



WHAT KIND OF SOCIETY?

VISION AND VOICE FOR THE UK CHURCH



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The Evangelical Alliance

We are the largest and oldest body representing the UK's two million evangelical Christians. For more than 170 years, we have been bringing Christians together and helping them listen to, and be heard by, the government, media and society. We're here to connect people for a shared mission, whether it's celebrating the Bible, making a difference in our communities or lobbying the government for a better society. From Skye to Southampton, from Coleraine to Cardiff, we work across more than 80 denominations, nearly 4,000 churches, 600 organisations and thousands of individual members and supporters. And we're not just uniting Christians within the UK – we are a founding member of the World Evangelical Alliance, a global network of more than 600 million evangelical Christians. For more information, go to www.eauk.org/join

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PREFACE

We live in uncertain times. People need vision – because vision brings hope for a better future.

What kind of society? aims to provide a vision for the kind of world that we want our children and grandchildren to grow old in. At a time of disconcerting turbulence and increasing trepidation about what the future holds, we want to encourage God's people to give voice to this vision that things can change for the better.

In 2014 Evangelical Alliance Scotland produced *What kind of nation?* as a prompt to help Christians engage with the independence referendum that took place that year and think about the kind of Scotland they wanted in the future. In the wake of the 2016 EU referendum result and 2017 General Election we felt a similar document asking searching questions of our society and positing a vision for the future was needed, and this is it.

The Evangelical Alliance has engaged in public policy work for a long time, and is keen to see Christian ideas and principles influencing parliamentary debate. Over the last few years we have also worked to encourage Christians in public leadership, urging them to take on responsibility and act with authority in the places that

God has put them. But on its own this is not enough. Vision is needed. We hope *What kind of society?* provides a springboard of vision for public policy and public leadership.

It is our firm conviction, and the basis upon which we produce this resource, that the Christian faith has good news and is good news for all people. We believe that the truth of the gospel is the greatest news that any person can hear, and we also believe that Christian teaching and biblical principles provide the best anchor for our society. Such vision has a great track record. It has benefited many in the past and can help many more thrive in the future.

The language of love, freedom, justice and truth resonates strongly in our contemporary society. These things are of enduring importance for everyone, and we want to see them lived out and made real in our communities and neighbourhoods. The challenge is that these ideas are contested. What does it mean to love? Who gets freedom? What counts as justice? And what is truth?

Our hope is that this resource offers a starting point for a positive conversation, and unpacks how these ideas

might help us rediscover a vision that is fuelled by the hope that a flourishing society is possible.

These are not the only ideas that we could have used. There are many other themes within biblical teaching that also resonate with our culture. These are simply the ones we have chosen to use as a starting point – to encourage and equip God’s people to cast vision for and to have a voice in our society. Nor is this an exhaustive account of how these four themes might impact our society. It is only intended to start conversations, to inspire vision and to encourage action.

Our vision is for an authentically plural society in which people can live together despite their deepest differences. Our conviction is that this plural public space is best secured when built on distinctly Christian principles of love, freedom, justice and truth. These foundational ideas allow people to flourish and societies to thrive. Love provides the glue that holds society together. Freedom provides opportunities. Justice rights wrongs. And truth is a rock we can all build our lives upon.

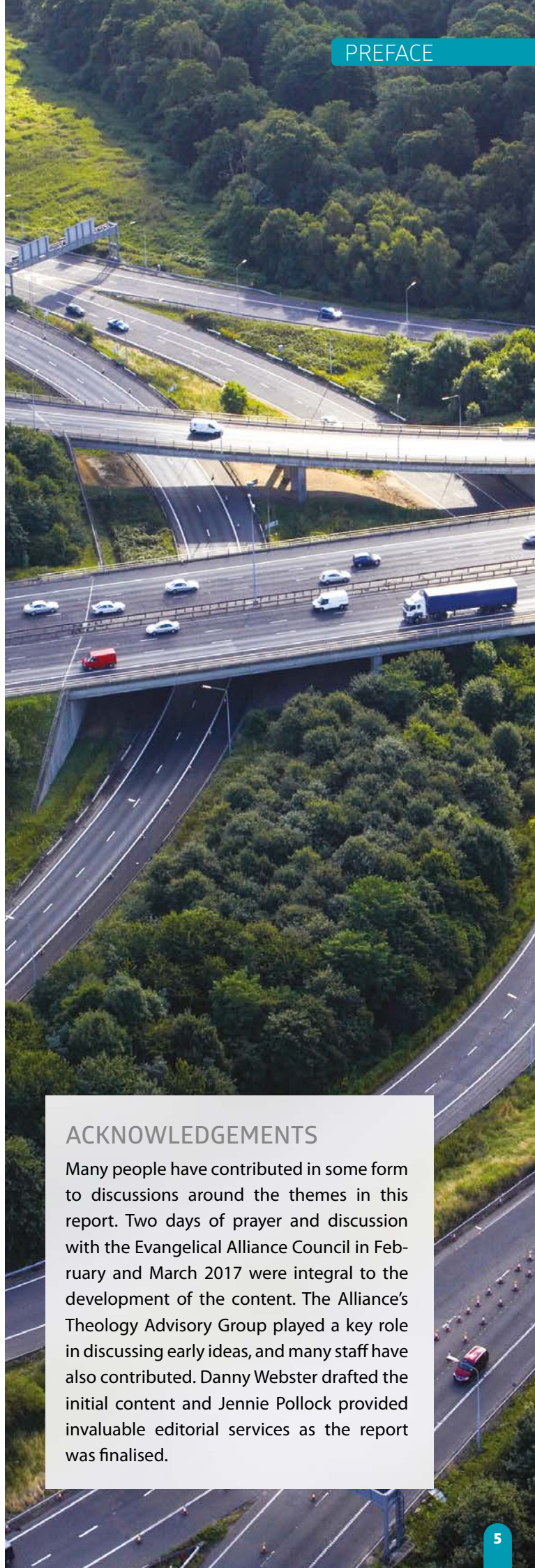
It is unlikely that everyone will agree with all that is written. In fact, it’s quite likely that there will be things you, your family and your neighbours disagree with. But that’s okay. This is a prompt to help you think through what should be at the root of our society for the coming generations. It’s about considering what we need to protect and promote in order that future generations are in a better place. It is a starting point for the kinds of conversations we want to see across the UK. We want to see Christians and churches taking a more central role in asking questions and finding answers to the problems we face.

As we publish this resource we ask and pray that it is used by Christians across the UK as they seek after the kind of society that works for the good of all.

We want to see Christians speak confidently of the goodness that our faith leads to, and give voice to a vision of a society where all flourish and grow, and love, freedom, justice and truth are not just noble ideas, but the revolutionary principles our society is built on.

So, what kind of society do you want?

Dr David Landrum, director of advocacy
Evangelical Alliance
September 2017



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INTRODUCTION

If society was more loving, more free, more just, and more truthful, we would all benefit.

This is the Evangelical Alliance's vision for the kind of society we want the UK to become. We believe that the Christian faith has provided the foundations for flourishing in the past and we are confident and hopeful that it can for the future.

As evangelicals we are committed to engaging in public life and believe we have a contribution to make for all of society. We believe things can be better than they are now. Evangelicals frequently say they want to change society, so we want to stimulate the next stage of the conversation: what kind of society do we want?

Evangelicals have been at the forefront of advocating for systemic changes for many centuries, and working to ensure the impacts of these changes are felt by those who need them most. Whether through campaigning against the transatlantic slave trade, improving factory conditions or working for prison reform, evangelicals are activists.

The good news of salvation in Jesus is at the heart of our message and motivation, and as John Stott observed: "A country which has been permeated by the gospel is not a soil in which ... poisonous weeds can easily take root, let alone luxuriate."¹

The gospel and social activism cannot be separated, but sometimes people have tried. We want to chart a course that is not about truth detached from the society we are living in, nor good works devoid of good news. A gospel without the truth of the good news is no gospel at all. It is an attempt to carry the fruit of the Christian faith without the root of the good news. To use another metaphor, it

is like cut flowers: they are beautiful in their place, but detached from the ground they lose their freshness and life all too soon.

We live in times of dizzying social and political turbulence. There is a crisis of leadership in our society, a lack of vision for a common good, and a hope deficit. This vacuum is a challenge but it is also an opportunity for evangelical Christians.

Politicians do not have a clear framework to guide them as to what policies to pursue, and the wider public doesn't have one to help them decide which to support. The decline of public understanding and acceptance of a Christian vision for the good life has left a vacuum which cannot be filled by political ideologies. Throughout this report we want to help equip Christians to have a vision for what public life could look like and a few core values that help structure how it is worked out.

We often know what we are against – and are often known by what we are against – but for our engagement in society to be effective and lasting we need a vision for that society, and we will need to be able to articulate the vision in a way that makes sense and is appealing. This means asking ourselves two key questions:

- 1 What do we want?
- 2 How do we best communicate what we want?

