

## GENERAL SYNOD

### Centuries of Marginalisation; Visions of Hope Mission and Ministry among Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities

#### Introduction

The Churches Network for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma was established over 20 years ago to bring together Gypsy, Traveller and Roma Christians and those ministering with them, to provide mutual support and fellowship. It also aims to be a body that seeks to call for justice for this highly marginalised group of people in our society.

It is a highly ecumenical organisation and includes Anglicans, Roman Catholics, The Salvation Army, traditional Nonconformists and Pentecostals, and It has a broad range of supporters in the English Romany, the Irish Traveller and Roma communities.

Romany Gypsies and Travellers have been present in the UK for at least 500 years. Ever since their arrival they have been subject to racial discrimination. In spite of being recognised by the Equalities Act as a minority ethnic group they are subject to casual racism on a daily basis and high levels of institutional racism. A substantial part of the UK Romanies and Travellers have a caravan-dwelling or nomadic life-style which attracts racialised abuse. Many immigrant Roma, however, whose families have never been nomadic, see being treated as "nomads" as, itself, racist stereotyping. (Ryder, Cemlyn and Acton, 2014). This report seeks to give background, challenge racism against Gypsies and Travellers and calls the Church to act to bring justice to these much marginalised people, who have so much to offer the wider Church.

#### Racism on a Daily Basis

1. Speaking in 2004, Trevor Phillips as chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, compared the racism meted out to Gypsies and Travellers as being similar to that experienced by black people living in the deep south of America in the 1950s (BBC News Sunday, 17 October 2004)
2. Extreme levels of hostility are the norm today, fuelled by irresponsible media coverage, of the kind that would be met by outrage if targeted at any other group. People have described prejudice against Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Roma as 'the last acceptable racism' or 'the last apartheid'
3. Writing in the Guardian in January 2016 Mike Doherty of the Traveller Movement asserted that 9 out of 10 Traveller children have suffered racial abuse and 2/3 have been bullied or physically attacked. Many from the Gypsy, Irish Traveller and Roma communities now seek to hide their identity when applying for jobs as they know it will generally reduce their chances of employment.
4. In 2004 a Stonewall report listed some of the commonly held prejudices

'It was argued that these groups did not conform to the system by paying taxes, had a reputation for questionable business practices, and did not respect private property. They were criticised for not belonging to the community and had a negative effect on the environment, for example they were unsightly, dirty or unhygienic'

5. (Valentine and MacDonald, 2004) Under half of Gypsies and Travellers live on sites, a small majority privately owned, the rest council run; many live in houses and they pay rent just like everyone else. (Acton, Acton, Acton, Cemlyn and Ryder 2016) The rest are homeless, often living in great poverty, yet they pay VAT, road tax and all the indirect taxes, without receiving all the benefits of citizens.

## **Institutional Racism**

6. Since the 'Egyptians Act' of 1530, banning further immigration of Romany Gypsies and seeking to deport resident Gypsies, there have been constant Government attempts through legislation to ban, criminalise, marginalise, and forcibly settle nomadic people in the UK Clark and Greenfields, 2006).
7. Recent Government changes to planning guidance in August 2015 sought to define Gypsies and Travellers in planning law by whether they were pursuing a nomadic lifestyle. This potentially means if they cease to travel (which has become almost impossible due to the almost total loss of traditional stopping places) they will be defined out of existence and lose their ethnic status. Further planning restrictions on developing sites on Greenbelt or in the open countryside will make establishing sites even more difficult. The Housing Act of 2016, with the withdrawal of the need for Local Authorities to assess the needs of Gypsies and Travellers and the Control of Horses Act of the same year seem to be part of a concerted legislative attack on Gypsies and Travellers. (Traveller Movement Report, 2017)
8. Hargreaves and Brindley writing in 2011 in 'Planning for Gypsies and Travellers' write

'There are no stopping places, few Transit Sites, no emergency sites and families on the road face constant eviction'

9. The lack of permanent sites and the difficulties of getting planning permission due to local opposition egged on by a hostile media, is the biggest single issue facing the Gypsy/Traveller community. Without secure accommodation and safe stopping places access to education, employment and health is severely restricted. Inequalities in health, education and the disproportionate number of Gypsies and Travellers in the Criminal Justice System are staggering, and desperately in need of redress.
10. Life expectancy was 12 years lower for women and 10 years lower for men according to the CRE (2006). People over 50 in the Traveller community are seen as elderly. Infant mortality in samples of the Irish Traveller community were 3 times that in the settled community. People have low expectations of good health and a

nomadic lifestyle and forced removals mean that hospital appointments are not always kept. Many GP receptionists will refuse to register people with no permanent address, and the lack of awareness of the culture and customs of Gypsies and Travellers by health workers further mitigates against them.

