

Archbishops' Council

Mission and Public Affairs Division

Countering far right political parties, extremist groups and racist politics: A guidance note

This note is prepared in response to a number of requests for guidance on relating to political parties and other extremist groups that promote divisive, intolerant or racist politics. It has been developed on the basis of experience in a number of local areas.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

The Church of England celebrates the diversity found in its parishes, schools and congregations, and the contribution of this diverse people to the life of their communities and churches. The Church of England is also aware of its own need to be constantly vigilant regarding racism and all forms of prejudice in its common life and structures.¹

Concern has been expressed about the rise of parties promoting policies that are harmful to community relations and divide society on the basis of ethnicity and faith. The number of elected representatives from these parties at borough, district, county and, now, European levels has increased considerably over the past decade; as a result, church leaders and members will face the issue of how to relate to such councillors and other politicians, and the parties from which they come.

At the same time the raised profile of these groups in the political arena can seem to give legitimacy to hostility and racism in the discussion of immigration and community cohesion.

Faith and race

The recent discourse of the far-right has developed in a direction where intolerance is often cloaked in the language of culture and faith, both of which can be used to fuel racism and religious hatred.

Lately the British National Party has sought to promote itself as a guardian of 'British Christian heritage' against an increasing 'islamification' of British society and the leadership of the mainstream churches.

BNP supporters and candidates claim to have established a 'Christian Council of Britain' which erroneously stresses the 'godly importance of race and nation'. At present the Council seems little more than a web presence.

In the lead up to the 2009 European and local elections churches, backed by statements from church and other faith leaders, worked together to contest the views of candidates promoting racist views. A statement from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York warned the dangers of voting for any party - 'whose core ideology is about sowing division in our communities and hostility on grounds of race, creed or colour'.²

¹ See <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/agendas/july2007/gspapers/gsl655.rtf>

² <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/prabcaby.html>

While these approaches had an impact in many places, candidates were elected on low voter turnout. These elections pose new challenges. Often those elected from such parties will seek to make civic capital through contact with church leaders to increase their local standing. Church leaders need to have thought through how they will react. Local churches may now be faced with deciding how to distance themselves from groups and councillors - whose racist policies and attitudes they opposed during the elections, while maintaining pastoral engagement with those who voted for them and council officials who continue their work as public servants.

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND'S POSITION

The issue of political organisations whose policies engender racism has arisen in a number of debates in the Church of England's General Synod Most notably in February 2004, July 2007 and February 2009 when the following resolutions were passed.

February 2004

The 2004 resolution makes very clear the Church's rejection of parties promoting racist policies:

“That this Synod, noting the recent success of the British National Party in local elections in parts of Lancashire:

- a. believe that any political movement that seeks to divide our communities on the basis of ethnicity is an affront to the nature of God revealed in creation and scripture and is a grave danger to harmonious community relationships; consequently voting for and/or supporting a political party that offers racist policies is incompatible with Christian discipleship;
- b. call on all Christians in England to nurture a loathing of the sin of racism and to model the teaching of Christ in loving all our neighbours; and
- c. commit the Church of England to work in partnership with our ecumenical partners, other faith groups, voluntary and statutory organisations, mainstream political parties and all people of good will, in building cohesive communities and affirming our multi-ethnic, culturally and religiously diverse society.”

July 2007

In July 2007 Synod welcomed the report *Present and Participating* and recommitted the Church to promoting the gifts of a diverse leadership:

‘That this Synod, rejoicing in the enrichment that minority ethnic Anglicans bring to the Church of England and the wider society and reaffirming our abhorrence of the grave sinfulness of covert, overt and institutional racism:

- (a) request all dioceses to assess what further developments of their structures and practices are needed to secure a greater use of the gifts of minority ethnic people in the life of the Church at all levels and an increase in the number of ethnic minority young people in leadership;

- (b) request the Archbishops' Council to review the results of these assessments, consider whether further national action is required and report to Synod within three years; and
- (c) reiterate that support for political organisations whose policies engender racism is inconsistent with Christian discipleship.'

February 2009

In February 2009 Synod requested the House of Bishops to formulate and implement a policy for the Church of England under which clergy, ordinands and employed lay persons required to speak on behalf of the Church should not be a member of an organization whose constitution, aims, objectives or pronouncements contradict the duty to promote race equality.³

ARCHBISHOPS' STATEMENT, MAY 2009

The statement made by the Archbishops of York and Canterbury in May 2009 was concerned with the impact of the political crisis on people's voting in the European and Local Elections :

"There are those who would exploit the present situation to advance views that are the very opposite of the values of justice, compassion and human dignity are rooted in our Christian heritage.

