

FAITH IN POLITICS

Preparing Churches for the General Election 2015



Introduction

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said: “When people say that the Bible and politics don’t mix, I ask them which Bible they are reading.”

Our Christian faith is woven through with a concern for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. We seek to answer questions such as how immigrants should be treated, whether a nation should go to war and how we are stewards of the environment. These are issues for living our discipleship today as they were when the Bible was written.

Of course, the Bible doesn’t tell Christians which party to vote for. Christians can be united in a common faith but have different ideas about how politics can best serve the common good. The weeks leading up to polling day are a chance for us all to scrutinise ideas and ask questions before making a decision about who we want to lead us for the next five years.

We know that this year there will be a General Election for the UK Parliament, and that it will be held on Thursday 7 May. Already the candidates and activists will have been preparing for the campaign, and the major political parties will have been working on their manifestos.

This briefing document is written with the goal of providing some information and a framework for further reflection and discussion. It is not a campaigning tool and does not seek to offer support for or opposition to any party or candidate. It has been written by specialists working for Churches or church agencies about their respective fields. It is written for members of churches who are seeking to find out more about a range of important issues, however they might decide to vote. Each page covers a different topic and includes background information, current issues for debate, questions (either for candidates or personal reflection) and someone to contact if you would like further information.

In previous years many churches and Churches Together groups have organised election meetings and candidate hustings to explore the issues and to find out more about the people who want to be our Members of Parliament. The issues and questions which are included here might be a good starting point for groups wishing to arrange these events.

Now is the time for the Churches and wider civil society to do what they can to join the debate, to help communities understand the issues and to contribute in a positive way to the democratic process.

Devolution

If you live in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales, there will be some parts of this document which won’t impact you because of devolution. These issues aren’t decided for you at a UK election, as they will be the responsibility of the devolved institutions – the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. We’ve put a country initial (E, NI, S and W) on each page so you can see at a glance if the section is appropriate for you. This should be taken as indicating that the issues are ‘on balance’ applicable to the particular nation, although individual points may not be. (If in doubt regarding a specific point, please contact us).

Further links and resources can be found at:
www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/election2015

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Constitution and Democracy



Background

In recent years some of the major changes to how the UK is governed have involved the devolution of powers of decision-making and responsibility from the UK Parliament at Westminster to the National Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

- In Scotland, the recommendations of the Calman Commission on devolution were implemented in the Scotland Act 2012. The 'no' result in Scotland's September 2014 referendum on independence was followed by an all-party process to try to reach agreement on further devolution.
- In Wales, the Wales Act 2014 has devolved further powers and some taxation to Wales, and has provided for the calling of a referendum at some time in the future on devolving part of income tax to Wales.
- In Northern Ireland policing and justice powers were also devolved to the power-sharing Executive and Assembly in 2010, and the Stormont House Agreement in December 2014 has also provided an element of continuity for devolution. However, recent revelations about on-the-run fugitives being told they were no longer wanted as part of any criminal investigations have to some extent re-opened old wounds and exposed the fragility of the UK's constitutional settlement.
- In England there have been moves towards more 'localism' – where executive power is given away from central government to local authorities or elected mayors. The Mayor of London has substantial devolved powers in areas such as policing, housing and transport and a new position of directly-elected Police and Crime Commissioner has been created for 41 police areas in England and Wales.
- Fixed parliamentary terms of five years have been introduced. Under the House of Lords Reform Act 2014, peers can now retire or resign permanently, and non-attenders and those convicted of serious offences can be expelled. In a 2011 referendum the voting system for UK Parliamentary elections, the public supported the current First-Past-The-Post system over the Alternative Vote.

Issues

Future reforms: proposed reforms include withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights, establishing a British Bill of Rights, and drawing up a single written Constitution.

Voter engagement: voter turnout and engagement are evolving, with changes to the voter registration system (meaning that some people may need to re-register). The independence debate in

Scotland resulted in a record turnout in the referendum – and has led to renewed calls for the franchise to be extended to 16 and 17 year olds. Many organisations are also concerned about voting rights for convicted prisoners.

House of Lords reform: the three main parties all promised further reform of the House of Lords in their 2010 manifestos, though agreement could not be reached. But the future of the 92 hereditary peers, the merits of appointed versus elected members and the role of the Church of England Bishops (as well as the more general question of the establishment of that Church in one part of the UK) may become priorities for politicians, both during the campaign and after the new Parliament is elected.

Devolution: the future progress of devolution to the nations and regions of the UK is likely to play a role in how people vote – especially in areas which will be affected by the parties' different proposals. Deeper questions are raised about England, which already has a varied system of local government. The 'West Lothian' question is still unanswered: ie, why should Westminster MPs from nations and regions with devolved powers also have a vote in Parliament on matters which do not affect them or their constituents?

Voting and nation-specific issues: the proposal that only English MPs should vote on laws which only affect England in the House of Commons has been supported by some people, but others say the creation of different classes of MPs would prevent the effective working of democracy

Questions

- *Do you think that a written constitution for the United Kingdom would be helpful or harmful?*
- *Is 'English Votes for English Laws' a logical next step in constitutional reform, or would the creation of different categories of MPs cause as many problems as it solves?*
- *Is the UK's current governance structure the best, or would a different system meet its current needs better? If change is needed, what steps should be taken next?*

For more information

Web: www.parliament.uk/about/how/guides/
www.electoralcommission.org.uk

Children and Young People



Background

In the UK, at any one time, about one in ten children are extremely unhappy with their lives: this is known as low subjective well-being. Children with low well-being are less likely to enjoy their home and family life, to feel safe, to enjoy going to school or to feel positive about their future. As they grow up, they are more likely to be victimised, to adopt risky behaviours and to suffer from eating disorders and depression. When compared to children in other countries, children in England fare badly, coming 9th in a recent survey of 11 countries.

One significant contributor to low well-being is poverty. The Child Poverty Act 2010, supported by a cross-party consensus, commits the Government to working towards the eradication of child poverty by 2020. In spite of this there are still 3.7 million children living in poverty, one of the worst levels in the industrialised world. Figures from the Institute of Fiscal Studies indicate that child poverty will increase by 1.1 million by 2020. Furthermore more than half of all children in poverty live in families with at least one adult in paid work.