Our goal with *What kind of society?* is to address these questions and to provide the church with what it needs to practically cast a vision and be a voice for the good of all.

As James KA Smith puts it: "The biblical vision of our human calling to tend the earth and love our neighbours

– a calling that is *renewed* by the gospel, not superseded
 – propels us into social concern for the societies in which we find ourselves. The church sends us into the world as agents of renewal.”²

WHAT HAVE THE EVANGELICALS EVER DONE FOR US?

In the UK we have benefitted for centuries from the legacy of the Christian faith. It is the foundation of our political and legal system, and the education and health provision so highly valued across the nations grew out of the efforts of Christian charity before the state took on the mantle of responsibility.

Smith goes on to say that “the envisioned good of a diverse, pluralistic, yet civil society that liberal democracies hope for is not a generic vision. It has a particular history – rooted in Christianity – and demands particular virtues.”

The very basis on which our political and legal system rests is firmly grounded in Christian thought. As Zimmermann comments about English law, “In the early stages of its development, and at least until the early nineteenth century, the common law rested almost entirely upon a religious conception that looked to higher or natural laws as the primary basis for judicial decisions.”³

Considering Magna Carta, Thomas Andrew says: “[it] can be seen as the first cogent political expression of certain theories of right and liberty. This story is one in which the Christian Church and Christian theology plays a vital role.”⁴

If you walk into parliament - and you can - and you head to central lobby and look up you will see windows depicting the four patron saints of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. If you look down you can see inscribed into the tiles a passage in Latin from Psalm 127, which in modern translation says: “Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.”

What is true about the foundations of our political system, is also true about the instruments of society which we precious guard. Take healthcare as one example, Christians have been involved in providing medical care for many centuries, often as an act of charity when state provision had not yet been contemplated. In gushing tones Donald Soper, “arguably the most influential Methodist leader of the 20th century,”⁵ wrote in the early 1960s (for the Socialist Health Review) that “the National Health Service in particular represent[s] the

noblest domestic act of government in the 20th century. I should indeed want to go further – it seems to me to be the most Christian political achievement of my life time and one of the most transparently Christian political acts in British history.”⁶

Providing healthcare was a Christian imperative before it was a state responsibility, and in the future the mantle of responsibility may well return to those motivated by more than legal duty to give care to those most needing it. During the Victorian era Evangelicals “were prepared to take a part in the changes in social policy which characterised the turn of the nineteenth century and urged their church members to do the same. They were to be found on most local government committees in the poorer districts which dealt with social problems and they did their utmost to check abuses and to improve the social services. They thus exercised considerable influence in helping to bring about the social reforms of the [twentieth] century and in laying the foundations of the welfare state.”⁷

In the area of education, the Church of England founded the *National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church* in 1811, with the goal of providing a school in every parish. Still in existence, the *National Society* (as it is generally known) today provides schooling for one million pupils.⁸

In the early nineteenth century Elizabeth Fry gave herself to the task of improving prison conditions, both organising volunteers to visit and campaigning to improve conditions. Fry was the first woman to give evidence to a parliamentary committee, in 1818, and the *Goals Act 1823* incorporated many of her recommendations.⁹ Lord Shaftesbury was another evangelical given to social reform, his campaigning in parliament limited the working day for factory workers to ten hours, and banned the use of young boys as chimney sweeps.¹⁰

In the UK today we still see this drive to work for the good of all in action, from compassionate activities such as helping people out of debt or providing emergency food, to restorative action in helping people into jobs and permanent accommodation, or transitioning from prison back to a fulfilling role in society. We still see the political campaigns of committed Christians making a difference for the most vulnerable, advocating aid overseas and justice at home, and picking up the legacy of Wilberforce by working to end the slavery and racism that still haunts our world today.

A VOICE FOR GOOD

We do not suppose that only evangelicals can contribute good ideas for society. We readily acknowledge and affirm the many developments that have contributed to our flourishing that come from believers of other faiths, as well as those without religious identities. What we do contend is that the Christian faith, and especially the conviction and activism of evangelicals, is an essential voice for good in our society, one we have benefited from for many centuries and one which sustains much of what is valuable in our society today.

There is also ample scope for humility in accepting that we have not always got this right. There have been times when the intent of advocating for the good of all has come closer to supporting privilege for the adherents of Christianity. That is not our goal, instead we want to provide a voice for the good of all, a voice that speaks with confidence and clarity, full in the belief of the goodness of God and His desire to see all of creation restored to full life.

When churches respond in the hardest of times with hands of kindness, words of warmth and the commitment that they are not going to leave people behind, the goodness at the heart of the Christian faith is magnified for the world to see. This was evident after the Grenfell fire in June 2017 where faith communities were described as a “fourth emergency service”.¹¹ Churches have been a part of communities for centuries, they have networks to lean on when challenges come, and a resilience to crises that is visible when it matters most.

Giving voice to our hope, and advocating goodness, can be difficult tasks. This is made more difficult when society does not agree what goodness looks like. It is worth addressing some of the contentious topics, not because they are the only important issues, but because they arise frequently as a source of tension when evangelicals engage in contemporary society.

The issue of abortion is one such topic in which Christians rely on vastly different underlying ethics to most secular thinkers in determining the good outcome. For Christians human life is sacred, and we have a duty to protect that life in all its forms, this means caring for the elderly, supporting people with health challenges and disabilities, and advocating for the protection of life before birth. We strongly contend that a coherent compassionate ethic requires protecting both women and unborn children as well as caring for them after birth. In Northern Ireland the Evangelical Alliance has been part

of the Both Lives Matter campaign, making the case for better care and services for pregnant women and reframing the debate around valuing both mother and unborn child. This, however, is not a perspective shared by all, and therefore not all will consider it a voice for good.

Sexuality is perhaps the area where Christian ethics come into the clearest contrast with contemporary values. This is also an area where Christians have frequently handled themselves without the care that is due, whether in response to Christians experiencing same-sex attraction, or around the language and behaviour relating to gay, lesbian and bisexual people. And yet, the orthodox Christian position remains that sexual union and the intimacy involved in committed lifelong relationships, is something reserved for couples made up of one man and one woman.

These two examples illustrate that we live among competing visions for the good, and therefore saying that we want to speak ‘good news’ to society is not enough. It is necessary that we provide a rationale for why what we say is good news, is just that. Providing a voice for good is not the same as saying what society will accept, nor what will keep people happy, nor even what might make people like Christians more. It is presenting a vision of what a society that reflects God’s goodness could look like.

There are some issues on which the Christian perspective is largely in line with contemporary public opinion, or has contributed to a shift in our collective response, for example tackling human trafficking or encouraging overseas development. But in other areas, as mentioned above, the perspective we offer will diverge from the accepted norms in the UK today.

The challenges of Christian engagement in public life in the twenty-first century may be different from those experienced by earlier generations, but they are not wholly new. Frequently Christians have contested in the public square for what goodness should look like, Wilberforce, so frequently cited for his role in the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade had a second great endeavour through his life: the reformation of manners, or in other words, encouraging civility and better behaviour. In pursuing this goal he frequently came up against practices, habits and a culture that were roadblocks in his path. There were other understandings of the good that needed challenging, perhaps well summed up in his catchy title: *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians: Contrasted with Real Christianity*.

BUT WHAT KIND OF TRANSFORMATION?

There can be a tendency among evangelical Christians to fall into one of two traps when it comes to social and political engagement. The task of this relatively brief report is to steer a path between them. This is ambitious, and runs the risk of falling into either or both traps.

The first trap is that evangelicals become absorbed into individual issues as the defining feature of their public engagement. This can transfer into voting habits as seen in the United States, where a candidate's position on abortion often overrides all other issues, but also through political campaigning which challenges Christians to respond to the 'greatest moral issue of our time'. (This could be international development, human trafficking, environmental concerns, domestic poverty, tax evasion, marriage, family life, the death penalty – the list is almost endless.)

That the options for the 'greatest issue' are so numerous suggests there is no such issue. There are many vital issues for Christians to have a voice on, and problems we must commit to solving, so while the focus for some may be narrow, our combined witness to public life cannot be confined to single issue campaigns.

The second trap is sometimes a response to the specific and important campaigns, and attempts to look more broadly at the contribution we can make. We (evangelicals) like the language of transformation, we like things that change, so we talk about seeking transformation, and being the change that we want to see in the world. But we don't always put the flesh on the bones of what that change looks like or how it will come about.

Similarly it can be easy to criticise the quality of our public life, and sit back and say that things must change, but never do the hard work to describe what those things are, and what that change could look like.

