

Bristol Christians in Politics & Social Action

Meeting Notes

28 April 2015

City Road Baptist Church

Here are some notes from the first meeting of 'Bristol Christians in Politics & Social Action' (name to be confirmed) held on 28 April 2015.

The event was hosted and supported by the City Road Baptist Church.

Around 16 people attended, with apologies being sent from another dozen people.

Welcome

Welcome and introductions (10 minutes)

The meeting began with the Minister of City Road Baptist Church, Rev Eric Aidoo, welcoming everyone.

He noted that as God's people it was essential to take seriously our stewardship role in the Divine economy, in God's world, the created order. He emphasised that the arena of politics and social action is part of that responsibility; decisions taken here, and in politics in particular, affected many lives and particularly the poor and marginalised in society. Our involvement in the political process can help influence decisions and outcomes that reflect values for the common good and can advance the cause of the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Paul Hazelden led the rest of the meeting, with input from the floor. Paul described the background and context of the meeting, which has two main strands.

Firstly, *Forum for Change*. This is an initiative of the Bristol Evangelical Alliance, and consists of eight 'spheres', of which Politics and Social Action is one. There have been various events over the past few years, which have been organised on a mainly ad-hoc basis, and to develop the work properly the sphere needs a recognised Steering Group to pray and plan together.

Secondly, *Christians in Politics*. This is a small national organisation, established last Autumn as an offshoot of the effective *Christians in Westminster*. They produced the *Show Up* video which we are planning to watch a little later. They want to unite Christians from all the political parties, recognising that our allegiance to Jesus is deeper than any party loyalty, and they want to encourage more Christians to get involved in political action of all kinds.

Christians in Politics would very much like to see a Bristol branch established, which would also need a Steering Group. It seems absurd to set up two groups with the aim of uniting all Christians who are interested in and engaged with politics.

This is not something only of interest to a minority of Christians in Bristol, the

dedicated few who specialise in the social implications of our faith. While it is true that not all Christians are called to be politicians, all Christians are called to engage with politics in some way: through prayer, through giving to good political causes and candidates, through supporting projects and campaigns that empower the poor and disadvantaged and other community building projects.

We all have a role to play. The question for each one of us is: what role is God calling me to play? The hope is that through this meeting, we can identify some of the people who God is calling to be involved in helping to see His will being done, His Kingdom being made a reality in our life together and the life of our city,

As a final introductory comment, Paul urged the people present to encourage all Christians to exercise their democratic right to vote: it is our duty both as citizens and as Christians. If good people who want justices as well as prosperity do not vote, our leaders will be elected by the people who do vote. So, please encourage people to vote, and to pray about who they vote for. And do make use of the resources available on the web site.

Vision

Briefly share the current (draft) vision for this sphere (20 minutes)

This is currently the main reasons why a group of Christians involved in Politics and Social Action is needed, and what it might do. One of the points made is that we also need to build a vision for the city, so we know what we are seeking to achieve.

The notes below include much of the conversation in the meeting, but a few points made in conversation afterwards have also been included.

Information

Act as a central clearing house for news and information: collate what is happening in this sphere, and circulate it to those who are interested.

The main requirements here are an email list and web site, with social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter being used to help spread the word.

Connection

Connect people and politics; help politicians understand what is happening on the ground.

One key requirement is to connect the politics people with the social action people: the social action people need to tell the politics people what is happening on the ground, how policies are being applied and how they actually affect behaviour and outcomes; and the politics people need to test out ideas and draft policies with the social action people to get impartial informed input before a commitment is made to implementing them.

Promotion

Encourage more people to get involved in some aspect of politics and social action.

See the 'Introduction' above. God calls all his children to love and care for others: the only question is how?

Challenge

Address the assumptions most people have about politics and politicians; counter the belief that people only get involved in politics for selfish reasons.

Meaningful contact and developing relationships seems to be the way to go: you cannot prove that someone has good motives and behaves with integrity, but if you know what a person is doing, you can see these things being lived out.

Education

Hold public meetings on important and interesting subjects, presented in an accessible way.

The 'Christians in Science' public lectures provide a good model for the sort of events which should be possible.

Development

Provide opportunities for the personal development of the activists and workers.

The people involved in Politics and Social Action must take their own personal well-being and development seriously, but they need to be helped to do this. There are many personal challenges relating to balancing effectiveness with faithfulness, setting priorities, establishing and maintaining boundaries, learning facts, developing skills, reflecting on experiences, embracing both independence and accountability, and much else. We need systems in place to test whether we are actually following Jesus and building His Kingdom, or just following our own preferences and prejudices.

