

The House of Bishops of the Church of England have today expressed the hope for political parties to discern "a fresh moral vision of the kind of country we want to be" ahead of the General Election in May of this year.

In a pastoral letter from the House of Bishops to the people and parishes of the Church of England, the Bishops urge Christians to consider the question how can we "build the kind of society which many people say they want but which is not yet being expressed in the vision of any of the parties?"

The letter also encourages church members to engage in the political process ahead of the General Election and to put aside self-interest and vote for 'the common good': "The privileges of living in a democracy mean that we should use our votes thoughtfully, prayerfully and with the good of others in mind, not just our own interests."

The letter also states that: "In Britain, we have become so used to believing that self-interest drives every decision, that it takes a leap of imagination to argue that there should be stronger institutions for those we disagree with as well as for those 'on our side.' Breaking free of self-interest and welcoming our opponents as well as our supporters into a messy, noisy, yet rich and creative community of communities is, perhaps, the only way we will enrich our almost-moribund political culture."

The letter defends the right of the Church to enter into the political arena: "It is not possible to separate the way a person perceives his or her place in the created order from their beliefs, religious or otherwise, about how the world's affairs ought to be arranged. The claim that religion and political life must be kept separate is, in any case, frequently disingenuous - most politicians and pundits are happy enough for the churches to speak on political issues so long as the church agrees with their particular line."

The pastoral letter draws on the experience of the Church of England as a Christian presence in every community to warn of the disengagement between politicians and the people. They note that "with few exceptions, politicians are not driven merely by cynicism or self-interest" but nevertheless, "the different parties have failed to offer attractive visions of the kind of society and culture they wish to see.... There is no idealism in this prospectus".

The letter encourages political parties across the spectrum to seek bold new visions of hope and idealism rather than "sterile arguments about who might manage the existing system best."

The bishops also argue Britain is in need of a stronger politics of community to boost solidarity between people and reverse a drift towards social isolation: "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."

The letter specifically avoids advocacy for one any political party but instead encourages those in the Church to seek from political candidates a commitment to building a society of common bonds over individual consumerism. The bishops say Britain is hungry for a new approach to political life which reaffirms our ties at a national, regional, community and neighbourhood level. There is a need for a strong corrective to halt the move towards increasing social isolation, they say, through strengthening the idea that that Britain is still a "community of communities." This, they say, is a theme which has roots in the historic traditions of different parties: "We are seeking, not a string of policy offers, but a way of conceiving and ordering our political and economic life which can be pursued in a conservative idiom, a socialist idiom, a liberal idiom - and by others not aligned to party."

The pastoral letter argues that the Church of England finds its voice through being a presence in every community with churches remaining one of the primary agents of social action and social care in parishes across the country. The letter argues that Intermediate institutions such as housing associations, credit unions and churches are needed for their role in building stronger communities. A thriving society needs many intermediate institutions, they say, including those who disagree with each other.

The letter also recognises the inherent danger in the current situation where people are disengaging from politics, arguing that restoring faith in both politicians and the political process requires a new politics that engages at both a deeper more local level within a wider, broader vision for the country as a whole.

In the letter, the bishops warn against despair and urge people to vote in the General Election: "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."

ENDS

[Read the Pastoral letter](#)

Printed copies of the Pastoral Letter can be [purchased from Church House Publishing](#)

[Read a guide to the pastoral letter and its contents.](#)

Read statements from the [Bishop of Norwich](#) and [Bishop of Leicester](#).

The Church of England & Church Urban Fund research "Church in Action" can be found at:

<http://www.cuf.org.uk/blog/churches-respond-loneliness-crisis>

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/house-bishops-pastoral-letter-2015-general-election>