In addition to poverty, neglect among adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17 (both within the family and institutionally) also has a significant impact on well-being. The scale of the neglect of this age group is not clear, but neglect is the most commonly cited category for child protection plans. The short-term consequences of neglect are well established having significant links with education, physical and emotional health and anti-social behaviour. There is less research on longer term-impacts though studies show that, contrary to popular expectations, adolescent neglect has more long-term consequences than neglect during childhood, increasing the risk of arrest, offending and violent crime in late adolescence, and the risk of arrest and drug use in early adulthood.

Issues

Poverty: lifting children and their families out of poverty will require improving welfare support, increasing pay and employment opportunities, reducing the costs of working (through help with child care for instance), increasing access to affordable housing, reducing the cost of school and addressing fuel poverty. The worst child poverty is among young refugees and asylum seekers who are often forced into destitution and denied access to vital services. Children's resilience to poverty should be strengthened, reducing the chance of poor children growing up to be impoverished adults, through improving educational attainment.

Neglect: reducing adolescent neglect will require a stronger focus on early intervention. Professionals with regular access to young

people have a key role in the early identification of potential problems and ensuring that young people get the help they need. This will require a shift in the attitudes of professionals, who frequently believe young people are more troublesome than troubled and overestimate their resilience. There is a particular need to address neglect of older adolescents. 16 and 17 year olds are often seen as not in need of support and face legal inconsistencies where the law fails to protect them from crimes, such as emotional neglect and child sexual exploitation, when it would for younger children.

Stigma: the current stigmatisation of people in poverty in the media and public debate leads to significant levels of bullying and victimisation of children due to their economic circumstance. If children are to be protected from bullying and victimisation, the public discourse on poverty and benefits must change.

Participation: the voices and opinions of children and young people are frequently sidelined when discussing issues that affect them. However they have significant insights to offer when it comes to the design and implementation of interventions and statutory or voluntary services that help them.

Questions

- *Have the welfare reforms negatively impacted children? If so, what can be done?*
- *What can be done about the rising cost of school for children because of equipment, trips and uniforms?*
- *Neglect remains the most prevalent form of abuse in the UK, but it is often hidden behind closed doors. How can we improve the way we identify and help neglected children?*

For more information

Web: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/

Debt

Background

The “Debt Trap” report from The Children’s Society and Step-change Debt Charity found that 1.4 million families (with 2.4 million children) are living in problem debt. In total these families are behind with payments of £4.8 billion to creditors and service providers.

However, the problem goes well beyond this. An additional 2.9 million families with dependent children have struggled to pay their bills and credit commitments over the last year – putting them at risk of falling into problem debt.

Problem debt is debt which leads to a serious impact on the lives of families affected. Many families end up cutting back on food for their children, or heating their home: this can have a real impact on the well-being of children. Families in problem debt are twice as likely to argue about money problems as other families. This puts stress on family relationships, and causes emotional distress for children.

Problem debt can also cause problems for the relationship of children with their peers. More than half of children in families in problem debt said that they had been embarrassed because they lacked the things their friends had. Nearly one in five said that they had been bullied as a result. It also leads to children missing out on normal social activities with both their family and friends. Keeping up with debt repayments has led to 84% of parents cutting back on spending on social activities for their children over the last year. A third say they cut back on this every month: *“My little sister) once went to karate for a bit (...) but we couldn’t afford to keep her there, so she didn’t do it. And like her friends have clubs and stuff that she can’t go to.”*

Issues

Increasing pressure on household budgets: while household budgets up and down the country are under strain, families with dependent children often have to deal with extra pressures, as they are more likely to face unexpected bills and are less able to cope with sudden financial shocks, for example redundancy, reduced hours or illness.

The debt trap: as families begin to struggle financially, many feel that taking on credit is the only way to make ends meet - a third of all families have had to borrow money to pay for essentials for their children in the last year. One parent said: *“We were using credit cards to live, not to buy things but just to pay the food bill or getting cash out to pay the council tax. And then, when we maxed out our credit cards, we got into a payday loan problem.”*

This often marks the beginning of the debt trap as credit repayments begin to take up a larger proportion of income and families find themselves cutting back on essentials. Nine out of ten parents in problem debt have cut back on essential items for their children within the last year so that they can keep up with debt repayments.

The lack of a “breathing space”: at the moment mounting interest, default charges and collection activity can kick in as soon as a family gets into debt

The need to learn debt and money management skills: children need to learn about debt and money management from their school and families, not from payday lenders advertising loans before the watershed.

Questions

- Why are so many families struggling with problem debt in the UK today?
- What can be done to ensure that children don’t suffer from the impact of problem debt?
- How can we ensure that the next generation of children grow up with positive attitudes to debt and money management?

For more information

Web: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-you-can-do/campaign-join/debt-trap-end-damage-children

The Economy



Background

The financial crisis of 2008 continues to overshadow most policy areas. The last government prevented the banking crash from destroying the economy only by massive expenditure to shore up the system – meaning a huge growth in national debt. When the present government took office, it declared its firm commitment to reducing the debt – but debt remains intractable.

Balancing government expenditure against debt reduction is a juggling act. Health, education and pensions have been largely protected, leading to greater spending reductions in other areas. Welfare cuts have proved worryingly acceptable to the general public, as the concept of the “undeserving poor” reappears. Whoever wins in May 2015 will face the need for further debt reduction – and the low-hanging fruit has already been picked.

Meanwhile, the financial sector, which was at the heart of the crisis, has resisted calls for significant changes to its practices. The conditions for another bubble, which may then burst, have not disappeared, although they may have been mitigated.

A big underlying question is whether the economic consensus of the last 35 years is the only viable model, or should there be more scope for fiscal policy aimed at regulating supply and demand (Keynesian economics)? Alternative approaches have not yet gained enough momentum to overturn the dominant consensus.

Issues

Debt, cuts and diversification: the squeeze on benefit recipients is causing real hardship which also impacts on future generations (although some areas of welfare expenditure, such as pensions, have not been part of the debate about cuts). Cuts to the Civil Service reduce the quality of advice and support to government. Reducing military or policing costs creates other risks. Reliance on the City of London as the powerhouse of the national economy has exacerbated economic imbalances between the South East of England and the rest of the country and left most of our eggs in one basket – the same basket that broke in 2008.