Christians have been deeply disturbed by the conscious adoption by the BNP of the language of our faith when the effect of those policies is not to promote those values but to foster fear and division within communities, especially between people of different faiths or racial background.

This is not a moment for voting in favour of any political party whose core ideology is about sowing division in our communities and hostility on grounds of race, creed or colour; it is an opportunity for renewing the vision of a community united by mutual respect, high ethical standards and the pursuit of justice and peace."⁴

It must be recognised that resolutions and statements can only be part of how Christians work to oppose racism and racist organisations. It will be in the Church's everyday engagement with the neighbourhoods and communities of some of most marginalized communities that alternatives are found and hope renewed.

LEGITIMACY AND NORMALISATION

Recently candidates from extremist parties have been elected with minority votes in constituencies where traditional voting patterns have collapsed. The strategy of such parties is first to gain sufficient votes and local Council seats to normalise their place in the political landscape and build on this to gain constituency seats in Parliament.

There are a number of reasons why political parties and individuals promoting racist policies gain support. In many cases these are traceable to a failure of community leadership, both formal and informal. Electioneering tactics focus on community

³ <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/gsfed100209pm.html>

⁴ <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/prabcaby.html>

weaknesses and perceived threats and will often seek protest votes on perceived failures to address crime, effectiveness of local services and fairness in housing provision. This will require a strategy to counter claims being made – local community leaders are potential allies in this.

In the long-term, opposition to such parties requires broad coalitions rooted in the life of the local community and committed to long-term effective engagement. If churches are to be part of the healing of these communities then their ordained and lay leadership needs to be out and about in the community and engaged with its local leaders, working together to address local concerns. There is a particular responsibility on the clergy to maintain confidence in the wider community so that the church can play a key role in building community trust and respect to resist those promoting racist divisions and mistrust.

SOME REALITIES

Be aware of the beliefs and activities of parties and groups that promote racism. Check out the websites. Churches need to be aware of the context in which they are operating. There are risks that you will be challenged about your stand. Be prepared for this if you give out personal information, telephone numbers, and email addresses.

Be aware of the way some parties might misuse and distort claims for the word ‘Christian’ in their campaigns and literature. **Be aware** of groups looking to rent facilities with unfamiliar names and pseudo-Christian credentials.

Get advice from those with long experience in dealing with such parties and anti-racist work e.g. the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, the TUC etc. *Searchlight*, a campaigning and monitoring magazine, can give you up to date information about groups and parties,⁵ alongside *Hope not Hate*⁶ who can offer advice and campaigning material for forming a community campaign.

This is not an area in which individuals should work on their own. They need to work with others. It is important to form alliances with others whose tone and methods broadly fit the church’s style and approach. Experience indicates that **local based** alliances and strategies are the most effective. Look for the positive and hopeful –and build on it.

Be aware that racist groups will try and operate covertly, sometimes seemingly as individuals rather than as groups, jumping on bandwagons and usually spreading fears about housing, employment, crime to gain credibility with people and then standing in local elections. Activists are increasingly using the cloak of respectability to gain a foothold in local politics.

Keep in touch with anti-social behaviour teams, the police and councillors from other parties to monitor any increases in racist incidents or hate crimes.

WHEN THERE ARE ELECTED COUNCILLORS FROM THESE PARTIES

If such councillors are elected do not assume that electoral success or the complexities of political negotiation on Councils changes people. Their election does not disassociate them

⁵ <http://www.searchlightmagazine.com>

⁶ <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/>

from the rhetoric or ideology found in their literature or websites. Monitor their effectiveness as representatives for all the ward community.

If clergy think there are legitimate grievances to be addressed then it is best to talk to the communities and community groups concerned, and other elected members, not the councillors from these parties. Church leaders (particularly local bishops), if they have maintained good connections, can provide leadership and a trusted space to enable meetings for those wishing to build alliances, oppose racist policies and address perceived grievances.

Monitor what is happening in Councils and wards where such councillors have been elected to see how resources are being deployed, what policies are being put into effect and what interventions are being made on local issues. Take up concerns when they arise.

Council staff and other public employees will have no choice about whom they work with. They may need pastoral support and need your prayers.

Church premises do not have to be made available to such councillors for surgeries even if they have been used by councillors of other political parties.

Community groups may be offered council grants through nomination by local councillors. Care needs to be taken as accepting a grant can be used in a councillor's publicity.