With these two pitfalls in mind this document intends to set out a vision for what kind of society we want to live in. It is not going to get into the specific policy details that transformation requires, our hope is that it provides a platform for many others to work off. Nor will we remain at the level of generalities which are hard to disagree with but harder still to do anything about. This is about the kind of society we want, not just the public policy we want, so while politics is part of the vision we articulate,

it is only part. Christians need to be public leaders in society, providing leadership and offering love, freedom, justice and truth to a world that needs them. A key point we want to make throughout is that seeing politics as the solution to all of society's problems has actually contributed to a vacuum in public life. Politics often has a

role, but relying on legislative solutions often disempowers people to make the difference they can through their own actions. This is a public vision not a political one.

Christians need to be public leaders in society, providing leadership and offering love, freedom, justice and truth to a world that needs them.

VALUES TO LIVE BY

There are some things we believe everyone can agree on, and starting from these values we will seek to build a fuller picture of the society we want. We believe the way our society operates can be more free, more just, more infused by love, and more oriented around truth. This is the kind of society that will lead to the flourishing of everyone. We are offering a suggestion for what that can look like.



These are values that are drawn closely from biblical ethics, but also values which wider society benefits from and supports. If we said nothing more no one could disagree, and we could move on. Except we wouldn't help Christians work out what living out these values looks like. When we say society should be freer, what does that mean? Does it mean, to use one fairly current example, that one should be free to demand whatever service you require from a provider or, alternatively, free to set the services you offer based on your conscience? There are tensions within the values we focus on, and places in which their application is contested, our hope is that this report provides a basis to support a fuller and deeper engagement by Christians in public life.

This is a Christian vision for the common good, one which we hope extends far beyond those who consider themselves to be Christians.

THE GOSPEL AS THE SOURCE OF OUR SOLUTIONS

The final chapter of this report will look at truth in public life, a crisis which has come to be known as 'post-truth politics'. But it is important, before we get there, to make one crucial point.

When we talk about truth we are anchored in the belief that the ultimate truth comes through the person of Jesus revealed in the scriptures. We hold that the Bible carries authority for governing our faith and witness: it is the word of God.

That might sound absolutist – it is. But the outworking of this truth is what provides the framework for a vibrant plural society, where different beliefs can exist without being reduced to a level where we might all agree but the meaning is lost, or escalated into aggression simply because of disagreement. We have to have the ability to disagree without letting the point of disagreement define us, we have to find, as former Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks has put it, the dignity of difference.¹²

On one level being confident about what we believe enables Christians to engage with people who have different worldviews and perspectives on the common good, this is often referred to as confident pluralism.¹³ There is also a deeper contribution that the Christian faith can offer to this pluralism.

Freedom is an integral aspect of the Christian faith, it is what enables us to make the choice to follow Jesus, and

freedom is what we receive when we place our trust in him. The freedom to accept or reject the good news is what makes the choice to accept it so powerful,¹⁴ and it is also the motivator behind a wholehearted defence of religious freedom. Originally a struggle between Christian dissenters and the established Church, the path towards religious freedom has been born out of the Christian faith and the struggle for the liberty to practice belief away from the regulation of the state. While we have very different ideas as to what constitutes ultimate truth to other religious beliefs, the freedom for people to choose what they believe, and for adherents of other faiths to make the case for why their beliefs are correct, is a vital liberty for us all irrespective of our belief.

We believe that the kind of society we want is rooted in values inseparable from the Christian faith and it is an indistinguishable aspect of our Christian witness to articulate and promote such a vision.

Providing space for dissent is essential, it is what fosters a plural public space, and that pluralism – where differences are celebrated and not minimised – is at the core of a good and civil society.

A brief note on pluralism is necessary. Theological pluralism argues that different religious beliefs represent

different perspectives on and paths towards the same truth. This is not what we are advocating. Christians believe fundamentally different things to adherents of other religions. It is to minimise the core tenets of each faith to suggest, as a common illustration does, that they are each blindfolded and touching different parts of an elephant.¹⁵

COMPLEXITY CANNOT PARALYSE US TO INACTION

There are many reasons why dealing with the issues addressed throughout this report is too complicated, and the temptation to boil things down to soundbites and generalities is constant. Complexity should not paralyse us, nor is it something to be feared. Complex societies present complex problems, and they require complex solutions. However this isn't something to be ashamed of, but an opportunity, and on top of that is the ongoing need for nuance. Nearly everything we say requires nuance. As President Bartlet once said (sort of, he's a fictional character), "Every once in a while, there's a day with an absolute right and an absolute wrong, but those days almost always include body counts."¹⁶

We don't shy away from nuance or complexity in what follows. That probably means it isn't as catchy as it could

be, but the kind of society we want isn't always neatly summed up in headlines.

OUR APPROACH

The report is divided into four core chapters looking at how the values of love, freedom, justice, and truth can be worked out in our public life from a biblical basis. Love frames and fuels our vision for freedom, justice and truth.

In each chapter we look at what the Bible says about the theme, the historic context and value of Christian involvement in this area, and where we are today. We seek to look ahead and anticipate some of the challenges

in the future and then offer a vision for what a distinctly Christian understanding of love, freedom, justice and truth has to offer society. Because evangelicals are activists each chapter will conclude with an outline of how we can respond, focusing on what can be done next. Our desire is that it prompts thought and action in the areas touched on.

We know we can have a better society than we do now, we want to provide a few steps on the path to getting there. We believe that the kind of society we want is rooted in values inseparable from the Christian faith and it is an indistinguishable aspect of our Christian witness to articulate and promote such a vision.

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LOVE



There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:18-19

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

WHERE IS THE LOVE?

The Black Eyed Peas asked 'Where is the love?', and looking at the world around us, on our doorstep and over the seas, it is not hard to feel the continued relevance of that search.

Meanness seems too easy to encounter, isolation too frequent and anger too often excused.

We need more love in our society. This is possibly the least contested of the four ideas we're exploring, but it is no less complex. We all want more love in our lives, and we want it on our streets, in our politics and across the world.

People killing, people dying, children hurting, hear them crying, can you practice what you preach, can you turn the other cheek?

Father, father, help us, send some guidance from above, because people got me, got me questioning, where is the love?

- Black Eyed Peas, *Where is the love?* 2003

Politics needs to learn the language of love. Popular in marriage preparation courses, *The Five Love Languages* looks at the different ways people give and receive love.¹⁷ Maybe we need love languages for public life. What are the core habits we should be promoting in public life that would enable people to give and receive love with greater ease?

IT BEGAN WITH LOVE

At the foundation of the Christian story is love. Creation was an act of love, as God put the universe in motion, as He created the trees, birds and animals, the waters and the fish, the sun and the stars, and said they were good. And then He created people, in His own likeness and He said they were very good.

Before all that God is love. God loves the people He created, and through Him we are able to love, but that is first because He is love, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."¹⁸ Love is a verb, it is something

we do towards something else, it is not a noun, or an adjective, one can be loving, but one cannot be love.

Yet God is love, because God is three in one, in the relationship of the trinity, between Father, Son and Spirit, all eternal, all everlasting, before the creation of the universe, they loved. Love is only possible through relationship, and God is made up of a relational trinity.

The creation of the world and of humanity was the overflow of love. Love is why the people God created were given freedom to choose to follow His guidance or reject it. Even in their rejection love remained. The story of God throughout the Old Testament is of His pursuit of His people and His desire for them to return to relationship with Him.

God sent Moses to deliver the people from Egypt, He gave them laws to guide their living, He even gave them a king when that was what they wanted. God sent prophets to call His people back to Him. And God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, so that whoever believed in Him would not perish but have eternal life.¹⁹

The crucifixion of Jesus is often described as the Passion of Christ, the term coming from the Latin 'to suffer'. We tend to use the term most often these days to express strong feelings, such as, 'I'm passionate about the arts/Burnley FC/good coffee'. Yet passion is more than just a strong preference for something, it is being prepared to count the cost for its sake, it is love that pays a price. It is the suffering of Christ, born out of love, that gives us passion.

Love caused God to send light into darkness, and it is what propels us to do likewise.

BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

Paul finishes one of the great 'love' passages of scripture (1 Corinthians 13) with these words: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."²⁰

Love is a powerful motivator for Christian action. The love of God is what enables us to love God, and it is what drives us to love the world around us, and to encourage freedom, stand for justice, and speak truth.

Love is not soppy, it is active. Love acts.

Flourishing is what love drives us towards. We are compelled by love and by the God of Genesis, to seek flourishing or, to use the biblical term, *shalom*. This is described

by Eugene Peterson as: "the dynamic vibrating health of a society that pulses with divinely directed purpose and surges with life transforming love."²¹ Flourishing is complete wellbeing, it is humans at peace with God, with each other and with the world they inhabit.

Love does not mean the absence of hate, in fact, by loving things as God loves, we learn that there are things that we hate. But while love is at its purest when directed towards people, hatred is at its most distorted when it is people we hate.