Employment: after 2008, unemployment did not rise as fast as was feared. This is good because unemployment is destructive of the human spirit. But the fastest multiplying jobs are often too badly paid to sustain a decent standard of living – nor do they generate much tax-take, so they don’t ease pressure on public expenditure.

Banking: compared to most developed economies, Britain has few banks and those we have remain “too big to fail”. This contradicts a basic principle of the market economy which claims (in theory) to abhor the emergence of monopolies and cartels. The development of challenger banks, community finance initiatives, credit unions and other players in the financial sector may be one way to challenge the quasi-monopoly of the banks, most of whom have been reluctant to provide services to poorer communities.

Inequality: material inequality has grown since 1979 and continues to widen. Taxation which would significantly constrain very high incomes is considered politically impossible. The country is divided between the poor, the relatively well-off but insecure, and the extremely rich 1% (or less). Widening inequalities are known to generate numerous social problems. But in a global economy, where the rich can move their money (and themselves) to other tax regimes, scope for action may be limited.

Distributional justice, and power: economic questions often centre around distributional justice – who should get what share of the national cake. Yet while corporate power has accumulated, work remains precarious for many and consumers have limited choice about who supplies their needs. It will take more than one Parliament to rebuild a more competitive economy, resuscitate other sources of wealth such as manufacturing, and sort out the big economic issues facing us.

Questions

- *How far can the UK government choose its own economic policy directions, and how far must it be subject to global market pressures?*
- *How can we get a proper balance between debt reduction, stimulating the economy and protecting the vulnerable? Can we create an economy where social and environmental goals – not just profit – become the driving force for creative and entrepreneurial activity?*
- *How might our own spending decisions – what we buy, where we bank, how we support ethical companies – affect the economy at large?*

For more information

Web: www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/home-affairs-policy/work-and-the-economy.aspx

Education



Background

Over the last five years, diversity in school provision has increased with the growth particularly of Free Schools and Academies; approximately 40% of children now attend an academy. Providers include a range of national and local groups, some of these being commercial interests, but most schools are either self governing or part of small educational partnerships. Schools of a religious character comprise about one third of schools in England, most owned by the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches.

In a drive to improve standards, this has been a period of extensive educational change. The National Curriculum for learners of all ages, and examination frameworks at age 16 and 18, have been changed to reflect greater challenge and increased rigour. Changes to published school performance indicators have led to an increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and more 'academic' subjects. This has sometimes been at the expense of more vocational qualifications, arts subjects and extra-curricular activities.

The recession has not touched schools so deeply but budgets have been strained such that some courses and opportunities have been trimmed. However, the 'pupil premium' has put additional resources into some schools to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and other learners, with promising impact. Some schools and academies have benefited from ambitious building programmes but funding issues have curtailed this for others.

LAs have a changed role and reduced powers; most are much slimmer, offering far fewer services. They retain responsibility for school place planning, which is a significant challenge in areas with rapidly rising demand. Many schools are independent of LA control and the Government oversees them through a new structure led by Regional Commissioners. The responsibilities of school governors have increased and the role has become more challenging.

Since 2012, university fees have almost trebled to £9,000 a year. Universities continue to offer a relatively broad palette of courses, although some students are opting more for 'vocational' subjects. Apprenticeships have also grown in popularity. There is a continued imbalance between applications from young people from advantaged and disadvantaged areas, especially to 'top' universities.

Issues

A full and rounded education: has the increased focus on success in the 'academic', coupled with straightened finances, narrowed the experience of school, particularly for learners with other skills?

Protecting children from radicalisation: the 'Trojan Horse' conspiracy has stimulated debate about the role of faith in schools and whether Government agencies (such as OFSTED) should be making judgments about the religious life of a school.

The attractiveness of education as a profession: schools experience difficulty recruiting high calibre leaders. International comparisons highlight the heavy workload of school staff in the UK. There is a shortage of teachers in several subjects (including RE) and, as teacher training has become increasingly diversified, teacher supply is more difficult to assure. Schools are also finding it difficult to recruit volunteers to be governors.

The status of Religious Education: Ofsted have highlighted issues of quality in RE. Although it is still compulsory, it is often taught by non-specialists and GCSE RE was overlooked for the 'EBacc' – a key school performance measure. The new RE examinations have been well received although some are concerned that the practical details of the new requirement to study two religions at GCSE needs further consideration.

Questions

- *What is the future for education funding and what will 'value for money' look like throughout the sector?*
- *Schools with a religious foundation have a longstanding tradition of commitment and service to education – what is the future for this?*
- *How can we ensure that disadvantaged people benefit from the life changing opportunities of good education?*

Environment



Background

Our world is already experiencing the impacts of climate change with droughts, heatwaves, floods and cyclones. From Australia to Zambia to Fiji to Haiti and to Bangladesh our church partners bear witness to the growing impact of climate change today.

Campaigners hope that a new long-term climate deal will be agreed at the UN Climate Change Summit in Paris in December 2015. The primary focus will be on commitments made by both developed and developing countries to limit carbon emissions. Other hoped-for aspects of this global deal include promises to help worst affected countries adapt to the impacts of climate change and the establishment of a global fund to support developing countries' investment in low carbon technologies.

In 2008 the UK introduced the Climate Change Act setting mandatory carbon targets for 2030 and 2050 and requiring the UK Government to set five-year carbon budgets. The UK's first carbon budget from 2008 to 2012 was achieved. Emissions in 2013 were 12% lower than 2007 and 28% below their 1990 level. However the recession and decline in economic output contributed to this result and the Government's Committee on Climate Change warns that once we take this into account the underlying pace of emissions reduction was insufficient to meet future carbon budgets. More needs to be done and at a faster pace to encourage the UK's transition to a low-carbon economy.

Issues

Climate Finance: it is only fair that countries such as the UK that have benefited most from cheap fossil fuels should support developing countries in building modern low carbon economies. Pledges on global climate finance made in 2009 have not so far been met. International climate finance must be scaled up to at least \$100 billion per year by 2020, and achieve much greater levels beyond 2020. This inevitably will require innovative sources of climate finance, potentially generated through the financial transaction tax, diversion of fossil fuel subsidies towards renewables and taxes on fossil fuel extraction.