Church leaders need to take care when attending functions at which councillors from far-right parties may be present (not least such events as Remembrance Day services). For example: photographs of conversations can be used to imply church support for such councillors and their policies.

It is not advisable to meet groups promoting racist policies as this gives them credibility and publicity. It is advisable not to give them a platform in churches or church buildings, as this can be used to suggest support for their policies (even by implication). This is a decision that will need to be taken by groups organising activities around local campaigns and pre-election hustings. (On elections, see below).

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

Long-term strategy can only be based on the long-term building up of positive relations and trust with and between key faith and community leaders, so that there is a network available for action should campaigning be needed. Clergy and lay leaders need to take a leading role in developing such connections.

It is important to listen to the community and its community groups and to take seriously weaknesses and grievances which could be exploited.

It is vital to work for inclusive communities. Church leaders need to be involved in campaigns that promote the common good and encourage press publicity for positive work. Working across communities is particularly important, nurturing greater contact and understanding. The development, for example, of *Building Bridges Burnley*⁷ and its pattern

⁷ <http://bbburnley.co.uk/default.aspx>

of working in local communities have given the church with other faith groups wider credibility. Connecting schools in different communities is increasingly important.⁸

EQUIPPING THE CHURCH

Racism and religious hatred are theological issues.

They need to be taught to be sins and incompatible with Christian discipleship, as part of the regular teaching ministry of the Church.

The rejection of evil, such as racism, is a key element of the Liturgy of Baptism.

We are all members of one human race under God. The concept of many races is an artificial construct which is not considered biblical (Acts 17:26).

The Church cannot accommodate those who would discriminate on grounds of ethnicity. In the cross of Christ we find the reconciliation of the diverse human family with each other and with God. As the body of Christ, the Church holds and negotiates the tensions of living across difference, as the possibility of a redeemed humanity. Christ is the cornerstone of a church built from diversity – the stability the Church needs when what are thought to be the permanent load bearing walls of hostility come crashing down. (Ephesians 2).

There is a need for consistency and integrity when confronting racism. Racism is indivisible – we cannot attack it in one area collude with it in other areas of life.⁹

Prayer, sermons and liturgy need to be unambiguous about the spiritual dangers of racism. In the congregation individuals should not be identified for personal criticism but racist behaviour and attitudes should be condemned. The Church's mandate to offer the call to repentance must be taken seriously, as must the inclusion of those who respond to that call.

Observance of *Racial Justice Sunday*¹⁰ (2nd Sunday of September) can provide an annual focus for such teaching – and could be marked with a public event.

Training needs to be provided for Bishops and clergy, as well as congregations, on dealings with racism in their church and communities. This can include the role and calling of Christians in public life as community leaders, councillors and school governors.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A CAMPAIGN

If a particular campaign is needed then work with the broadest coalition that can be assembled, (i.e. community groups, statutory and voluntary agencies, schools, youth Projects, Faith Groups, mainstream political parties), engage the Police etc, in campaigns to promote the good of the community. Talk to local press and radio about how they handle these issues and promote positive stories of local community life.

Have a locally designed logo for your campaign (perhaps designed by local children or young people). Signs and symbols of inclusion, badges, stickers, ribbons are a very powerful way of demonstrating togetherness and subtly marking an anti-racist message.

⁸ Schools Linking Network <http://www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk/>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jan/12/cross-cultural-friendships>

⁹ See Kenneth Leech, *Race*, SPCK 2005 p.93.

¹⁰ <http://www.ctbi.org.uk/CBDG/396>

Some anti-racist groups may come in from outside the area so beware of ‘show boating’ and ‘grandstanding’ especially when there has been a racist incident. Some groups will want to use the incident to promote their own political perspective and will be gone as soon as they have arrived.

Learn from other campaigns. The community campaign led by churches on London’s Isle of Dogs in the mid-nineties is well documented.¹¹ The Churches Together in Lancashire and Lancashire Council of Mosques campaign throughout Lancashire in 2006 (‘Don’t be Negative - Vote Positive’)¹² is another example of joint working. Currently there is little in writing to assist Christians in their work against parties that promote racist policies, so one way to learn from others is to be in touch with racial justice officers in dioceses where the activity of these parties is particularly well known.¹³ Be ready to organise and speak out against racism, particularly if there is a by-election.

OTHER POINTS FOR DIOCESES

Remember Rural Areas: This is not solely an urban issue, dioceses need to keep aware of the activities of racist groups in rural areas.