11. Discrimination of course exacerbates poor mental health, as it leads to a devaluation of self by the victim, which leads to a lack of confidence, avoiding others and often distrust of the other. Parry et al (2004) calculated that Gypsies and Travellers are 3 times as likely to be anxious and twice as likely to be depressed as the wider community. Forced settlement also badly affects people used to living outdoors, as does the constant uncertainty of those without sites and harried from pillar to post on the roadside.
12. Huge inequalities persist in terms of educational achievement, with communities having low rates of literacy. In schools in the UK exclusion rates for Gypsy/Traveller children are 4 times above the national average (Traveller Movement 2017). The Children's Commission (2012) found that 100% of appeals against the exclusion of Gypsy and Irish Traveller children were successful which suggests that a large number of exclusions must have been unfairly given and, is symptomatic of the failure to fully include these children in the school system.
13. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2014) found that 5% of the prison population is made up of people from the Irish Traveller and Romany Gypsy communities, which make up only 0.5% of the UK population. More staggering still are figures which show that 11% of detainees in Secure Training Centres for children and young people and 8% of the inmates of Young Offenders Institutes are from these communities.
14. Churches too have been part of this institutional racism, in their failure to welcome Gypsies and Travellers into the full life of their communities. There is much anecdotal evidence of people being refused Baptism, Weddings and Funerals and such things as churches cutting off the outside tap for the graveyard rather than have Travellers use their water supply.

### **Theological Reflections**

15. In the Bible significant figures are or become nomadic, such as Abram, Jacob, Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Deuteronomy 26 states

'My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt...The Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us; they imposed cruel slavery on us. We cried to the Lord the God of our Father for help and He listened to us and when he saw our hardship and oppression the Lord led us out of Egypt with an outstretched arm'

16. Today we call on the Church not to forget the oppression of Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Roma, who are subject to so much casual racism and institutional inequality and to stand with them in their struggle for liberation.

17. Jesus born in a stable, forced to flee as a refugee at an early age, chose to live as a wandering nomad for much of his ministry

'Foxes have holes, the birds of the air nests, but The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'

18. He also freely associated himself with the marginalised and socially excluded of his day for whom he had a particular love, and we believe because of this Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Roma are close to his heart. We also suggest that the Church has much to learn from the Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities who choose to live simply, have a love of the earth, their extended families and a tradition of welcome to the stranger.

19. Up and down the country there is a growing recognition and celebration and renewal of the Christian faith amongst Gypsy, Roma and Irish Travellers. The huge growth of the 'Life and Light' movement, the establishment of Independent Roma Churches, the appointment of a National RC Chaplain to Gypsies and Travellers, the establishment of the Margaret Clitheroe Trust, the work of the Salvation Army with new Roma congregations, the appointment of Anglican Chaplains to work with Gypsies Travellers and Roma all point to this.

## **Recommendations**

20. We call upon the Church to:

- Speak out publicly against racism and hate crimes directed against Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Roma
- Urge the Media to stop denigrating and victimising these communities
- Instigate a Commission on Sites for Gypsies and Travellers and encourage the local and national Church to make land available for new sites managed by Housing Associations
- For Bishops in the House of Lords to continue to speak out boldly against legislation that seeks to further marginalise Gypsies Irish Travellers and Roma
- We urge the Bishops to call on central government to address the extreme distress of those Roma who have migrated to the UK in recent times and are anxious about their ongoing status in the light of the Brexit negotiations.
- For each Diocese to be encouraged to appoint a Chaplain to Gypsies and Travellers, to harness the potential for Church growth here, and work to combat racism in the Church and wider community.