Fracking and extraction of other unconventional fossil fuels: a moderate investment in the extraction of gas by hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking", may not be incompatible with the UK's carbon targets. However unconventional forms of gas compete with renewables for tax breaks and government incentives for investment. Fracking is a contentious issue for affected communities in Lancashire, Scotland and elsewhere. Fracking projects will impact on the landscape, consumption of water resources and agricultural and tourist industries. Churches in

Lancashire are among those expressing concern over the lack of regulation and transparency.

Carbon emissions from the power sector: the Committee on Climate Change states that for the UK to meet its carbon targets, carbon emissions per unit of electricity generated will need to fall to one tenth of current levels by 2030. It is widely acknowledged that this will leave very little scope for the use of coal, the most polluting fossil fuel, beyond the mid-2020s. Some studies show that we can achieve the majority of the power that we require from renewable sources but only if there are planned investments in grid capacity. In times of austerity it is difficult to persuade governments to commit to spending on long-term infrastructure developments.

Nuclear power: the future role of nuclear power in the UK is also a contentious issue as some would see nuclear as a valuable source of low carbon energy. Should the UK allow market forces to determine the extent of investment in new nuclear power stations?

Questions

- *What measures should the UK take to demonstrate its commitment to realistic carbon reduction targets?*
- *How can the UK reduce emissions from the power sector to one tenth of current levels by 2030, as recommended by the Committee on Climate Change?*
- *Can the UK do more to ensure poorly insulated homes are made energy efficient?*

For more information

Web: www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/environment

Europe



Background

The European Union now contains 28 member countries and is likely to expand further over the coming years.

The last elections to the European Parliament took place in May 2014. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) became the largest UK political party in the European Parliament with 24 seats, followed by Labour with 20 seats and the Conservatives with 19 seats. UKIP built on its success at the European Parliamentary elections to win 2 by-elections to the UK Parliament.

The European Commission includes a College of 28 members, one from each EU country. Jonathan Hill (Conservative), the UK Commissioner, has responsibility for financial stability, financial services and capital market union.

There have been prominent public debates around migration within the EU and the UK's potential withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights. As well as questions about national identity and 'British values' in the UK, and views for and against 'multiculturalism', there have been rising concerns about the impact of immigration on the welfare state, housing, the NHS and the availability of jobs for those already resident in the UK. These issues have become highly politicised.

The possibility of the UK joining the Eurozone has become far more remote. Most economists agree that the conditions are not right and the move would not benefit the UK at this time. Many politicians remain committed to the principal of joining the Euro, but many more are implacably opposed.

Issues

EU Integration: since the last General Election in 2010, the UK Parliament passed the European Union Act of 2011. This Act includes a 'sovereignty' clause intended to reaffirm the sovereign character of the UK Parliament. The Act provides for a referendum should there be a further transfer of power or competence from the UK to the EU. Ongoing debates about the UK's power to extradite individuals believed to be dangerous, limit levels of immigration or cap benefits payable to immigrants continue to make this a significant political issue, particularly at a time when matters of devolution and national sovereignty within the UK are being increasingly discussed.

The UK in Europe: the 2015 General Election could see Europe becoming the single dominant issue on the British political landscape for the next 3 years. Debate around the possibility

and timing of an "in/out referendum" will be a source of political controversy for the main parties. The politics of Britain's relationship with the EU are complex and competitive, touching as they do on matters of culture, identity and the meaning and value of national sovereignty in a globalised and interdependent world. There are also questions around the extent to which the EU can be a force for peace and justice within Europe and in the wider world: this was an important issue for the architects of the EU in the aftermath of two World Wars. The repercussions of any referendum would be far reaching for the country as a whole.

The Economic Impact of EU Migration: as discussed on page 14 of this briefing, there are many misconceptions about whether immigration has a positive or negative impact on the UK's economy. But what is clear is that fears around 'benefit tourism' and 'health tourism' exist and reinforce people's opinions. It is likely that future governments will need to engage with the public to meet these concerns.

Questions

- *What role should the UK play in Europe, and what role should Europe play in the world? How does this relate to our understanding of 'Britain's values' and are these the same as the values of the EU's?*
- *Is the UK's current immigration policy for EU-based migration optimal, and if not, what changes are needed?*
- *Where should Europe's border begin and end? Should Turkey be allowed to become a member?*

For more information

Web: www.ceceurope.org/current-issues/current-issues/

Family



Background

There is no such a thing as a typical or 'normal' family in contemporary Britain. Social, legal and cultural shifts have brought about significant changes in marriage and partnership, work and home life. Families continue to evolve and adapt to these changes, facing unique joys and challenges. Parents, carers and children also face distinct but interrelated issues, as economic pressures put an increased burden on people's time and finances.

There were 26.4 million households in the UK in 2013 and the number and diversity of households continues to rise. In addition, recent census data indicated that numbers of concealed families, where more than one family is present in a household, rose by 70.4% between 2001 and 2011.

Issues

Work-Life Balance: parents and carers benefit from more flexible working opportunities – a study by Working Families clearly demonstrated the strong relationship between work-life integration, flexible working, workload, and wellbeing. Exploring routes to allowing greater flexibility in the workplace would be welcomed by many working parents.

Family Wellbeing: families are still keen to find ways to enjoy being together. The opportunity to play, explore outdoor spaces and discover new ideas and experiences with each other is important to parents and children alike and contributes to a sense of wellbeing. Yet often facilities and cost can be barriers to doing so. In the Family & Childcare Trust's Family Friendly Report Card 2014 parents were asked to rate their local public services: public libraries scored the highest marks, with 74% of parents believing that they provided a good service for families. Children's centres were also valued as places where families can seek advice and support as well as participate in activities together.

Childcare: with increased numbers of parents working, and a particular increase in working mothers in the past ten years, finding suitable childcare is crucial. In Britain nearly 70% of families with children under 15 use childcare – but childcare is often expensive and there isn't enough provision. Offering a wider variety of childcare options and increased signposting to local provision would be of huge benefit to families.