Research

Identify good quality and relevant research; identify where it is lacking and encourage researchers to fill those gaps.

Our plans and policies must rest on a solid base of facts and evidence. We need to be clear about the

Support

Provide personal help and encouragement for those on the front line.

Workers are very often stressed and isolated, and feel unsupported both by their organisations and by their churches. They need to know: you are not on your own.

Networking

Provide an opportunity to build new relationships and strengthen existing ones.

In both the areas of politics and social action, it is important to know the people involved, and to receive a personal perspective on the things that are happening.

Voice

Speak to those in power on behalf of Christians and other faith groups, the weak and vulnerable; help to negotiate a way for people to express and live their faith in a secular society.

The churches and other faith groups are increasingly being called on to provide the services required to make our society work, but at the same time the expression of our faith is being increasingly restricted. Secularists are seeking to remove faith from the public realm: we need to create a coherent and unified response, and then find ways to communicate it appropriately.

News

Summarise the most important current events, activities, opportunities and challenges (20 minutes)

The expectation was that people would provide news about events and initiatives when signing up for or sending apologies for this meeting, but this did not happen. Several projects and networks were mentioned in passing, including the 5k Partnership and the Homeless Forum.

The Christians in Politics video, 'Show Up', was shown.

Keynote Address

Marvin Rees will talk about his plans, and where the wider church community fits in (20 minutes)

Marvin was unable to attend as planned, and sent his apologies. However, he did provide a written statement, containing the text of his talk. Paul summarised some parts and read the key passages. The whole statement is provided below in the appendix.

Feedback

Discussion about what has been presented so far; other ideas and suggestions; future meetings (location, frequency, topics) (30 minutes)

Vision

The vision is a good starting point, but is too abstract. For each of the points being made, we need to be clear about three things.

- What is the problem here?
- What will we do about it?
- What will be the result?

Scope

Are we talking about local politics and social action?

No: we are talking about networking and supporting Bristol Christians who are involved in Politics and Social Action, whether the Politics and Social Action are local, national or international. Speaking personally, Paul wanted global issues to be a significant part of the work; but being pragmatic, what is actually done will be mainly determined by the energy and focus of those who get involved. (That is a reason for *you* to get involved!)

Conflict

Where there are political disagreements, such as those between the people who celebrate Foodbanks and those who believe them to be part of the problem, we can act as an honest broker: collect the facts and the stories, and talk in an unbiased way to both groups.

Aims and activities

Some suggestions included:

- Christians in Bristol are no longer scared of the word ‘politics’.
- We seek the welfare of the city.
- God is involved in all we do.
- Get out to the churches and church groups and talk about politics.
- Train people to talk about politics and social action.
- Collect and tell stories.

Prayer

A time for people to pray – either all together or in small groups, depending on numbers (10 minutes)

Plan

We will need to build a steering group to take things forward – who wants to be a part of it? (10 minutes)

The Steering Group behind this meeting consisted of Rev Eric Aidoo, Katie Brooker and Paul Hazelden. A few people have expressed that they are willing to be a part of the initial Steering Group to take things forward from here. If anyone else is interested, please contact Paul as soon as possible: if you don’t have his contact

details, you can use the form on the web site (<http://mad-bristol.org.uk>).

Other suggestions and recommendations from participants included the idea that we should produce or develop the following.

- A clear theological basis or underpinning for the work/project.
- A mailing list (already being worked on).
- A monthly or periodic prayer and sharing meeting on an evening.
- Undertake research to inform the work.
- Set specific goals and develop plans and strategies to achieve them.

Close

The meeting ended with a closing prayer; people continued to talk over the optional lunch afterwards.

Appendix: Marvin Rees' Talk

Dear Politics Sphere

I hope you detect the humility in which this letter is written. I am a fallen man, and I continue to fail.

Thank you for the opportunity to write to you all. I am sorry I was not able to attend the politics sphere meeting. But perhaps my absence now presents a better opportunity to communicate with my church family by forcing me to put some of the thoughts and reflections I have carried over the years onto paper. These have come into sharper focus in the time since I stepped forward to run for Bristol Mayor.

I start by sharing a story. A few years ago, I arranged for church leaders in the city to meet with Bristol's political leader. I had suggested to the political leader that she meet with church leaders on two grounds. First they offer millions of pounds worth of social interventions (both through direct service delivery, the individual and community harm they prevent and the societal resilience they build). In the face of unprecedented cutbacks, the city leaders needed to be thinking how they could better align and leverage resources within our communities. But, secondly, I suggested the churches should not only be seen as a resource to lessen the impact of spending cuts. I argued they should also be seen as wise and informed contributors to the decision making process as the cuts were being lined up. I believed there to be a role for faith leaders at the strategic level of city planning.

