

## GENERAL SYNOD

### Report on the Immersion Experience in India by Regional Representatives of the House of Bishops

#### Background

1. The immersion experience was designed as a pilot to explore how Christian Aid might support the learning of those taking senior leadership roles within the Church of England. Specifically, by deepening knowledge and understanding of global justice issues and enabling senior leaders to become more effective advocates with respect to their role in church leadership and public theology.
2. As the Church of England's humanitarian and development organisation, Christian Aid is aware of planned changes to the resourcing and development of senior leaders in the church and is keen to contribute appropriately. The knowledge and experience built over the past 70 years, plus a global network of partners working on the ground in over 40 countries means that Christian Aid has a significant learning resource to share.
3. Church leaders are routinely required to comment and reflect on global issues of poverty and injustice in the public square and need to do so in a confident and informed way. More profoundly, they are called to lead the wider church in responding to the needs of the poor and to take effective action to change the world<sup>i</sup>. Christian Aid already works closely with senior leaders e.g. by providing briefings to bishops in the House of Lords, but there is no substitute for *seeing* and *encountering* issues first hand.
4. Immersion is one way in which that *seeing* and *engaging* can take place. It is a well-established methodology used for example by the World Bank with its senior managers. Importantly it is a way of engaging that allows those who are 'the poor' to speak for themselves rather than being spoken about.
5. The key element of an immersion experience is the opportunity to share in the lives of real people albeit briefly, and for any action that results to be done *with* and not *to* the communities concerned. For Christian Aid this is both a practical and theological imperative. Practical, because tackling poverty effectively is about giving people power to change their own lives and theologically, because this process of empowerment is a recognition and acknowledgement of the transcendent dignity that every person has and the justice God requires for creation.
6. Gender was chosen as the focus for the immersion:
  - because gender justice is widely acknowledged to be a key factor in overcoming poverty internationally and one which our international partners tell us requires urgent attention;
  - because those selected for the pilot were all senior women leaders in the Church of England and
  - because this is an issue where church leaders, churches and faith based organizations have a unique position to affect change.<sup>ii</sup>
7. The pilot was planned by Christian Aid in collaboration with the Leading Women Group and the Transformations Group. The immersion visit itself was facilitated by Christian Aid's partner, Praxis in India. An immersion typically has three stages: (a) Pre-immersion

preparation which includes thinking about the practical issues of any visit and what the learning objectives should be; (b) The immersion itself, supported appropriately; (c) Post immersion a process of reflection to clarify what has been learned and to consider how that learning should be used.

### **The 2014/2015 Immersion**

8. The immersion visit itself took place in a rural community in Kerala, India. Participants went in pairs accompanied by an interpreter and lived in the homes of tribal families, sharing in daily lives and receiving their hospitality and welcome. By focusing particularly on the lives of women they were able to get a first-hand insight into the complex way issues of gender contribute to and perpetuate poverty.
9. During the immersion, a number of planned visits to local projects where women were taking the leading roles gave an insight into the transformation that was possible when gender injustice was challenged and overcome. Discussions with the women leading those projects provided considerable insight into how change can be effected and the role of advocacy in that process.
10. The post-immersion reflection process now underway will give an opportunity for participants to reflect on how this particular experience, *seeing with our own eyes and touching with our own hands*, has added to their learning and provided additional resources for public ministry. By drawing on the experience of the immersion, their own prayer, and wider theological resources, including Christian Aid's global theological reflection on gender, the particular role that churches and church leaders have in challenging deep-rooted cultural norms that perpetuate injustice will shape into specific personal actions.
11. The post immersion reflection is also an opportunity to reflect more generally on the pilot as a model for the future. These will be fed back to those responsible for senior leadership training, including the Development and Appointments Group, to take the pilot forward.
12. The participants on this Immersion Experience wish to record their gratitude to Christian Aid, The Allchurches Trust, Praxis and Leading Women, without whom this amazing experience would not have been possible.

#### **Notes:**

Christian Aid's gender theology and corporate strategy papers can be found here

<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/of-the-same-flesh-gender-theology-report.pdf>

[http://www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/Reports-Gender-Strategy-July2014-J2623\\_tcm15-78960.pdf](http://www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/Reports-Gender-Strategy-July2014-J2623_tcm15-78960.pdf)

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<sup>i</sup> *The Common Good* (GS 1956) has been a timely reminder of the significant role of the church can play in shaping a society within which all can flourish and attain the transcendent dignity God has given. Christian Aid believes that churches and other faith based organizations can effect changes in ways that governments and other institutions cannot.

<sup>ii</sup> Whilst NGO's come and go, faith institutions are a constant presence throughout many people's lives and the majority of people in developing countries interpret their life options (including what is desirable and 'normal' for their gender) through the lens of their faith. When it comes to understanding how we should relate to ourselves and each other, faith leaders are often at the vanguard of our consciousness and as such, for both men and women, faith leaders are amongst the first they go to for guidance. When faith leaders confront and speak out publicly against gender inequality, they make it easier for individuals, communities and politicians to do the same.