Relationships: healthy and happy relationships between family members can make a huge difference and improve outcomes for many, not least the children and young people they include. But the demands and pressures of contemporary life can undermine

those relationships, so it is important to ensure these are well supported in all kinds of family types.

Questions

- *How can we create more free or affordable opportunities for families to enjoy time together?*
- *Can we offer new kinds of flexible working to those caring for children to improve employees' work-life balance, and wider variety of childcare provision be found that meets the needs of families?*
- *What measures could be taken to encourage family member relationships to be resilient and mutually supportive?*

For more information

Web: www.childrenandyoung.org.uk/
www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/reportcard

Global Peace and Security

Background

Conflicts in Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, and Israel/Palestine have had a devastating humanitarian impact. These confrontations have placed immense strain on established mechanisms for international diplomacy. New divisions between permanent members of the Security Council have diminished confidence in the capacity of UN and regional bodies to protect populations from violent conflict. The fighting in eastern Ukraine has so far resulted in over 3,000 deaths, in one of the most violent conflicts on European soil since the Second World War.

ISIS claim to have established a caliphate in Iraq and Syria, winning territory with a cold-blooded brutality that has appalled people across the religious spectrum. However their call for jihad has attracted some young Muslims including many from beyond the Middle East region, in part in reaction to their negative perception of Western States' intervention in the Middle East.

In February 2014 a UN Security Council resolution condemned President Assad's indiscriminate use of barrel bombs, but since then the Syrian regime has continued and even intensified the bombing campaign, resulting in a further 2,000 civilian deaths. The 2014 Gaza war resulted in over 2,000 deaths and damage to infrastructure running into billions of pounds. The Holy Land is now at risk of more widespread conflict.

US strategic priorities continue to adapt with a greater emphasis on the Pacific region as well as efforts to build a coalition with Middle East partners in Iraq and Syria. This encourages the EU and the larger member European states to assume greater diplomatic and military leadership on European borders in conflict with Russian separatist movements and in North Africa. Europe is also increasingly influential in the Israel/Palestine situation.

New technologies in the form of unarmed drones and cyber warfare will increasingly make their presence felt in conflicts.

Issues

Refugees from Syria and Iraq: the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has called on the international community to resettle 130,000 of the 3 million refugees who have been forced to flee Syria. So far pledges have been made to resettle over 60,000 vulnerable refugees met largely by Germany, Sweden, Australia and the United States. The UK has provided generously for support of refugees remaining in the region, but so far has provided resettlement to only 90 people.

Nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament and Trident:

governments are increasingly voicing support for a Nuclear Weapons Convention and a Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty based on international law. In 2006 the UK Parliament proposed the construction of new nuclear submarines with a lifespan of 30 years (the first to be deployed in 2028). This proposal now stands in stark contrast to new multi-lateral disarmament initiatives. At a cost of £25 billion the new submarines would represent one of the UK's largest capital projects, consuming a significant proportion of the Ministry of Defence capital budget. Parliament is expected to vote in 2016 to either approve or reject the Trident successor submarine programme.

Warfare by remote means: armed drones potentially allow military intervention at less political cost and have been used for targeted killings in Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Many more states will gain this technology in coming years, yet legal issues around their use, and particularly the practice of targeted killing, remain highly contested. Political allegiances discourage the UK Government from criticism of the United States' use of armed drones in Pakistan and Yemen which takes place outside of a recognised international conflict.

Responding to terrorism: violent fundamentalism has had tragic consequences in several countries across North Africa and the Middle East. The attack on the Charlie Hebdo office demonstrates the potential threat within Europe and the UK. Dialogue across faiths can promote tolerance and counter radicalisation. We have learned from Iraq and Afghanistan the limitations of military intervention. Yet, in the absence of strong security presence Christians and other minorities in the Middle East are extremely vulnerable. Our challenge is to achieve appropriate military and non-military intervention in the varied contexts in which violent extremism is so tragically evident.

Questions

- *What measures should the UK take to combat ISIS in Iraq and Syria beyond military intervention?*
- *Can the UK aspire to an ethical foreign policy and if so what would that involve?*
- *Do you support the proposed £25 billion programme to renew the Trident nuclear weapons system?*

For more information

Web: www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/peacemaking/

Health



Background

Health continues to be a key issue in general election campaigns. The biggest reorganisation of health care provision since the creation of the NHS took place in April 2013. Local Clinical Commissioning Groups are tasked with 'commissioning' the care for their local populations. This change also saw attempts to bring health and social care closer together.

The future funding of the NHS continues to be a significant issue. Following major reorganisation during a period of austerity, there are fears that an increasing 'funding gap' would make it impossible to sustain current levels of funding and care.

There are concerns regarding care at a local level. In the last year, key areas of debate have included:

- waiting times in Accident and Emergency and Access to Services
- dementia care
- the integration of social and health care
- the cost of funding an NHS that is free at the point of delivery
- end of life care.

Issues

Waiting times in Accident and Emergency: there have been reports of patients waiting for prolonged periods before being transferred to A & E from ambulances, and in some areas an increase in time to be transferred to a ward, if admission is seen as the best care option. This is a concern to all who call on the Emergency Services in times of a health crisis.

Poorly performing hospitals and health trusts: concerns around poorly performing hospitals have been emphasised by the widespread publicity around the NHS Mid-Staffordshire Trust and in particular Stafford Hospital, which was associated with several scandals between 2005 and 2009. Healthcare in Staffordshire has recently been reorganised under a new trust. It is too early to evaluate whether the recent reorganisation of the NHS will be effective in assisting struggling health services to improve, and in helping the National Health Service retain public trust in its ability to provide excellent healthcare, throughout the UK.

Access to services: with the arrival of Local Clinical Commissioning Groups, communities should be able to be part of the process, but there are still concerns about seeing a GP at a time that suits the patient, access to services locally for accident and emergency care, cancer care, neonatal care, and how these are managed at a time of limited resources.

End-of- Life Care: the Liverpool Care Path way was withdrawn after reports of 'misuse'. A major review of End-of-Life Care has resulted in the publication of 'One Chance To Get it Right' and the development of End-of-Life Care Pathways at a local level. "Dying Matters" reported that almost half of the people dying in hospital would rather be at home, with only 22% of those dying in any one year, dying at home. There is going to be increasing and ongoing debate in the UK about death and dying, and Churches can contribute to this thinking.

