

# Presidential Address - 25th June 2011

## The Bishop of St Alban's Presidential Address

### Diocesan Synod

#### June 2011

One of the subjects that politicians have been very concerned about in recent years is the decline in a sense of community in our country. The jargon they use for it is social capital. What is social capital? It is the glue that holds communities together. For example, the way that people take responsibility for each other by caring for their neighbours; by helping children to read at the local Primary School, by being part of a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme; by getting involved in voluntary work and charitable giving; by voting in local and general elections. It is also (and perhaps crucially) about the level of trust between neighbours and strangers in a community. All these things contribute to the bank of social capital in society.

One of the profound worries of the Government is that research shows that for some years social capital has been declining in Western Europe and in the USA. For example, it is becoming harder to persuade people to serve as school governors or as local councillors. The proportion of our income that we give away to charity has been declining year on year. And worst of all, we hear horror stories in the papers of someone dying alone in their flat and not being found for months, simply because no-one missed them.

The person who has written most compellingly about social capital is an American scholar called Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*<sup>1</sup>. He identifies two sorts of social capital: bonding social capital and bridging social capital.

*Bonding social capital* is where a group of people have such a strong sense of identity that they look after one another. So, for example, in clubs, associations or churches members may lend each other their lawn mowers, do one-another's shopping, or baby-sit for each other. This is all good, but bonding social capital can be exclusive and does not necessarily look out for people who are new to the area or to strangers. When the life of our churches is based simply on bonding social capital they quickly become cliques of like-minded people who may be extremely friendly (do you know any parishes which advertise that they are not friendly?) – but (and this is the important point) they are only friendly with each other.

Putnam goes on to contrast this bonding social capital with what he calls *bridging social capital*. This is where a club or group, or indeed a church, is so confident in itself that it reaches out to people who do not belong to it. Let me illustrate the difference between the two sorts of social capital.

Typically, churches based on bonding social capital collect money from the community to repair the church roof, whilst churches based on bridging social capital will also raise money to help other good causes in the community.

Churches based on bonding social capital want people to come to them. Whereas congregations based on bridging social capital want to reach out to people in their locality.

Churches based on bonding social capital want to attract like minded people who will fit in with church life. A church governed by bridging social capital delights in welcoming people who are different and who will enrich their life even if they challenge it.

Churches based on bonding social capital are quite happy that the church building is locked all week; after all it is their 'clubhouse'. Congregations built on bridging social capital are always trying to work out how to keep the church open and accessible and at the heart of the local community.

Churches based on bonding social capital want the clergy to be their personal chaplain. Bridging social capital enables the church to set the clergy free to be leaders in the community, working for the common good.

Churches based on bonding social capital want children and youth to keep quiet since they are tomorrow's church. In contrast, congregations motivated by bridging social capital welcome children and young people to participate, recognising that they are not tomorrow's church, but today's church.

Now, let me return to politics – always a tricky subject for a bishop. A common phenomenon in modern Western democratic societies continues to be the seemingly inexorable decline in the number of people who vote in elections, whether local or national. This is just one symptom sociologists point to as evidence of the decline in social capital and they relate it to the increasing emphasis we place on the importance of individuality. So right across Europe traditional political parties are finding it harder to attract members and to get votes. Meanwhile many smaller political parties are emerging<sup>2</sup> with the result that some commentators predict that in the future we are going to see more coalition governments, some of which may not be able to last the whole term.

Governments are realising that there are many problems in society that they simply cannot solve by themselves. This is behind David Cameron's call for the Big Society. He has prompted much thought about what it means to be a citizen today. Luke Bretherton, who is a Senior lecturer in theology and politics at King's College London, has identified three models of citizenship<sup>3</sup>:

1. First, the citizen as voter. An individual listens carefully to what is in each of the manifestos of the candidates. The citizen expresses their preference for a candidate and then lets the politicians get on with their job. In this understanding there is no sense in which each of us has any real responsibility to contribute towards the good of the whole community. This is, perhaps, how many people in Britain think today – it is primarily the responsibility of someone else. One of the difficulties is that fewer and fewer people can be bothered even to exercise their democratic duty to cast a vote.

Following the debates about the Alternative Vote and the recent referendum we have become more aware how in many parts of the country, one's vote can never make any difference because the constituency in which you live is one of those that always returns a MP of the same party. So why bother?