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## **CASE STUDIES**

### **Gypsies, Roma, Travellers and Local Anglican Churches.**

#### Case 1;

##### Travelling Home:

The village of Horton in Berkshire is part of an area which has a long-established traveller community, which is a reflection of the broader context that can be found in the Thames Valley. Although the relationship between travellers and the broader community has witnessed a steady improvement over recent years, there is much work to be done regarding building lasting bridges. At the heart of the village sits St Michael's church, a much-loved building for over a millennium. It is a place that has witnessed the journey of life for many travellers, from the joy of celebrating a new life, through the affirming of relationships, to the harsh reality of death, in many cases prematurely. Although the church plays a central role in local traveller society and culture, it is not representative regarding attendance. It was in this context that the concept of a service aimed at travellers was born. This was only possible through the involvement of key members of the local Traveller community. The name chosen for the new service was Travelling Home (TH), which encapsulates the yearning mentioned previously. The first service took place in July 2015, with an attendance that exceeded all expectations. Due to its success, more followed in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Due to the popularity of the summer services, an extra Christmas one was held in 2016. The service was entitled Travelling Home for Christmas, was presided over by the Bishop of Buckingham, The Rt Revd Alan Wilson, followed by a light meal served at the village hall. This was only possible through close collaboration with Thames Valley Police. Les Bradfield, the local PCSO who used to be a chef, and now runs a food station as a way to engage with communities, cooked all the food. He is keen on increasing his visibility and Trust within the Traveller community.

It can be said that Travelling Home has been a greatly appreciated celebration of Romani culture and tradition and helped to build stronger bridge building between Traveller and non-Traveller communities. But the PCC has not seen TH as a success in terms of growing church attendance. This is a long-term matter to which cultural shifts of the kind being pioneered by TH are important contributors.

#### Case 2;

An Anglican priest in Wiltshire refused to officiate or allow the church to be used for a Romany Traveller funeral, as he claimed the family didn't come to church or had any association with the church. This was in spite of the fact that several generations of the family had been buried in the churchyard. Instead a ceremony was taken by a local Baptist minister at the town cemetery.

## Case 3;

Before a funeral in Somerset, the local Vicar under pressure from his congregation delegated the taking of a big Romany funeral involving a 1,000 plus mourners to a Licensed Lay Minister. The lay minister was criticised by a number of the congregation for agreeing to take the funeral. The neighbouring church in the Benefice was locked for fear of being “ransacked” by the Gypsies.

## Case 4;

Members of the local Anglican church in a Dorset village were some of the most vociferous critics, at a public meeting in the village called to oppose an application for planning permission for a single local Romany Gypsy family to live on a plot of land they had bought. They expressed fears that the village would become over run with Gypsies and strain would be put on the local school and that people would no longer feel their property was safe.

### **Gypsies, Roma, Travellers and Local Communities**

## Case 1;

The Food Bank Challenge has seen travellers post footage online of them buying goods for the needy before nominating a friend to do the same. Food bank volunteers in Flintshire said the overwhelming response has seen supermarkets almost run out of storage space. Project manager Sue Leake joked: "It's caused us a logistical nightmare." The foodbank challenge started in late November and has seen scores of videos posted to Facebook and Twitter.

Among those taking part is north Wales traveller Martin Gallagher. Mr Gallagher, who works for the Travelling Ahead project, said: "It was started by a guy called Watson Harrop Junior and it's really taken off from there....I think it's struck such a chord because we know how difficult things are for a lot of people right now, especially families....I've known around 60 people who have taken part so far."

Flintshire foodbank boss Ms Leake said staff did not know about the social media challenge until they went to collect food bank donations from a local supermarket. "Trolleys were full to the brim £80 of 90 worth of shopping," she added. "There were so many donations at one supermarket we had to start collecting items from 5am." "When we heard about the foodbank challenge - we then realised where these donations had come from". Ms Leake said volunteers were incredibly grateful for the gesture to the foodbank.

She added: "Travellers often get a bad press, but they've got big hearts and the experience we have had has been overwhelmingly positive."



Case 2;

Last Tuesday it was our turn to staff the Popup Soup Kitchen for the Homeless of Trowbridge. Erected under the city centre multi-storey parking lot, the flimsy table was laid with hot pasta, soup and sandwiches. Almost immediately a pickup truck arrived and out tumbled a man and two children. The back of the vehicle was opened up and was full of food. Introducing himself the chap said:

‘I’m an Irish Traveller and a Catholic, The Lord has been good to me and I wish to share my bounty with the homeless’ The table groaned under the weight of the provisions. The Clients departed laden with foodstuffs.

Canned rations remained and we suggested he take the tins to his local Foodbank.

There are many stories that vilify Gypsies & Tinkers. This is a good tale that ought to be told.