Questions

- *What are your priorities in healthcare?*
- *How can we ensure that sufficient funding is preserved for the NHS to maintain a high level of care and medical excellence?*
- *How are the local Clinical Commissioning Groups going to ensure care is both local and appropriate with equality of access for all?*

For more information

Web: www.kingsfund.org.uk

Housing



Background

It is widely accepted that house building in Britain has failed to keep up with demand for the last 35 years. Even if all the unoccupied properties were filled we would still need to build more than 200,000 new homes a year to keep up with the formation of new households and tackle the backlog of homeless and poorly housed families and individuals. Meanwhile street sleeping, which can be counted, has increased sharply since 2010 and hidden homelessness, which is not measured, is also estimated to have risen.

Issues

Housing need and affordability: last year only 117,000 new homes were built. Government policies relaxing planning rules and increasing available finance are not enough to increase the number of homes to the required level. One consequence of this shortage of housing is that the cost of a home, whether to buy or to rent, is now prohibitively expensive. The average British home costs just over £250,000 but the average (median) household income is around £23,000 meaning a home costs more than 10 times income. Rents are rising faster than house prices at the same time as more people are making their homes in the private rental sector. This means the cost of Housing Benefit, the government subsidy for the housing costs of people paying rent (available to people in work as well as to unemployed or retired people), keeps going up. One way to tackle the crisis of affordability would be to set a goal of no household needing to spend more than, say, 30% of their income on housing costs.

Homes away from more prosperous areas of the country, may seem to be more 'affordable' compared to national averages, but such areas too often lack the jobs, transport and infrastructure to support communities. Rural communities face particular challenges in providing affordable homes. With some businesses stating that they struggle to find staff due to the lack of affordable housing in commuting distance, the next Government will face the challenge of creating a joined-up housing strategy to address these issues.

Poor housing conditions and empty homes: the consequences of unaffordable housing include serious overcrowding and poor conditions in rented properties, but this is accompanied by the under-occupation of many owner-occupied homes, as well as by the scourge of empty properties. The last census found more than a quarter of a million families living in severely overcrowded conditions. There are endemic issues with damp, mould and disrepair, especially (but not exclusively) in the private rented sector. We need better standards for rented property, including

controls on fees charged by letting agents, and longer leases. There are around 700,000 empty homes in the UK, many of which have been empty for six months or more and should be brought back into use.

Rough sleeping: the latest estimate of rough sleeping in England from the annual government-led street count is 2,414. This is up 37% from 2010. Last year in London alone, more than 6,500 people were seen by outreach workers sleeping on the streets. Hundreds of thousands more people are hidden homeless, sleeping in cars, squats, bin sheds and on friends' floors. Young people and destitute migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are particularly at risk of homelessness and exploitation.

The rise in rough sleeping is being driven by various factors. These include cuts to advice services, landlords refusing to rent to benefit claimants, changes to the benefit system (not just the spare room subsidy or 'bedroom tax' but also raising the age limit for the Shared Accommodation rate from 25 to 35, as well as benefit sanctions), and, critically, the shortage of genuinely affordable housing. Recent changes to the benefits that can be claimed by European migrants are adding to the number of destitute people who have no recourse to public funds. These are people who often depend on support from churches and other faith communities.

An adequate safety net providing emergency shelter for all homeless people (including migrants), followed up with good quality advice and assistance would greatly reduce rough sleeping. It is important that this is accompanied by a continued focus on preventing homelessness and on support for the newly housed.

Questions

- *How can we ensure that the funding and the land are available to build the houses we need, and that these houses are built?*
- *How can we reduce the number of empty homes in the UK?*
- *Can we ensure the provision of emergency shelter for all homeless people?*

For more information

Web: www.housingjustice.org.uk

Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery

E N I S W

Background

Human trafficking is a serious crime and a violation of human rights. It refers to the recruitment, movement or receipt of a person by deception or force for the purpose of exploitation, which include forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and criminal exploitation.

Nearly every country in the world is affected by human trafficking. Victims are trafficked within their own country, to neighbouring countries and between continents. It is the world's fastest growing global crime and generates an estimated \$36 billion per annum.

It has been estimated that worldwide:

- More than 800,000 men, women and children are trafficked every year
- 77% of trafficked victims are women
- 87% of trafficked victims are sexually exploited

The UK is considered a destination country, with most victims originating from Romania, Nigeria, Albania and China. The Salvation Army, which has a government contract to support adult victims of human trafficking, revealed in October 2014 a rise of 135% in the number of victims requiring support compared to 2011. For the first time, the largest group of people (42%), had been subjected to labour exploitation. In June 2014 the government introduced the Modern Slavery Bill in Parliament, which was supported by the three main parties. This Bill aims to strengthen the legal framework to tackle slavery and human trafficking, ensure offenders get prosecuted and enhance victim protection and support. Many have welcomed the Bill but there are concerns that it is too focused on prosecution and lacks sufficient provision for victim protection and support.

Issues

Awareness: public awareness of trafficking and of the different forms that it can take is very low and many cases go unreported. Due to the nature of the crime, many people and law enforcement organisations fail to identify someone as a victim. Even frontline professionals can be unaware of the signs of trafficking and how to make a referral.

Prosecution: since many cases go unreported the culprits remain at large. Human traffickers are commonly associated with international criminal organisations and are, therefore, highly mobile and difficult to prosecute. Prosecution is further complicated by victims of trafficking being afraid to testify against traffickers, not trusting the police or even failing to realise that they are a victim.

Numerous victims also end up being prosecuted for offences they have committed as a result of being trafficked. There is also the danger that an insensitive investigation and prosecution process may further traumatise victims of trafficking.

Protection and support: once victims are identified it is vital that they are provided with specialist support. Effective protection and support will encourage victims to testify against their traffickers and help to secure more prosecutions. It also plays an important role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of the victim to ensure they do not fall back into exploitation. In the UK the National Referral Mechanism was set up by the government to identify and support victims. Following a recent review into the NRM several recommendations were made to change the way victims are identified, improve access to support and the collection and collation of data.