2. Secondly, Bretherton talks about the citizen as volunteer. This is one of the predominant ideas that has been explored in discussions about the Big Society. Can we ask individuals voluntarily to take on responsibility for maintaining our common life, so that the state does not have to do it? The problem is that this goes against several decades of political dogma that proclaims the sovereignty of the free market. We have been told by our leaders that human beings are ultimately motivated by money and material gain. There has been, for example, an extraordinary change (and some would argue catastrophic change) resulting from the introduction of the National Lottery. Unintentionally, it succeeded in undermining centuries of charitable giving because it changed the underlying reasons why we should give to charity in the first place. In the past we gave because it was the right, moral and responsible thing to do. Now we are told we should give via the Lottery as a bi-product of gambling on

becoming very rich. This has complicated the problem for successive governments in their struggle to persuade people that it is a good thing simply to volunteer.

3. Thirdly, Bretherton talks of the citizen as vow-keeper. This is based on the idea that 'no man is an island' and that we are social creatures. To be human is to live in relationship, in community, with its pattern of obligations as well as its rights. This is a deeply Christian view of humanity. As Christians we believe that we are made in the image of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is in himself a community of love and our life should and can reflect this divine reality.

Bretherton argues that "people of faith need to avoid co-option into being either voting blocks or service providers, and be true to their own best insights by upholding a vision of the citizen as vow-keeper." I respond to his plea because it is based on the fundamental Christian conviction that I have a commitment and an obligation to my neighbour. This is surely what Jesus was affirming in his summary of the law, that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. He told the parable of the Good Samaritan and spoke of the repentance of Zaccheus who gave away half of his possessions to charity. It is this sort of conviction that shapes our motivation as men and women, and which has the potential to inspire people to work for the common good.

A comment of Simon Jenkins – who is as far as I know not a practicing Christian - writing in The Guardian in April (The Guardian, 21.4.2011) struck me very forcefully. He said: "There is no such thing as a big society, just thousands of small ones" and he pointed out that many of these small societies were, as the headline put it, 'under steeples'.

I too confess that I cannot always get my mind round David Cameron's idea of the 'Big Society', but like Simon Jenkins I want to affirm and celebrate the hundreds of 'little societies' I meet Sunday by Sunday in our Diocese. And with you I pray for God's grace to renew them. Research shows that church going is profoundly transformative<sup>4</sup> and we need to hear that and stop being apologetic about it. The Christian faith is one of the powerful tools by which people are turned outwards from their own agendas to becoming more concerned for others. This is all about 'transforming communities'.

What our churches are doing week by week in virtually every community in the diocese is nurturing small societies, 'vow-keepers', communities of people who do not go along with the mantra of 'self first' but rather understand themselves as being bound to others. What we are involved in is not some nice but quaint activity that has little to do with real life. What we are doing is contributing to the very fabric of our common life as we pray for the coming of God's kingdom. We need to find ways to celebrate the amazing contribution that the individuals and churches are making to their local communities.

That takes me to this year's Diocese of St Albans Annual Report. In the past we have had worthy but rather dry reports. This year, thanks to Susan Pope, Arun Kataria, Claudia Brown and others at Holywell Lodge, we have a colourful, readable report which spells out some of the differences that we as the Diocese of St Albans are making. Among other things you can read about the Fairtrade Network; the Community Care Group planning a conference on Christian ministry in residential homes; the Penal Affairs Group working to help rehabilitate offenders; the environmental group. Turn to page 15 and you will see that in the Diocese of St Albans last year 4130 people were baptised, 870 were confirmed, 1640 marriages or blessings were conducted, 5370 funerals were taken; 43600 came to church over Easter, 93100 came at Christmas and about 25,000 people are in church each Sunday.

Each parish, church school and chaplaincy also has stories to tell. As elected leaders in this diocese, please take this report; read it and pass it onto someone else to read. Have confidence in the story of your own church. Share it and celebrate it. We need to raise our sights, give thanks to God for the contribution that we are able to make to maintain social capital and to work for the flourishing and thriving of our communities and the coming of God's Kingdom in the future.

+Alan St Albans

21 June 2011

<sup>1</sup>Putnam, R. D. (2000), *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American Community*, New York, Simon and Schuster.

<sup>2</sup>See *The Shrinking Big Tents* in *The Economist*, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2011, page 38: 'A new politics has emerged in which old allegiances have frayed, political identities have blurred and voters' trust in familiar parties has crumbled. One result is that voter turnout has fallen almost everywhere'.

<sup>3</sup>Luke Bretherton, "Votes, vows and volunteers" in *The Tablet*, 10 July 2010.

<sup>4</sup>Gill, R. (1999), *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.