Flourishing requires that we differentiate between right and wrong, this is a loving thing to do, we exercise love by seeking the best for all people. And by telling people about the good news of Jesus we are showing people the origin of the love that we have received.

Love is often conflated with sex in our culture and loses much of its power in the process. Love is seen as an erotic force that drives two people together. We have lost its ability to work across communities, across societies, across the globe. And yet love as an erotic force has itself been devalued and sold as sex. The gratification of the physical has replaced the commitment of one person to another.

In public life we need to rediscover the breadth of love, love as affection and friendship and love as charity.²² Love of each other precedes and often prompts love of our community and our nation. Patriotism is not itself a bad thing, but when that trumps love of people it is distorted. Love of one's own family is essential, but love of only one's family is damaging.

Freedom, justice and even truth have the possibility to be distorted and used to detrimental effect: so too does love. The love of self and the love of stuff are the most slippery of slopes we encounter, offering daily opportunities to put ourselves before others and to opt for a self-gratifying relationship.

Sometimes we treat people as products, objects for our use, and conversely sometimes our attitude towards objects shows the value we place on them. Our love of things is an outworking of a reductionist materialistic world view which values what can be touched and held and used. This is not to undermine the goodness of created things, but to acknowledge the limitations of things as objects of our love.

People are not objects of love, they are partners in a relationship. It is why within a family love is essential, why in a community love is not just an ideal but the glue that

Love caused God to send light into darkness, and it is what propels us to do likewise.

holds things together. And why across communities and throughout society love is more than a flight of fancy but the thing that will ground and sustain our public life.

CAN WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBOURS IF WE DON'T KNOW THEM?

Jesus' teaching in the parable of the Good Samaritan has regularly been used to emphasise that our neighbour is not just the person who is literally living next to us. It has been evoked in political conversation with remarkable frequency. It has been used to support overseas aid and development, to encourage solidarity among diverse communities, and to promote financial redistribution.

But in this broader and more political reading of loving your neighbour it has sometimes become easy to forget

that we are called to love our literal neighbours. Love requires that we know people. We can be generous at a distance but we cannot love without proximity. Giving to an international charity helping people in faraway places runs the risk of salving our consciences without demonstrating love in person.

We can be generous at a distance but we cannot love without proximity.

If we confine our view to the presentation of politics in the media we would have a very negative impression of love in society. We would see politicians, often from the same party, tearing each other's hair out. We may not always agree with what they do, we may passionately oppose it, think their priorities are askew, but that doesn't mean they are not committed to doing what they think is in the best interests of the people they represent. Political memes showing politicians

LOVE IN ACTION – LATYMER COMMUNITY CHURCH

Latymer Community Church (LCC) sits at the foot of Grenfell Tower, right at the heart of the Ladbroke Grove estate. Most of the church members live on the estate, and they were evacuated from their flats at about 2am on Wednesday 16 June 2017 as fire engulfed Grenfell Tower.



As the extent of the emergency became clear, the church community began to respond, opening the doors of the church during the early hours to provide a place of refuge for those from the tower and the surrounding homes, meeting the immediate physical needs and providing pastoral care. The church stayed open throughout the day as volunteers and donations poured in from around the local area. By the end of the day, as the networks of community centres, churches and mosques became more coordinated, LCC had taken on the responsibility for feeding those who still had nowhere to go.

The LCC team decided to put up a prayer wall where people could write their thoughts and express their feelings, as well as gather to pray. People from the community soon began to gather to write prayers and messages about those they had lost, taking the opportunity to grieve. The LCC team were joined by friends from London City Mission, who offered to pray for them and as the group stood with their arms around each other on the streets, they were joined by other members of the community, people desperate for hope and ready to pray.

By Friday, the atmosphere on the estate had shifted from the initial shock to deep sadness as the reality of the situation began to hit home. Many LCC members had lost friends and acquaintances; even the loss of familiar but unknown faces from the estate hit hard.

On Sunday morning, LCC hosted an open air service in the church car park in a deliberate act of proclamation over the community. During the service, members of the Fire Brigade, still working tirelessly to make the site safe and hunt for survivors, were clapped and cheered as they drove through the crowds that had gathered on the roads around the church, with Frog Orr-Ewing speaking scripture over them as they went.



caring for their salaries more than [insert your choice of noble cause here] have been thoroughly debunked.²³

For our society to be more loving we cannot act blindly trying to solve problems we do not know about, we must get our hands dirty and have our eyes opened. Closeness prompts compassion – literally ‘suffering with’ – we cannot truly love without knowing who it is that we love. To love our neighbours means knowing them.

FINDING LOVE IN A HOPELESS PLACE

Recent political discussions about hate speech show that we know we have a problem, but love will not be restored by trying to stop people saying nasty things. In fact, quite the opposite: people will only stop saying nasty things if they start loving one another. Christians have a mandate to model that and an opportunity to demonstrate what loving those you fundamentally disagree with really looks like. Over the past few years we have seen a rise in self-affirmation and a love of what we recognise and already know. It has become a narcissistic sort of love, not just of ourselves but of others like us.

It means we love what we recognise, and we recognise what we know, and we know what we agree with. When this is about body image it creates unhelpful ideals, when it is about politics it forges echo chambers where we only hear those views that reinforce our opinions. This makes it hard to love those who think differently to us because we have curated a space where they are not.

This is not just the future we are heading towards but the present we are living in. We are daunted by the prospect of trying to love everyone and everything, so we retreat to a place that gives us comfort and reassurance, and in doing so we risk losing out on receiving the love that comes when we show love.

But that is the challenge we must rise to. As Kester Brewin writes: “It is easy to love what is lovely, but we are called to love what is other. It is easy to love what is familiar, but we are called to love what is strange. It is easy to love what is comforting, but we are called to love what is disturbing to us.”²⁴

Love requires that we break down the barriers that push us apart. The online world is self-selective, love means we walk around and see and care for what we might not otherwise notice. The online world can never be the only world that forms our opinions. We are moved by love as we move towards what needs love.

When a terrorist drove a car along the pavement of Westminster Bridge and ran into parliament, much attention was made of those who ran towards the danger. While others fled some stepped forward, including PC Keith Palmer the police officer who lost his life. This is love in action. We saw it again when people stepped up to help in Manchester, at London Bridge, and in an incredible outpouring of love following the Grenfell fire in North Kensington.

Joy is love exalted; peace is love in repose; long-suffering is love enduring; gentleness is love in society; goodness is love in action; faith is love on the battlefield; meekness is love in school; and temperance is love in training.

DL Moody

If we have not love, then we are just clanging cymbals.²⁵

There are no limits to how much we should love. We are only limited in how much we are able to love, because we will never do it perfectly, nor love all of the time. There will be occasions when we prioritise ourselves, or allow hatred or fear to crowd out love. Our deepest yearning to be loved is fulfilled in the love we receive from God, love which fuels our own love for God and for others.

NOTES

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18 John 4:8

19 John 3:16

20 1 Corinthians 13:13

21 Eugene Peterson, *Conversations: The Message Bible with its translator* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2007) p 1203

22 CS Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Bles, 1960)

23 Isabel Hardman, ‘The menace of memes: how pictures can paint a thousand lies’, *The Spectator*, 29 November 2014. Available online at: blogs.spectator.co.uk/2014/11/the-menace-of-memes-how-pictures-can-paint-a-thousand-lies/ Accessed 22/12/16

24 Kester Brewin, *Other: Loving Self, God and Neighbour in a World of Fractures* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010) p 17

25 1 Corinthians 13:1



FREEDOM



It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1

Freedom is one of those things everyone wants. From Mel Gibson's cry in *Braveheart* to Nelson Mandela's

systems of governance to structure our society. If all our freedoms were absolute we would be in a state of anarchy. When personal freedom is abused, it usually causes injustice towards another.

decades long campaign against apartheid. Freedom is a good thing. Whether we're looking at our personal freedom or our corporate civil and religious freedoms, these are fundamental to our understanding of a fair and plural society.

Freedom is almost too wide a term to be useful, as almost every cause throughout history has placed it at the centre of their message, from Marxist freedom fighters to those seeking lower taxes, from those who want wider access to abortion to the campaigners for Britain to leave the European Union. But it is not worth jettisoning yet. Freedom has been central to European thought since the days of Aristotle and Plato. The second world war was fought to ensure freedom and foreign policy frequently relies on freedom for its justification.

Managing these freedoms is one of the central functions of any democratic government. Living in a democracy means that we agree to surrender some of our freedoms to the rule of law for the common good, and we assent to

A CHRISTIAN VISION OF FREEDOM

At the heart of the Christian faith is freedom, and while believers differ in their theology and how they understand the place and role of freedom, we all agree that it is a gift from God and we have a responsibility to steward it wisely. Beyond the Christian faith, those of other beliefs and none have generally agreed that boundaries of harm and consent should temper our pursuit of freedom. The working out of freedom in public policy is therefore a complex task, balancing how much restriction is important for the common good held in tension with how much freedom can be protected.