Transparency in the Supply Chain: evidence shows that human trafficking and slavery exist in different stages of the supply chain. The Government confirmed it will place a duty on large UK companies to disclose the steps they have taken to ensure their supply chains are slavery free.

Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner: the Government has just appointed the UK'S first Anti-Slavery Commissioner to oversee the implementation of anti-trafficking policy. However concerns have been raised that without greater independence from Government and broader powers the Commissioner will not be able to provide proper oversight or accountability.

Questions

- *What can be done to raise awareness of human trafficking in the UK?*
- *What measures can be taken to improve victim protection and support?*
- *How can the Churches increase their capacity to uncover cases of human trafficking and to support victims?*

For more information

Web: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/human-trafficking

Immigration and asylum

Background

Migration is often treated as a homogenous issue in public debate. Yet at any given time, in addition to existing citizens, the UK contains EU migrants, non-EU migrants, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. These different groups are treated differently in law, have very different reasons for being in the UK and face very different challenges – unhelpfully, they are often conflated in the public debate.

- **EU-migration:** this has been the focus of much debate. Immigration from the EU has increased dramatically over the past decade. Over a million new EU migrants are living in the UK. EU migrants enter legally and have a right to work in the UK and roughly the same numbers of UK citizens are living throughout the EU.
- **Non-EU migration:** Government policies aimed at reducing immigration have focused on this group. Routes of entry such as joining family or studying have been more tightly regulated. Non-EU immigration has fallen slowly over the past decade and this trend is continuing.
- **Asylum seeking:** this is by far the smallest group. Numbers of asylum seekers have fallen dramatically: 19,865 in 2011 compared to 84,130 ten years ago. At present, the UK is not a preferred destination for asylum seekers with 0.41 applications per 1,000 people compared to the EU average of 0.65 per 1,000 people.
- **Undocumented migrants:** these are migrants whose status is yet to be determined. Their numbers are unknown although these are likely to form a small proportion of the overall migration figure.

Immigration is a hot political topic with some people believing that too many people come to live in the UK, resulting in a society which is changing. All major parties have a stated intention to reduce the levels of immigration, although the details of the policies to implement this are as yet unclear.

Issues

EU migration: due to their relatively young age and good health EU migrants are net contributors to the UK exchequer. The impact on the economy and the labour market is contested. While the influx of new labour may have had an effect on individual industries – building, for example – overall the data suggest that neither unemployment levels nor overall wage levels were positively or negatively affected. The benefit claim rate for these migrants is exceptionally low and the idea that benefits have drawn many people into the UK has not been supported by objective evidence.

Asylum seekers and humanitarian crises: current conflicts in Syria and elsewhere have heightened public awareness of global conflict and persecution and the ways in which Western nations are involved in these. The UK has committed to take several hundred refugees from Syria over 3 years under the vulnerable persons relocation scheme and over 2,500 Syrian nationals have received leave to remain in the UK.

Provision for asylum seekers: this is very limited: the government does not want to make an overly 'generous' system a 'pull factor' for people from elsewhere. The effect is that many people are forbidden from working, while receiving barely enough to survive on. For some of those seeking asylum, legal aid and avenues for appeal have also become more problematic.

Policing the immigration system: more people are being asked to join in the process of checking for 'illegal immigrants'. This applies to some aspects of the health services, and in a current pilot programme, landlords in the West Midlands are checking the immigration status of applicants. For some, this is a prudent way of ensuring that people do not access services to which they are not entitled; for others, it risks fostering a culture of suspicion.

Detention: increasing numbers of people (29,000 in 2012) are being held in Immigration Removal Centres and prisons each year. There is no statutory limit to the length of detention, nor any automatic right to a bail hearing.

Questions

- *Do you think we should take more refugees from Syria and other countries facing humanitarian crises? And is our provision for asylum seekers appropriate?*
- *Why would people in your community fear new immigration? Why would others welcome it?*
- *How can the Christian tradition of hospitality to the stranger inform decisions on immigration policy in the present day?*

For more information

Web: www.ctbi.org.uk/12/

International Development



Background

- Despite good progress by many countries in tackling poverty and some progress towards meeting some of the Millennium Development Goals, there are still more than 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty around the world, and over 2 billion living on under \$2 per day. When overall statistics improve, it is often women, children and marginalised groups who are left behind, and who suffer first when a disaster strikes.
- There is still a very long way to go to ensure that all people get better access to basic rights like healthcare, education and water and sanitation, and to address global inequalities.
- Successive governments have committed to keep the longstanding agreement to spend 0.7% of national income on overseas development aid. Aid is important for responding to emergency needs and to help tackle the root causes of poverty.
- However, other government policies also have an impact on developing countries – for example measures to tackle corruption, address climate change, challenge gender inequality and to stop tax avoidance around the world.

Issues

Global Goals: the Millennium Development Goals, established 15 years ago, set out to halve world poverty and to increase people's quality of life by getting governments to agree to a set of common goals and targets for 2015. Some of these have been met, but many have not. New goals are now being developed: it is hoped that these will address key issues such as focusing on the hardest to reach groups, reducing inequality and tackling the root causes of poverty.

Aid: the UK has finally met its 40-year promise to spend 0.7% of income on international development aid. This money has helped millions of children to go to school and supported humanitarian interventions in some of the most difficult places. Some have argued that this amount is too generous. Others have argued that this promise should be enshrined in law so that it can't be broken. And there is considerable debate about precisely how the money is spent.

Gender: a significant majority of the people living in poverty around the world are women. In developing countries, far fewer girls complete their education than boys and it is estimated that 1 in 3 women suffers some kind of domestic abuse. If attempts to tackle poverty are gender-blind, they will fail.

Humanitarian response: in the past 20 years, natural disasters have affected 4.4 billion people, claimed 1.3 million lives and

caused \$2 trillion in economic losses. The next government will need to decide how to continue providing financial support during a humanitarian crisis, and how it will work with the global community to reduce the impact of disasters on the most vulnerable.

Tax avoidance: tax avoidance robs countries of revenues which could be used for funding basic services and tackling poverty. The UK is a major financial centre, with control over many tax havens. The UK government therefore has an important role to play in ensuring that the global tax system is reformed in a way which delivers more transparency and benefits developing countries. UK companies can also be complicit in corruption in developing countries.