Work with Ecumenical partners. Opposing the politics of racism is a concern across the Churches. Additional guidance and resources are available on the Methodist Church website.¹⁴

Appoint a Monitoring Group: It is suggested that dioceses should have a small liaison Group with the specific responsibility of monitoring racism within the area covered by the diocese. This would include the actions and profile of parties and groups promoting racism, the grievances that might give rise to support for them and the action that is being taken by the church in local areas to respond to both the racism and the grievances.

The group should be linked to an Archdeacon or other senior staff member and meet with the bishop at least once a year, as well as providing reports when necessary.

This group’s role should be distinct from the work of the Minority Ethnic Anglican group within the diocese, which focuses much more on the role and concerns of Minority Ethnic Anglicans within the life and witness of the diocese (but possibly linked to it).

CO-ORDINATED DEMONSTRATIONS

In addition to political parties other networks have emerged in the past year coordinating demonstrations in areas of significant Muslim communities, and often places where Mosques and Islamic practice have not been visible in the public realm until recently. Organizers claim they are seeking to alert the Government and the public to their concerns about extremists, but messages on the ground are often confused and generally Islamophobic. Demonstrations are brought together through internet organization bringing the majority of participants in from other cities, regardless of local community relations.

¹¹ Liz Carnelly ‘Prophecy, Race and Eastenders’ in *Modern Believing* 36/1995; Nicholas Holtam and Sue Mayo, *Learning from the Conflict. Reflections on the Struggle against the British National Party on the Isle of Dogs*, Jubilee Group, 1998.

¹² <http://archive.theboltonnews.co.uk/2004/5/29/487798.html>

¹³ The exception being: Kenneth Leech, *Race*, SPCK 2005

¹⁴ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentoworld.content&cmid=1828>

This makes these demonstrations and the movements behind them difficult to counter in particular locations.

Direct confrontation is inadvisable. Church leaders need to coordinate with police and other community leaders (particularly those being targeted) when a local demonstration is advertised. A prayer vigil followed by the advice to avoid the location of the demonstration has enabled the damage of potentially incendiary situations to be limited.¹⁵

ELECTIONS

The 2010 General Election will be fought on different issues and through a different system to the 2009 European and local elections. There will also be local elections in some areas where 30 BNP councillors are coming to the end of their terms and may stand for re-election. Christians need to be alert to the language and policies evident in electioneering by extremists and more general anti-immigrant rhetoric. The BNP will almost certainly have election broadcasts.

Statements by local church leaders re-emphasising the Church's abhorrence of racism and prejudice should be prepared early and a decision taken about the appropriate time to make such an intervention – i.e. when candidates are announced, before a hustings, or when postal ballot papers are being sent out?.

Churches are under no legal obligation to include the BNP in election hustings meetings, or give space to such parties for public meetings, if they consider this 'association' could have detrimental affect on their reputation and activities (as charities).

It is open to charities to decline to invite to a public meeting a representative from a political party which advocates policies which are in contravention of the charity's objects, or whose presence or views are likely to increase the chance of public disorder or of alienating the charity's supporters.¹⁶

If candidates participate in an event that does not include all candidates in a constituency they need to declare this on their election returns. Organiser should be able to provide notional costings for the event which are split between the candidates participating.

...when a husting organiser invites candidates on a selective basis, the [Electoral] Commission considers that the provision of a public platform for those candidates who attend would constitute notional expenditure for the candidate ... and also a non-cash donation, if valued at more than £50.¹⁷

The *Citizens for Sanctuary* campaign have identified *sanctuary* as a key area in the election campaign including a pledge they are asking prospective parliamentary candidates to sign.¹⁸ LIBERTY are promoting an Asylum Election Pledge encouraging candidates to exercise caution and restraint in how they approach the immigration debate in the election campaign.¹⁹

¹⁵ <http://www.manchester.anglican.org/news/380/manchester-vigil-of-hope>

¹⁶ <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/supportingcharities/elect.asp>

¹⁷ http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0018/13284/Candidates-Election-Expenditure-2006-12_23817-11799_ENSW.pdf

¹⁸ www.sanctuarypledge.org.uk

¹⁹ <http://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk/issues/5-asylum/asylum-election-pledge.shtml>

Advice on handling election hustings will normally be available from the Electoral Commission²⁰, Charity Commission²¹, and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI)²² – check their websites.

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²⁰ http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0008/79910/2009_09_11_Hustings_Topic_Overview_FINAL.pdf

²¹ <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/Library/enhancingcharities/pdfs/charelect.pdf>

²² www.ctbi.org.uk