Christians begin with the sovereignty of God when it comes to understanding freedom. This provides an overarching template for understanding the opportunities for freedom and its necessary constraints. God created humanity to bear His image throughout creation and to partner with Him in his ongoing work. The creation we live in was set into being by God and He continues to

sustain the heavens and the earth. And yet God gives us freedom, because God is in the freedom business.

We see this in Exodus – the liberation text *par excellence* – when God decided to act in the world and in human history as a redeemer in action. Chris Wright notes that this is about political, economic, social and spiritual liberation, God’s total response to Israel’s total need.²⁶

Exodus is a unique event in history but it also serves as a prime lens through which we see the biblical mission of God. He puts His name – Yahweh – to it, and the Passover celebrates this moment of freedom which profoundly shapes Israel’s story. When the Israelites were first offered freedom by Pharaoh, Moses would not accept it unless they were allowed to take their livestock so they could “have sacrifices and burnt offerings to present to the Lord our God,”²⁷ which was not granted. When they were set free the Israelites were set free from slavery, and set free to worship God.

When Jesus announced his ministry in Luke 4 he quoted from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

The jubilee and sabbath are all about freedom, established to set people free from debt and bondage and to allow time to rest and be with their family. True freedom is exercised in the context of relationships, responsibilities, and even rules. Augustine, the early Church father, taught that true freedom is not choice or lack of constraint, but being what you are meant to be.²⁸ Humans were created in the image of God. True freedom, then, is not found in moving away from that image but only in living it out. The closer we conform to the true image of God, to Jesus Christ, the freer we become. The further we drift from it, the more our freedom shrinks. Freedom needs a handrail.

True freedom is found *not* in insisting on one’s own rights, but in freely giving them up by being a servant to Jesus Christ first and the people of God second. If we look at Paul in 1 Corinthians 8, we see that we are free to eat what we choose, but our love for others causes us to freely choose to surrender that freedom. Our current desires are not a good guide for our freedom, they make better harnesses for slavery. When tempted in the desert Jesus was more free when he said no to turning the stones into bread,²⁹ than we are when we give into our desires.

Freedom is God’s ultimate gift to us, we are offered freedom from sin and from slavery through Jesus; the whole story of the Bible is a movement from slavery to freedom.

The choice for Christians to worship God is one we are free to make (although theologians have long disagreed about the extent to which the choice is ‘free’, all are agreed that we are not mere robots). From Adam and Eve to the people of the UK today, we have a daily choice as to whether to recognise God as our creator and Lord, or to act in the way of our own impulses. The freedom to worship, or to rebel, is critical to giving that worship or rebellion meaning.

It is from this freedom to worship that support for wider freedom of religious belief and conscience should flow naturally for Christians. That it has not always done so is not a reason to ignore the role of Christianity in securing religious freedom in the UK and much further afield. Dating back to the Reformation in the UK and across Europe, Christian dissenters shaped this aspect of their faith, pressing for freedom to practice in new and different ways than were permitted through the Roman Catholic Church. Religious freedom is of central importance to evangelical Christians, and it is an issue that commands widespread support from people of many different faith backgrounds, including those of no faith: religious freedom is good for all.

The freedom that we receive in Jesus Christ is not a mere set of rules, nor is it about a place, or a lifestyle, our heritage or our upbringing. It is about a person and a relationship, and the truth of this relationship is what gives us freedom.

FALLEN FREEDOM

When we abandon God and others in the name of our own freedom we open the door to injustices and damaged relationships with other people. Freedom and justice should go hand in hand, and we’ll explore more about justice in the next chapter, but as Christians we should advocate both.

If we want freedom at any cost, the cost will usually be to justice. We see that in the biblical story where Israel is taken from captivity to freedom, and given the freedom to worship God and keep his laws and covenant. As the people exercised their freedom, however, it led to idolatry when they melted their jewelry to form a golden calf to worship, and injustice as seen in Hosea 10:13: “You have plowed iniquity; you have reaped injustice; you have eaten the fruit of lies.”

HOW FREE ARE WE?

As noted above our freedom is mediated through the laws and rules that govern how we live and work, as well as our wider culture and the choices it guides. Freedom comes in many shapes and sizes, from the freedom of speech we generally enjoy in the UK, to the freedom of religion that is at the heart of Evangelical Alliance's advocacy work. Freedom is not just about the laws that protect our freedom to do things, freedom is also needed from things which enslave. There is still actual slavery both in the UK and abroad, and freedom from that is of key concern to evangelicals among many others. Other areas where freedom is needed attract less attention, and there is a responsibility to look at debt which cripples many in the UK, drug, alcohol and gambling addiction, and a culture that says more stuff will bring happiness.

Our focus in political terms is often on defending freedoms, but our action in using those freedoms should be matched by helping other people find freedom.

When we consider the role of the government in defending or suppressing freedom we also need to think more broadly about how much its actions affect our freedom. In some ways, within the narrow confines of post-modern, consumeristic and individualistic thinking, the actions of the government have limited impact. Across the western world there is a need for realisation that our freedoms are affected by far wider trends. We see consumerism appearing to offer the freedom of choice, capitalism promising the freedom to pursue money, secularism the freedom from religion and individualism the freedom from control by others. These appear to offer freedom but in fact bind people in new forms of constraint, whether to the acquisition of ever more money or stuff, or the unrealisable quest for perfect autonomy.

The freedoms we hold so dearly are lived out in complex and ever changing environments, the threats to freedom faced by previous generations are different to those which affect us today. Our freedoms become real as we live them out and use them. Christians are rightly concerned with the freedoms necessary to practice their beliefs: the freedom of religion, of worship, to preach the gospel, to assemble, to convert from one religion to another. But these are not marginal or sectional interests, they are fundamental for all people and they are inextricably linked to wider freedoms which are at the root of a plural and democratic society and they are the litmus test of individual dignity.

The freedom to preach the gospel and worship God is not just for the sake of Christians. These freedoms are precious and benefit people of all faiths and none. That is why we advocate for them.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The UK legal system places a high value on freedom of speech, with a famous judgment from Lord Justice Sedley in 1999 saying: "Free speech includes not only the inoffensive but the irritating, the contentious, the eccentric, the heretical, the unwelcome and the provocative provided it does not tend to provoke violence. Freedom only to speak inoffensively is not worth having."³⁰

The combination of domestic laws and the European Convention on Human Rights provide a strong protection for freedom of speech, and especially the freedom to practice religious beliefs of your choice. The Evangelical Alliance and the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship produced the *Speak Up* resource to help Christians understand and use the freedoms they have to share their faith, whether this is in private, public, the workplace or online.³¹ There are restrictions and regulations affecting what people of any faith say about their beliefs, especially in the work place, but in the most part these are easily navigated with common sense and do not constitute marginalisation of Christians.

The wider cultural setting places a tighter hold on how Christians exercise their faith. It is not that Christians can't live out their faith in virtually all aspects of their life, but in doing so they frequently place themselves in a minority position and can risk a marginalisation that is stronger than that which the law can coerce. Christian belief is increasingly disdained by many in society, to the extent that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, referred in 2016 to the religious illiteracy in central government, saying that the view towards Christians with conservative beliefs was, "They assume they're a bit bonkers."³²

This cultural tightening is most apparent in the increased challenge in expressing Christian beliefs about doctrine and practice. In most situations you are free to say what you believe, especially relating to the doctrine of the faith, but articulating those beliefs may pose challenges for Christians, especially those active in public life. Some beliefs are likely to be laughed at, others criticised, and some condemned as hate speech, or reported as 'hate incidents' in a similar way to what happened to the Home Secretary for comments about immigration at the Conservative Party Conference.³³

Perhaps most notable was Tim Farron's decision to resign as leader of the Liberal Democrats following the 2017 general election. His faith had been repeatedly scrutinised and he had been subject to persistent questions about his views on sexuality and abortion. In his resignation statement he commented:

I'm liberal to my fingertips – and that liberalism means I am passionate about defending the right and liberties of people who believe very different things to me. There are Christians in politics who take the view that they should impose the tenets of their faith on society. But I have not taken that approach because I fundamentally disagree with it. It is not liberal, and actually, it's counter-productive when it comes to advancing the gospel. Even so, I seem to have been the subject of suspicion because of what I believe and who my faith is in. In which case we are kidding ourselves if we think we yet live in a tolerant, liberal society.³⁴

The Evangelical Alliance joined many in viewing his resignation as a sad indictment of the freedom of Christians to voice their beliefs in public life. As David Landrum, the Alliance's director of advocacy commented: "However committed Christian public figures are to seeing a plural public square, a truly civil society, and a common good, it seems that, for some it can never be enough."

