it a human cost in terms of insecurity and an inability to commit to long term relationships in the community.
17. A common response to insecurity is to blame, and turn upon, “the other”. Coupled with cynicism about the potential for politics or economics to create a good society, there is a real possibility of serious social fragmentation. Not surprisingly, political thinkers associated with different parties are been struggling with these matters.
18. At the time of the 2010 General Election, just as the Church of England was committing itself afresh to pursuing the common good, congruent ideas were emerging in the Conservative Party under the banner of the Big Society. Before and immediately after the election, there were fruitful conversations between church representatives and the thinkers behind these ideas. The first Parliamentary debate on the Big Society was initiated by the Bishop of Leicester and practical outcomes such as the Near Neighbours programme followed.
19. This is not the place to examine in detail the fate of the Big Society. Some Coalition policies have reflected its ideals (such as Big Society Capital and some aspects of the Localism Act), but others seem to pull in other directions. Synod is due to consider a Diocesan Synod Motion on the Spare Room Subsidy Removal (the so-called “bedroom tax”) – an aspect of welfare reform which seems to some to undervalue people’s informal local networks of support. There is certainly a question about how deeply rooted Big Society ideas have yet become in the policies and political philosophy of the Conservative party.
20. If the Big Society expressed David Cameron’s opposition to the concentration of power in an increasingly overweening state, some thinkers on the left have also begun to focus on ways to build up local communities and intermediate institutions which can challenge the dominance of corporate power without expecting the state to carry impossible expectations. To some extent, their thinking has informed Ed Miliband’s reflections on what he has called “the Good Society”, but, again, it is not clear how far these ideas have so far permeated official Labour thinking.

21. It is hard to point to any equivalent ferment of ideas among Liberal Democrats at present, although there is plenty in the liberal political tradition that might be called in support of the communitarian concerns which are emerging in the other main parties.
22. UKIP's political philosophy is, as yet, rather a blank canvas, and the extent of any internal debate about the party's underlying analysis of society is unclear. The Green Party manifesto speaks explicitly of "the common good", although this has yet to impinge strongly on the national political debate.
23. On both left and right, thinking which returns the notion of the common good to our wider political discourse is developing, although not yet mainstream. Yet the movements behind these ideas are persistent and contain much that should be of interest to the churches. For example, in the work of Phillip Blond of the ResPublica think tank, who generated the ideas often called "Red Toryism" and, on the left, Lord Maurice Glasman (inevitably dubbed "Blue Labour"), support for the role of the churches in promoting the common good is at the heart of both their projects.
24. Both Blond and Glasman are keen for the church to be a major player in developing resilient and viable local communities, and argue strongly against the secular assumption that the influence of religion in society is always sectarian or divisive. On the contrary, they recognise that religious people are naturally biased to working together for the common good and that this sacrificial love of neighbour is crucial if rich patterns of community are to flourish. Both start from a critique of liberal individualism which, whether in the guise of economic liberalism or social liberalism, has over-stressed the primacy of the individual to the point where our dependence upon one another is eclipsed, with disastrous results for politics and society at large. For both Blond and Glasman, religious communities are among the few places where civility and the common good are still valued and practiced. The churches, they argue, must be supported to help build a better social and political settlement.

### **The Common Good and the next General Election**

25. As the next General Election approaches, in May 2015, the parties are starting to construct their manifestos. The months ahead offer a window of opportunity for the Church of England to make known its hopes and expectations for the "offer" which the parties will be making to the electorate in a year's time. How might we hope to see the common good reflected in the positions and policies of the parties?
26. There could be a number of broad indications that the parties might be taking the common good more seriously. Without suggesting that this is a comprehensive or uncontroversial list, some of the signs might be:

- Acknowledging the depth of insecurity and anxiety that has permeated our society after several decades of rapid change, not least the changes brought about by the banking crisis and austerity programme.
  - Policies which suggest that people matter for their own sake and not just for their productive potential, whether in their early years, adulthood or old age.
  - Recognition of people’s need for supportive local communities and that the informal and voluntary sectors hold society together in ways which neither the state nor private enterprise can match.
  - Moves to devolve power (the subsidiarity principle) rather than allowing it to accumulate, whether in state or private hands, and which build up the voluntary sector.
  - Policies which recognise that people need a sense of place and of belonging.
  - Addressing the culture of regulation and litigation when it acts as a “chill factor” on voluntary action, where anxiety about potential litigation can be a brake on action.
  - Recognition that gross material inequality is deeply injurious to social bonds and the common good.
  - Policies which reflect the obligation to secure the common good of future generations, not just our own, and to address issues of intergenerational justice.
27. There are many ways in which political parties might seek to address points like these. Parties will develop policies in their own idiom. But the traditions of both left and right include strands which could be drawn upon to help restore the notion of the common good to the heart of our political and social life.
28. Whether there will be explicit manifesto recognition of the role – actual and potential – of the churches in building the common good remains to be seen. Indeed, we should be cautious if the churches are lauded only on utilitarian grounds, for the good works they do and not for their intrinsic challenge to fragmentary individualism. Secularist thinking is perfectly capable of valuing the churches as sources of charity. But secularism’s assumption that religion has no place in the nation’s political and social structures is deaf to history – as the media debate at Easter about the Christian roots of British society made clear. This country’s Christian roots are one of the most important springs from which a new public commitment to the common good of all people, regardless of faith or belief, might emerge.