Having talked to the political leadership I turned to the church leaders with a simple challenge. I suggested that having been invited to the decision making table, they (we) must have something to say. I suggested it would not be OK to retreat to the "prophetic" place, challenging city leaders for failing to deliver the good society if having been given the opportunity to shape decision making, we had no contribution to make. It would be like the religious leaders who put burdens on peoples' shoulders

then don't lift a finger to help them.

I didn't think the challenge unreasonable because I believe the church has a huge contribution to make to Bristol. And I believe the fullness of that contribution is to be found in seeking an alignment of prayer and practical action with strategic (small and big "P" political and economic) leadership. In what a colleague at the Sojourners community told me was the speech that signed his death warrant, the Rev Martin Luther King Jr argued we are all called to play the Good Samaritan, but that it is only an initial act. One day we must come to see that we need to work on the very nature of the Jericho road to prevent the beatings and robberies. "True compassion is **more than** flinging a coin at a beggar; it is **not haphazard and superficial**. It comes to see that the **edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring**." (emphasis added)

I will share five reflections for the church in Bristol. Of course we could talk much more about each one, but I share them with you as provocations to develop our thoughts and conversation. And please test them.

1. The Bristol church must be strategic and intentional about power

I have reflected on the stories of Joseph and Joshua, how specific they both were in their political, economic and societal plans to shape nations. I believed the same is needed for Bristol.

The church must develop an intentional effort to build and wield power. This will often make for uncomfortable reading because of the historical associations of the church with oppressive power, the danger of unaccountable power and a theology that has sometimes seemed to suggest we should be pursuing weakness in order to make space for the miraculous. Power is dangerous. But let me again cite Dr. Martin Luther King who argued in the midst of the civil rights movement that the church needed to reframe its understanding of and relationship with power and pursue it. "Power without love is reckless and abusive [but] love without power is sentimental and anemic." The changes that love demands need power to be implemented. This means targeting positions of influence – not just as positions to be influenced but positions to be held.

In line with this it is important to point out that the most vulnerable people need the opportunity to be part of relationships and organisations that give them access to power and influence. In a world in which money talks, the church is one of the social institutions that can break free to facilitate a voice for the voiceless. This involves campaigning to speak up for the poor but also proactively using the organisation of the church to ensure good people get elected. This is revolutionary but it is not new. From the foundations of the labour movement to the voter registration drives in the United States, churches have taken this challenge seriously. We need to do so again. It's about moving beyond the political infantilisation that can come through constantly asking those in positions of influence to do the right thing to saying we will become those in the positions of influence (with duly established lines of accountability etc.).

2. The church at its best is a pathway to power for the powerless

At its best, the church is a social movement made up of ordinary people. At their best, the structures of the church offer a form of social organisation to rival any other and offer the opportunity to lift individuals, groups and agendas from obscurity on the margins to place them on higher ground. It offers a pathway for the powerless to take up positions of power. Building on my previous post, this is critical for church that is of and serves the poor and should be sown into the vision of the church.

I do not ignore the danger of the church being at its worst whereby a ruling class of religious leaders within the structure use the people below them as a stepping stone to further their own economic and political interests to the detriment of wider society in general, and the poor and God's reputation in particular. That danger is always real but it's a danger that people of good will in the church must contend with because leaving the world to run its own course is simply not working for the most vulnerable. The church has a great deal of social force at its fingertips. This brings great responsibility. We cannot bury this talent.

The other danger is that in the name of social justice, the church corral this social force (the numbers and organisation of people) into a theology of Good Samaritanism and away from speaking to the deeper political and economic shapers of our world. At its best that would make us a church of the First Aid, picking up the politically, economically, socially wounded after the fact. At its worst it could represent the political disempowerment of the poor by diverting them from tackling the socio-economic causes of structural injustices. Someone recently referred to this as a focus on social action at the expense of social justice. We must proactively avoid this. The church should be driving increasingly levels of political and economic literacy and activity rather than creating politics free zones. Politics free zones are places where the conversations about why people are poor, the impact and response to inequality, the role of the state versus markets, the power of corporations can't be had, and so they take place some place else without us. Inaction is not neutrality.

John Howard Yoder wrote:

“The choice or the tension which the bible is concerned with is not politics and something else which is not politics, but between right politics and wrong politics” (*For the Nations*: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997, page 222)

Politics will happen with us or without us. If it happens without us, those who need political change will look outside the church for it.