Landrum went on to say: "Perhaps, most importantly it's also worth reflecting on the fact that, more than what he espoused or how he had voted, he was pursued for what he believes, what he *thinks*. Other candidates sought to be open about their faith, and to express and explain their beliefs in an equally gracious and democratic spirit. But again to no avail."³⁵

In a prescient comment written before Farron's resignation, and on the other side of the Atlantic, James KA Smith wrote: "So the irony is that what liberal democracy wants – neighbour-concern, civility, and tolerance in a pluralistic society – depends on what liberal democracy now seems to want to exclude: thick particularistic religious communities that inculcate Christ-like virtues in citizens."³⁶

Believing in the virgin birth is likely to be mocked and saying Jesus is God may be scorned, but it is the freedom to suggest that Christian teaching offers direction on how we live our lives that is under the greatest cultural pressure. Some of this comes with legal weight, especially around sexuality and gender, and this is the issue under the microscope most frequently at present. There



is an inevitable tension between a public square which purports to preach that all values and opinions should be accepted, and those values and opinions which suggest a particular way to live is preferable. It is logically impossible to say that all beliefs are valid, but not provide space for the articulation of values which reject that, and yet this is the paradoxical consequence we encounter today. Some beliefs are ruled as exclusive and therefore not welcomed.

Hate speech is something Christians should actively avoid, and encourage others to do likewise. The challenge comes when there is a disagreement about what constitutes hate speech. A healthy public space accepts that beliefs disagree, and doesn't attempt to reconcile fundamental differences under the guise of tolerance – which as John Locke observed is not about agreeing with or even accepting another person's view but ensuring there is space for those views. "Tolerating those who differ from us in matters of religion is so fitting to the Gospel and to reason that it seems monstrous for men to fail to see this clearly."³⁷

A plural public space acknowledges that there are competing visions of what the good life looks like. This may not always be comfortable, but it is a stronger sort of freedom than the artificial truce which suggests we all agree and subtly coerces conformity.

There is a further aspect of this which warrants consideration. The message people of faith receive from wider culture is that faith is a good thing so long as you keep it to yourself. This sort of castration of conviction would be laughed at in any other part of life. Christians believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is the best news, and living in his footsteps, while frequently not easy, is the way to flourishing. Why would Christians not aim to share that message with as many people as possible?

IS FREEDOM UNDER THREAT?

Freedom is constantly constrained, and that can be both for good and ill. We see freedom restricted to advance justice, but we also see freedom limited in ways which prevent people living the lives God has created them to live. This limitation can come from the legal system, cultural pressures, the acts of other people, as well as the consequences of our choices.

Support for freedom of religion and belief is widespread, including among people who are not adherents of a particular religion. However, sometimes this support is primarily individualistic: I want to believe what I want so it is important that others believe what they want. The wrapping up of religion and belief with other characteristics in equality legislation has also confused the situation. Particularly for Christians, their identity is a chosen one, unlike other characteristics, so the freedom to change their belief is a crucial aspect of freedom of religion, and inevitably as part of that, the freedom to try and persuade others of the rightness of their beliefs.

There are two aspects of freedom of religion that require vigilance to ensure it is fully protected for future generations. The first is that the freedom is not limited to what people believe or say, but also how they live their lives. A Christian's faith is lived out in their life, in the choices they make day by day and the priorities that guide their direction.

Part of this is about protecting the freedom of conscience, and this only really has meaning when it comes under challenge. If my conscience tells me to do something uncontroversial and widely accepted by society, there is very little need for formal protection. The strongest case study for the protection of conscience in English law is around abortion provision. The law in Great Britain permits abortion in certain circumstances and it is important for Christians to acknowledge that the law allows women, if they wish to, to have access to the necessary services

and support. But the law also provides a conscientious objection for medical staff who feel they cannot take part in this procedure as for them it constitutes taking a life.

There are other areas where there is a 'clash of rights' which the law has not dealt with in such a reasonable and accommodating way towards people who hold views contrary to what the law allows. Over the past decade there have been a number of cases involving Christians in which the law has been challenged. These have been varied in their circumstance, and in their merit, but evidence a tension between the extent to which it is reasonable to constrain someone's religious convictions through the law and the value placed on protecting the freedom to practise religious beliefs. The courts found against a registrar who wanted to rearrange rotas to ensure she didn't have to officiate civil partnership ceremonies, and against bed and breakfast owners who wished to restrict use of double rooms to married couples only (this was prior to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013). The trend has been for the courts to not support religious conscience in the face of either legal changes, or other protected characteristics.³⁸

The second area of religious freedom that requires vigilance is the constant pressure to leave faith at the door when you leave either home or church (or alternative religious building). The frequent secular charge is that religious beliefs are fine but they shouldn't affect what goes on in public life. Even in the wake of the Westminster terrorist attack in March 2017 one media commentator suggested that people shouldn't be praying because it was these beliefs that helped cause this violence.³⁹ That is nonsense, but not harmless nonsense. It is suggesting that one idea about the good life (secularism) is allowed to dictate the terms on which other ideas about the good life (religious beliefs) can operate. This is just the sort of privilege that secularist campaigners accuse religious believers of wanting.

Christians believe that the fullness of life comes through saving faith in Jesus, but that the whole world can benefit from the contribution Christians make to public debate, policy development and social and cultural renewal. As NT Wright comments: "The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth."⁴⁰

The irony is that one of the frequent challenges Christians have faced down the centuries is that people have found the teachings of Jesus attractive as a model to aspire to, but when they are divorced from the wholehearted acceptance of the Lordship of Christ, the harder

teachings get rejected at the first sign of opposition. Some of Jesus' teachings are still welcome in public debate, it's uncommon to hear a politician visiting a church in the run up to an election without them invoking the parable of the Good Samaritan. But when these teachings challenge our social and cultural norms they are considered out of place.

If freedom of religion is to mean anything, then it has to allow adherents of the religions to live out their beliefs,

otherwise it is no more than a theoretical freedom. This includes the freedom to convert and change one's religious beliefs. The European Convention on Human Rights acknowledges the need for religious belief to be manifested if the freedom is to be meaningful, and rightly this manifestation is conditional. If it were not, anything could be done or claimed in the name of religion and given a free pass. If we are to retain order and contribute to the social good for all, then some surrender of freedom is always necessary.

FREEDOM IN ACTION – BETEL

Betel UK is a Christian charity helping men and women trapped in addiction. Betel's mission is to bring long-term freedom and restoration to lives broken by drug and alcohol abuse. They accomplish this by building values, skills and character through living, working and worshipping together in a caring Christian community. Their centres nationwide are free-of-charge, operate no waiting lists, and are run by people who have experienced freedom from addiction themselves. Here is one lady's story:

My name is Kim and I'm 44 years old. My parents were both alcoholics and so as children, the only thing my sisters and I saw at home was our parents being drunk or going missing. My dad was removed from the family home for sexually abusing my eldest sister and my mum's alcohol use got so bad that we were placed into care. It was meant to be a week but it ended up being five years before we were allowed home and mum was mum for a while. It didn't last long. After a few years, mum wanted to go partying and drinking again. She didn't want to be a mum. To numb the feelings of rejection I started drinking, smoking pot and taking LSD.

I was so desperate for someone to want me. I got involved with a boy but when I gained weight he said he didn't want me any more, so I sought a drug to help me lose weight - amphetamines. That was the start of my downward spiral into deep addiction. I didn't sleep. I was hallucinating. I became emaciated. To help me sleep, my sister gave me heroin. I was eighteen and used heroin until I came to Betel at 29. In those 11 years I did everything I said I wouldn't do. I became a prostitute, a prolific shoplifter, constantly in and out of prison, on probation and drug treatment orders. Nothing worked. Everyone told me my best hope was to be medicated with methadone to replace heroin for the rest of my life. It was at this stage that I came into contact with Betel.

I came into Betel hoping to stay for two weeks to get off drugs. Fourteen years later, I'm still here! God has captured my heart and completely transformed my life. Now I live a life that was once unimaginable to me. I'm the women's supervisor here. I love seeing people being transformed by the power of the cross. I'm married with two beautiful daughters and my life is focused on the Lord and his plans for me. I once heard a speaker saying, "I don't want to go where God's presence won't be." That's my heart. I lived without the Lord for so many years and now I can't imagine life without him. I was once trapped in addiction and darkness, but through Jesus, I now have a freedom I never knew was possible.

If you or anyone you know needs freedom from addiction, please visit www.betel.uk or call **01564 822356**.





A FREEDOM WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Christians in the UK live in great freedom, especially considering the challenges believers in other parts of the world experience. But freedom cannot be taken for granted, it must be watched and it must be used. As abolitionist Wendell Phillips said: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."⁴¹

A vision for a plural public square requires robust freedom to speak things that are challenging and uncomfortable, not for the sake of nuisance, or causing harm to others, but for the benefit of those who we agree with and disagree with. Furthermore, it requires that those freedoms are lived out in action, and that systems of law and government take account of the tension between competing beliefs and how in different situations different solutions will be required.