29. Such a vision is not going to be realised overnight. But it will be a considerable advance if, as the election approaches, the parties recognise that the current trajectory of politics and society is heading too far from the things we all hold in common. We hope the parties will demonstrate a renewed emphasis on the common good and the importance of faith in creating a society worth living in.

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June 2013



**Extract from *The Church of England and the Common Good Today* (2010)**

2. The idea of the common good ... is first expressed as a philosophical idea in Aristotle's *Politics* and enters Christian thought in the work of Aquinas and Ignatius. Ignatius extended the Aristotelian principle to refer, not only to free men participating in democratic structures but to all people universally. For Aquinas, the common good is discovered not just in political structures but in the ties of affection that bind people together in families and communities.
3. The notion of the common good does not translate easily from the early Christian ideal into modern social terms. David Hollenbach has argued that a particular understanding of pluralism, the growth of individualism and the allied emphasis in politics on diversity and freedom (understood in individualistic terms) constitute a major challenge to the concept of the common good. He argues that, "the good that can be achieved in the shared domain of public life is hidden from view as protection of individual, private wellbeing becomes the centre of normative concern".<sup>6</sup>
4. If the church values its traditional understanding of the common good, its ethics will inevitably be perceived as counter cultural in a modern social framework. It is as well that this should be understood from the outset.
5. The phrase "the Common Good" has two main reference points in recent church history. The processes of liturgical revision which began in the Church of England in the 1960s led to new Intercessory prayers in the Communion service, introducing the well-known petition, that we may "honour one another and seek the common good". This form of words has persisted through Series 3, the ASB and into Common Worship. Importantly, this line follows the petitions for the Queen and all in authority. The pursuit of the common good is an aspect of personal discipleship but also part of God's calling to the social and political structures.
6. Secondly, *The Common Good* was the title of an important document from the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, published in 1996. This paper established the importance within Catholic Social Teaching of the pursuit of the common good as an obligation on the Church and the State. It provoked an exceptionally positive response across the Christian churches of Britain. In the run-up to the 2010 General Election, the Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a new document entitled *Choosing the Common Good*, which again stressed that personal discipleship and a concern for the political order come together in the Church's vocation to seek the good of all people.
7. In comparing the intercessory prayers of today's liturgy with that of the BCP, the more recent texts suggest a church with a greater awareness of its distinctiveness within a society whose conception of the good is no longer seen as identical with the Christian

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<sup>6</sup> David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.10.

vision. This reflects Hollenbach's argument. But it is also worth noting the danger that a church which feels alienated from dominant social trends might forget its vocation to seek the good of those beyond its own membership.

8. Pursuing this theme, it is not surprising that the Catholic Bishops' document, *The Common Good*, was published at a time when individualism and social fragmentation had increased dramatically over the preceding two decades. By 1996 it was obvious that social atomisation, coupled with an emerging identity politics, was straining the bonds of mutuality and community across Britain, and that this was not a passing phase attributable to specific policies but a deepening trend.
9. In both cases, then, the emphasis on the pursuit of the common good as an imperative grounded in Christian doctrine and ethics can be seen to reflect the tension between the churches' teaching about human society and the direction in which social relationships were moving at a particular stage in the history of liberal social institutions.

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13. Anglican theology, like Catholic Social Teaching, grounds the importance of the common good upon the intrinsic dignity of every human being. All bear God's image and all are loved by the God who desires their flourishing. Moreover, a Christian anthropology understands the human person to be essentially social by nature. Humanity is created for the purpose of relationships marked by love: love of God and of each other. It is not just a matter of empirical fact, but an aspect of the created order, that human beings flourish best in social relationships – starting with the family but extending much further in the wider “families” of community, church and nation as well as in global affinities within the human family itself.
14. It is because these relationships are perceived to be fragile and undervalued that an emphasis on the common good becomes part of the church's “offer” to the times in which we live: part of a vision of living well. It is also a reminder to Christians that their mission in the world is not just to enable the church to flourish but to promote the flourishing of all people.

## The good of the Church and the common good

15. A flourishing church is, however, integral to any worthwhile vision of the common good. To desire the flourishing of all people involves their spiritual flourishing as well as material well being. Since we believe that God calls all people to be one in Him through Christ, and the church is the community of those marked by their trust in Christ's redeeming love, the good of the world requires a flourishing and outgoing church.
16. Any tendency to see the pursuit of the common good as a discrete activity somehow detached from the worshipping and missionary life of the church is mistaken. Building up the church is part of the Christian commitment to the common good since the good cannot be fully realised apart from Christ, and Christ cannot be fully known outside the community of the faithful.
17. William Temple makes this point very clearly at the end of his seminal *Christianity and Social Order*. 'If we have to choose between making men Christian and making the social order more Christian, we must choose the former. But there is no such antithesis. Certainly there can be no Christian society unless there is a large body of convinced and devoted Christian people to establish it and keep it true to its own principles.'
18. It remains that churches can become so caught up in their internal affairs that the calling of the ecclesial community to seek the common good of all ceases to feature significantly in their self-understanding. The call to pursue the common good is not a diversion from the core task, nor a subtle implication that salvation can be found in works, but a reminder that a church which is consumed by its own concerns, or which recognises fellow human beings only as potential church members, is missing a central element of its calling.
19. Calling men and women to follow Christ is a part – but only a part – of what is entailed by the pursuit of the common good. As the Roman Catholic documents on the subject remind us, the threat to the God-given dignity of every human being posed by aspects of the political, economic and social structures necessitates a Christian response. If the pursuit of the common good is integral to the church's missionary vocation, it is also (in the non-partisan sense) a political programme for ordering the world we have.