3. The radical place is not always in the wilderness.

The church has been on a journey. Very crudely put, we moved from the verbal declaration of the gospel to a recognition that the church has a mandate to be involved in social change. This has meant social action and the social activism of efforts such as UK Action and Jubilee 2000. There has been, and quite rightly, a celebration of the prophetic role for the church. And, along with “worship”, this idea of “activism” is becoming an increasingly attractive part of what has come to characterize the radical church. But my concern is that if that is all the church becomes, it is not the kind of radical prophetic place occupied by the prophets of the old testament or the kind

needed by the world today.

If that becomes the full definition of what we are, then far from a radical place it can be a place of comfort where we can stand on the touchline making moral pronouncements at low personal cost, as to what “politicians” and others should be doing. All this without taking on the burden of responsibility of making it happen. It’s a place of comfort because it affirms and allows us to protect our moral superiority as we cast light of the failures and evils of the individuals, organisations and structures around us. But as with the parable of the talents, it does this as the cost of burying that moral superiority, keeping it off the field of play where it might be challenged or compromised.

I want to suggest the fullness of the radical position is to be found when the church combines these pronouncements with electoral politics. This is the place where we are compelled to contend for our faith, where we find out how resilient we are to the seduction of power and respectability. It’s the place where we contend with the reality of compromise because no-one walks away from a democratic table with everything they want. It’s the place where we have to work out what we are prepared to give to get and find out what we truly stand for and against.

My fears were confirmed in a conversation with some very smart University Students straight after the mayoral election. Not only was politics the least well attended seminar of those offered (worship, activism and media the best attended), but those who came shared they did not want to be part of party politics because of the compromise it would demand. As well as pointing out that many of the charges they laid against politics (bickering over points of disagreement, being part of a group with which they would not totally agree, organisations that exploit people) being equally applicable to the church, I pointed to the fact that the poorest people need the change that comes about through policy and to abandon the realm of real policy making in the name of our own spiritual purity, is tantamount to giving the poor up to some other policy shaper so we can remain without blemish. Its time we took a risk and got politically dirty.

4. The Church needs to describe what the good Bristol would be.

Without a vision the people perish. We must contend for the vision of/for Bristol. There is an opportunity for the church to describe the City we want to be. A clear description of the good society is an essential part of a functioning society but is lacking for Bristol. Rather, what we have at best is a piecemeal approach built around progress of individual issues but with no sense of the whole collective story. At worst we have a vacuum which is filled by the collection of selfish individual visions which crowd out any space for describing a common good that is any more sophisticated than an aspiration of generic economic growth.

Describing the good Bristol is part of describing its purpose which should be language the church is very familiar with: what would a good Bristol look, feel and sound like? How would it work? Where would it be heading? The church’s offer would be just that, an offer, not a diktat. But it would offer a framework through which the city could set priorities, make decisions and judge policy. The theologian Paul Tilich, I am told, warns power abhors a vacuum. If we do not offer a description

of the good society, something else will and there will be some other framework for setting and assessing city policy and strategy.

5. The Bristol church must write its manifesto for 2016

2016 will see the Bristol Mayor and all 70 councillors up for election. The church must act now to set out its aspirations and values for the city. It is not good enough simply to host a hustings in the run up to the vote and ask what we are being offered by the candidates.

Setting out a manifesto would be an opportunity for the church to communicate with the city. It would be an opportunity for the church to self reflect, on its strengths and weaknesses and what it wants to become in the city.

Calling on an earlier theme, I would suggest there would be little authentically prophetic in failing to take the opportunity to shape the political debate and then pointing out its failures when it comes. The fully prophetic is in stepping up and shaping. The authority of holding people and institutions accountable comes off the back of giving them clear guidance in the first instance. I suggest if we have not offered a message of political substance, we are not in a position to take up the mantle of the politically prophetic.

I will share my more personal feeling about the churches role during my election campaign on another occasion. But let me finish with this. I have often thought about us meeting God and asking why this bad thing happened or that good thing did not. I have pictured an interaction where we are presented with a stream of political/economic opportunities available to us that we did not take up. We should remind ourselves that we live in a democracy, we were organised with great social capital, we had financial resources, we stretched from some of the wealthiest to some of the poorest, we had the material that would help us describe to the world what it could/should be about.

At the same time we have a situation where very few people are turning up to public meetings/forums who make decisions that shape the lives of tens of thousands (you know what they say about the world being run by the who turn up) and we have the Spirit of God. I am not saying we are doing nothing. The church is doing incredible work in the city. But I do believe we need to fully open the door on a new kind of political engagement and leadership.

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