This is referred to as reasonable accommodation, and is used in different countries to handle the challenges of how belief works out in public life. Such a system is used in Canada and attempts to balance religious freedom with non-discrimination laws. In one key case (Brockie, 2000) the courts held that as a printer the defendant couldn't refuse services to Canadian Gay and Lesbian

Archives and was to print the envelopes and letterheads they requested, but said that their order "ought not to require Mr. Brockie to print material of a nature that could reasonably be considered to be in direct conflict with the core elements of his religious beliefs."⁴² Reasonable accommodation means that Christians will not always get what they want, and likewise nor will other religious groups, it will depend upon the circumstances of the case. However, the starting point should be to consider accommodating religious belief in public life.

In relation to particular contested beliefs it requires an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of disagreement with legal changes and shifting cultural norms. For Christians it means acknowledging what is accepted by law and society, and understanding that this may place them in positions in which they are uncomfortable. In response to this there will sometimes be a need to comply with laws they disagree with. In other circumstances it may mean withdrawing from offering wider services so as not to place themselves in a situation which they cannot reconcile with their beliefs. In extreme situations it may mean demonstrating the inequity of laws that violate their religious freedom by not conforming to the law.

FIVE STEPS TO FREEDOM

First, we should use the freedom we have. The law provides considerable protection for Christians speaking about Jesus, whether at home, in public or in the workplace, but that does not mean there are not challenges to using the freedom they have. An important step for Christians to secure their, and everyone's, ongoing freedom is to use the freedom they have. This means speaking out about the truth that Christians believe, both the gospel of salvation, and the good news to society. As we use our freedom we demonstrate why it is so valuable.

Second, we should be agents of freedom, helping people not only into the freedom available through life in Christ, but helping people find freedom from debt, from addiction, and from places and people of oppression. We should be advocates for freedom through politics, but we should also commit to the hard work of helping people practically. We may not be able to make our nation more free but we can probably help a neighbour.

Third, there is a need for watchfulness. Whether it is in how employers handle religious beliefs in the workplace, the police in relation to street preaching, or the courts

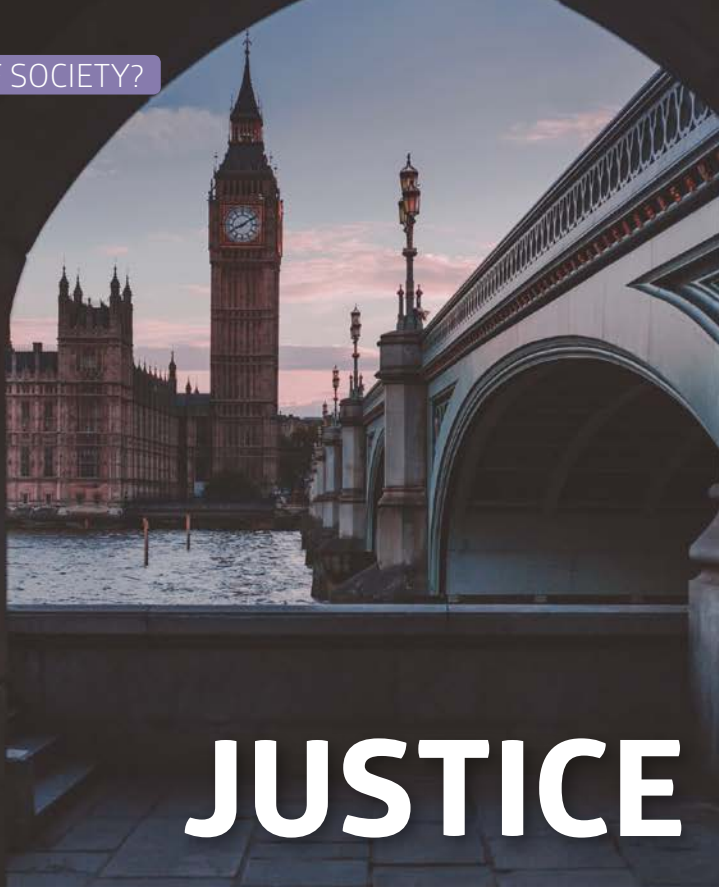
in judgments they pass. Likewise we should engage with the political process with understanding to see where the challenges to freedom are likely to come from and how we can best respond.

Fourth, we should actively advocate for freedom of religion or belief. This applies to our freedom as Christians, but also to the freedom of other groups to live out their faith as well. We have to engage with the political system with grace and integrity, and we have to do so not just as commentators but as participants. A crucial aspect of defending religious freedom is improving understanding of faith and religion by politicians, the media and public institutions, and that is best done by providing an example up close to those making decisions, especially if we are part of that decision-making process.

Finally, we should use our freedom with generosity and at times with courageous restraint. It does not serve the purposes of Christ to abuse our freedom, or to insist that because we have the freedom to preach the gospel it means others have to listen. There are times when our freedom is best demonstrated by choosing not to do what we otherwise might.

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JUSTICE



But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! Amos 5:24

And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8

Who is not in favour of justice? We want to see justice done, we

the marginalisation of the gospel. In more recent years, however, it has been reclaimed not as an alternative to the centrality of Jesus' saving work, but as a vital out-working of faith in action.

want the just outcome, it is inarguable. But justice is never inevitable, it is always fought for, frequently contested, and easily sidelined. Justice too often loses out to convenience, it is the forgotten child of complexity, and is restricted to the realm of rhetoric over reality.

But justice is the beating heart of the Christian who wants their faith to impact the world around them, it is unavoidable.

As Tim Keller points out by quoting Jonathan Edwards: "Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?" Keller goes on to say: "such ministry flows directly out of historic evangelical teaching ... the Spirit enables us to understand what Christ has done for us, the result is a life poured out in deeds of justice and compassion for the poor."⁴³

Evangelical Christians have not always had the clearest commitment to justice. To some it became synonymous with the abandonment of theological convictions and

THE ORIGINS OF JUSTICE

Justice is making things right, and the entire biblical story echoes God's overarching work of justice. God wants the people He created to return to a right relationship with Him and to flourish throughout their lives. There are many things which hinder this work: our own action; the actions of others; the circumstances of our birth; the wrong doing of ruling authorities; the harshness of a world bearing the scars of the fall. We need justice because things are not right.

Throughout scripture God calls His people back to Him, He rescues the people of Israel from Egypt, He gives them laws and commandments to guide them, a king when that's what they want, and instructions to care for the vulnerable in and outside of their community.

Considering the Hebrew word for justice, *mishpat*, Keller says: "If you look at every place the word is used in the

Old Testament, several classes of persons continually come up. Over and over again, *mishpat* describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor – those who have been called ‘the quartet of the vulnerable.’⁴⁴

In the New Testament when the disciples sent Paul and Barnabas on their mission to the Gentiles “All they asked was that [they] should continue to remember the poor, the very thing [Paul] was eager to do” (Gal 2:10). This is reflected in Paul’s final instructions before leaving the church in Ephesus, “In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35).

In the early Church care for the poor and the vulnerable was what marked Christians out. As Rodney Stark has observed:

*Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.*⁴⁵

Providing justice is in the DNA of Christianity, as in ancient Rome, so too in early modern Britain. As noted in the introduction, evangelical Christians played a vital role in establishing hospitals and schools, campaigning for prison and factory reform, and working for justice. Christianity has given our society a legacy of justice as well as the legal justice system.

This leaves an important question unanswered: which justice? If justice is putting things right, what then determines what is right and wrong? This is the realm of endless political debate asking whether it is better to do one thing over another, and debate which frequently sees Christians take differing positions. It is also a conundrum that can lead to the deepest beliefs and convictions being asked to stay out of political debate for fear of creating division. However, as philosopher Michael Sandel comments:

*This stance of avoidance can make for a spurious respect. Often, it means suppressing moral disagreement rather than actually avoiding it. This can provoke backlash and resentment, it can also make for an impoverished public discourse, lurching from one news cycle to the next, preoccupied with the scandalous, the sensational, and the trivial.*⁴⁶

IS JUSTICE BEING DONE?

There are people living on our streets, children leaving school without education, prisons which escalate crime rather than rehabilitate people. One of the greatest crises of recent years continues to unfold in the Middle East as a nation is emptied of its people to the surrounding world. Syria is the epicentre of this crisis, and the stories of death and destruction across the nation ascend to heights of unimaginable brutality, before fading from view for a while, while the suffering does not abate.

We know injustice when we see it. It is not right that children are trapped beneath rubble while guns roar overhead, it is not right that prisons do not break the cycle of crime. Whether in the UK or overseas there is an imperative towards action, but we frequently have no idea what we can do which will make a difference. Sometimes we reflect on the helpfulness of our actions to an extent which paralyses us.