Questions

- *How can the UK Government ensure that climate change is tackled in a way that delivers a fair outcome for the poorest in the world, who are hit hardest by the changing climate?*
- *Is it right that the UK maintains its promise to spend 0.7% of income on international development aid, and what priorities should govern how this money is spent?*
- *How does our awareness of environmental issues relate to personal economic decisions such as how we spend our money and where and how we travel?*

For more information

Web: www.christian-aid.org.uk

Poverty and Social Exclusion



Background

The challenge of tackling poverty in the midst of austerity and further cuts to the welfare budget is likely to remain a contentious political issue in the run up to the General Election. This issue has to be understood in the wider context of the continuing squeeze on household budgets since the 2008 economic crisis:

- average household incomes have fallen in real terms by between 8-9% since 2007. This prolonged squeeze on household budgets is unprecedented in modern times.
- whilst unemployment has fallen, the numbers of people in low paid work has risen rapidly. As a result, over half of all people in poverty now live in a family with someone in paid work.

Issues

Low pay: there has been a significant change in the labour market in the last ten years. Insecure work – zero hours contracts, part time work and low-paid self-employment – has increased significantly which means that getting a job does not necessarily mean getting out of poverty. Five million people are paid less than the Living Wage, 3 million of them women. The Living Wage, set to ensure a basic but acceptable standard of living, is increasingly seen as an important measure in addressing the crisis of low pay. The 2014/15 rate is £9.15 inside London and £7.85 across the rest of the UK. The Living Wage Commission has suggested that if more employers paid a Living Wage, it could not only tackle in-work poverty but also save the public purse up to £2 billion a year.

Food poverty: the demand for emergency food assistance has rapidly increased over the last decade. The Trussell Trust alone provided 913,138 people with emergency food aid in 2013-14. A range of factors have been identified as driving the growth of food poverty, including a rapid escalation in the cost of household essentials – food, housing and utilities; a sudden drop in income; and problems with the benefits system, including delays, errors and benefit sanctions.

Welfare reform: reforming and reducing the cost of welfare has been a major element of the current Government's austerity programme. Money has been cut from the welfare budget but increasing pension payments and housing benefit payments have made the savings less than projected. Even so, research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies indicates that the changes to the welfare system introduced in this parliament will cause the levels of child poverty to increase from 3.5 million to 4.6 million by the end of the next parliament. By 2015-16 people in poverty will be

£2,744 a year worse off as a result of the cuts, with disabled people in poverty being £4,660 a year worse off. All main parties have indicated that they will continue to reduce benefit spending in the next parliament.

Questions

- *What policies will reduce the growth of 'in work' poverty in the UK?*
- *How can the next Government tackle the scandal of food poverty?*
- *Are cuts to the welfare budget necessary? If so, how can we protect the poorest and most vulnerable from the impact of these cuts?*

For more information

Web: www.church-poverty.org.uk
www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/social-justice/poverty-and-inequality
www.jointpublicissues.org.uk

Religious Freedom



Background

Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Yet in some parts of the world, administrative, societal and other obstacles severely limit the realisation of these rights. And there are also parts of the world where effective state authority has all but collapsed.

In these places the denial of freedom of thought, conscience and religion to parts of the population has resulted in the expulsion or killing of members of religious or belief minorities. In the Middle East and North Africa, Christian and other minorities are particularly under threat from violent extremism with international outrage at the recent atrocities committed by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Leaders from all faiths have roundly condemned the violence of ISIS. But the apparent receptiveness of many young people to ISIS propaganda campaigns gives the impression that the cause of religious freedom is under severe strain.

Religious extremism involving the persecution of minorities in other nations, including Burma, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, also remains a significant issue.

Alongside the international challenges to religious freedom, there have also been domestic debates in the UK around the extent to which members of religions are free to practise and express their faith. These highlight significant issues in how belief exists in a multicultural society containing religious diversity, but it is important to keep a sense of proportion between these questions and the harsh reality faced by many religious believers internationally. It is also important to remember that it is not just religion but freedom of thought in general which needs to be promoted in any national context, including the freedom to be an atheist.

Issues

International Cooperation around Freedom of Religion: promotion of freedom of religion will be compromised if it is perceived in some places as another ‘Western’ or ‘Christian’ human rights agenda. There is a need to explore the principle of freedom of religion in ongoing dialogue across faith groups. In the international sphere, there has been concern that human rights are sometimes used as a “political football” between states.

Religious and political freedom: tensions can sometimes be perceived as arising between religious freedom and the secular law. Faith-based legal mediation in the UK developed in recognition of the religious freedom of members of the Jewish faith, but this principle has become increasingly controversial, especially around the existence of Sharia law courts. Another aspect of religious freedom that needs careful consideration is the right to change religion, which is guaranteed under Article 18. This is a fundamental right that is denied in certain contexts, sometimes at the initiative or with the support of governments.

Equality Legislation: the legal framework of the Equality Act 2010 aims to protect the religious and other freedoms and equalities of individuals. Cases where these freedoms and equalities may be perceived as coming into conflict with each other have received media attention – for example over the right to wear religious symbols or refuse to provide services which are felt to be against one’s religious beliefs. Some cases have been taken to court, but the understanding of the legislation is still developing. Whilst some people welcome the recognition of religious equality within law, others fear that religious freedom will not be protected by such legislation but will ultimately be eroded and trumped by secularism.

Questions

- *Should the UK Government keep freedom of religion or belief as a human rights priority? If so, how can we ensure that the UK is an outspoken defender of freedom of religion or belief in Europe and internationally?*
- *Should the UK government make foreign policy or the encouragement of international trade conditional upon the state of religious freedom in other countries?*
- *How can the UK protect the positive contributions and freedoms of both religion and secularism, both domestically and on the global stage?*

Further Information

Web: www.csw.org.uk/home.htm
www.derby.ac.uk/religion-and-society

The following organisations have contributed to this publication:

- Action for Children
- The Baptist Union of Great Britain
- CARE in Northern Ireland
- The Children's Society
- Christian Aid
- Christian Solidarity Worldwide
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