In the UK income inequality has persisted at roughly the same level over the past decade, with incomes dipping and increasing across the board through and after the recession of 2008-09. The number of children living in low income households has been in decline since 2002, but with a small increase in the most recent analysis.⁴⁷ The number of people in England who are classified as homeless or in temporary accommodation has increased over the past six years, after more than halving in the years prior to that. Although the number of homeless people is lower today than it was at its height in 2005, numbers have been rising again in the last six years.⁴⁸ Nearly a quarter of adults in England and Northern Ireland have a literacy level equivalent to GCSE grade D or below, and a recent report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that England was the only developed country where adults approaching retirement have a higher level of literacy than those currently leaving education.⁴⁹

The above statistics are just a snapshot; whether looking at income, housing or education there are questions

of justice that require our attention. Likewise we could look at healthcare, the criminal justice system, employment practices, and find areas where the pursuit of justice is desired but currently inadequate. We could consider the injustice that people from black and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be diagnosed with mental health problems, but are also more likely to experience poor outcomes from treatment and more likely to disengage from mainstream mental health services leading to social exclusion and a deterioration in their mental health.⁵⁰

The focus of this report is UK society so we are not primarily discussing questions of foreign affairs. However, our world cannot be so neatly demarcated. We see what happens in places far away as well as in our neighbourhoods, and the calls over the last two years for a significant increase in the number of refugees welcomed to the UK from the Middle East have a domestic impact. Even if we are to limit our pursuit of justice to the 'quartet of the vulnerable' our responsibility in this area is unavoidable.

It is perhaps in the area of overseas development that the most remarkable strides towards justice have been made. In the last 25 years child mortality has halved, the number of people living in extreme poverty has halved, and the number of mothers dying while giving birth has also halved. Not all indicators are quite so positive, but the focus of individuals, churches, charities and governments has made a difference in the pursuit of justice for the most vulnerable.

Christians care about the world they live in as well as the people who live in the world. A Rocha, a member organisation of the Alliance, provides a fourfold explanation for why Christians should care about creation: God made the world and He loves it; He created us to take care of it; creation has gone wrong because of us and our actions; God has a purpose for creation.⁵¹

Care for the environment is for Christians an outworking of their commitment to justice, it is putting right things that are wrong. Where human action and natural disaster scar the world around us, it is our responsibility to put things right.

JUSTICE, OR JUST RHETORIC

The challenge we face is contributing to public discourse in a way that improves the reality of justice rather than

revert to the rhetoric of justice without effecting any change. Because that's where we're heading as a society if we don't pay attention.

Justice has become a catch all term for changing what we don't like and a trump card for ending debate. As Keller points out: "If you are arguing against someone who suddenly proclaims that his position is the one that promotes justice, there is no defense. To continue to press your argument is to stand on the side of injustice, and who wants to do that?"⁵² The term justice is being appropriated for circumstances that are not about justice, being conflated with mercy, charity and compassion, and being claimed by competing sides.

We do not have a coherent and accepted common account of what justice is, so pursuing it can pull people in different directions. The debate over abortion is one of the clearest examples of this justice paradox. Some campaigners will argue that justice requires allowing women to do with their bodies whatever they want, and include ending a pregnancy within that scope. Others, and Christian tradition stands firmly in this corner, make the case that justice requires standing up for the most vulnerable, and an unborn baby in a womb with no voice of its own is among the most vulnerable in society. To answer one person's plea for justice could lead to an unjust outcome in the eyes of the other.

One temptation is to try to arbitrate these conflicting views of justice by introducing new and wider-reaching laws. In fact justice is often the justification for more laws targeted at improving society. If something is an injustice the narrative has become that we need a legislative response. This is a mistaken approach and overplays the role of parliament and the legal system, for there are many situations not best or adequately addressed through legislation alone. It reinforces the idea of parliament as a factory: the more laws it passes the more productively it is operating.

For example, the government talks about legislating against hate speech, but while the deterrent effect of law may prevent some from expressing their hatred in public, it cannot deal with the fact of hatred – it can curb some actions, but it can't change attitudes. True justice requires making things right in reality, not just in our rhetoric. This takes us back to love, as Martin Luther King Jr. commented: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Changing the culture to promote love for one

Christians care about the world they live in as well as the people who live in the world.

another will be more effective in the long run than trying to police what people say.

Similarly, while minimum wage legislation has played a significant role in improving income for the most deprived households, perhaps more important has been work with employers to introduce a Living Wage. This latter measure is not universal, despite the introduction by the government of a similar sounding but lower pay standard. Yet the work through society and directly with employers to encourage a level of pay that allows employees to achieve a decent standard of living has achieved significant traction without the need for legislation.

On an international level the effect of justice is clearly felt by the implementation of existing laws more than the passing of new ones. International Justice Mission, through their *Project Lantern*, highlight the case of Cebu, in the Philippines. In 2003 the Philippines enacted an Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act, making child sexual exploitation illegal. In 2007 IJM began working with the police and other authorities to help and encourage them to actually enforce that law. As a result of this implementation, the number of minors who were victims of such exploitation dropped by 79 per cent in four years.⁵³

Too intense a focus on the role of passing laws to improve justice misses the role played by wider culture. Think of the newspapers and media we view, the films we watch, and the songs we sing; these frequently have a far greater impact on the pursuit of justice, and the impediments to justice in our society. As Andrew Fletcher said more than 300 years ago: "If a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation."⁵⁴

Without a clear anchor for what a just society looks like, or an understanding of what each person and community can do to contribute to it, we become more reliant on legislation and regulation to enact it. Justice then becomes another tick box requirement. This is the impact of the default secularism that runs rampant throughout our society: we want things to be good but we have nothing but group think to organise opinions about what 'good' is.

A VISION FOR JUSTICE

Justice requires freedom but also requires that freedom is restricted. Whether through the force of law, or through personal restraint, freedom is limited so that justice prevails. By not always getting what we want we



enable others to get what they need. And indeed, limiting our options can sometimes increase the freedom we have: making a road one-way gives drivers the freedom to drive on both sides of the road. When we choose to limit freedom, though, we need to have a vision of the good life in mind.

Our vision for justice must give dignity to all people. At the peak of the creation narrative is humanity created in God's image. This gives immense weight to valuing

people, their lives and their dignity. People should be treated with dignity, whether this is how we talk about each other, how we report news, or how we structure society. Employers should pay workers for their labour, and if that pay requires people to work multiple jobs and not see their family, those pay practices are eroding human dignity. Justice values people.

The criminal justice system serves multiple ends, it punishes offenders, it keeps people deemed dangerous to

JUSTICE IN ACTION – CHRISTIANS AGAINST POVERTY (CAP)

Evangelical Alliance member CAP seeks to end poverty by helping people get free of debt.

Founded in 1996 in Bradford, today CAP UK works with 500 churches across the country. Through these partnerships, 3,000 volunteers provide free debt counselling, along with other important services such as job clubs, education in managing money, and life skills training.

Former client Jayne recalls how it felt to be in debt:

"I wouldn't open my post; it just built up and built up in the kitchen, and even to just look at that pile of post was [gut-wrenching]. You just knew what was in there. I was frightened about going to bed because I knew once the lights went off my brain would click into action and all my worries, my fears would come flooding in. I think it's worse at night because you can't really do anything and you are alone with your thoughts. Sometimes they're a lot stronger than you are, and that is scary. I did sit up several nights and just knit throughout the night. I wouldn't function the next day, but I wasn't really doing anything anyway because I wasn't really interested in life. It does have a huge impact: I couldn't even look in the mirror, or if I did I'd say 'Jayne, where are you?', because it just wasn't me.

"[My CAP debt coach] Jane says I couldn't look at her for the first hour she was in my house. I gave her all my post and everything else and we went through it, and it was just such a relief. Such a relief. I think by the time Jane left I was an inch taller. She came back with my CAP plan. I knew I could do it – I just had that feeling."

Jayne began going to her local church, and found the sermons seemed to be speaking directly to her. After a few months she phoned Jane "and asked about this Jesus thing. I did a salvation prayer and met with Jesus, and it's just been amazing.

"CAP life, with Jane and with Jesus, is amazing," she says. "Confidence and pride - that's what CAP stands for for me. That's something I can say with my hand on my heart, it really has given me back confidence and pride. I can look in the mirror now and say 'Yes, that's you, I know it's you.'"

Jayne's story and others can be found on the CAP website: capuk.org





society restrained, but punishment and incarceration should never be the end of the story. Valuing the dignity of people means working for rehabilitation and restoration. This isn't a naïve, blind hope, and in some circumstances imprisonment may be the best permanent solution. But it is based on hope. Justice requires the hope that for people convicted of crimes the future is better than the past. That's why justice requires a focus on rehabilitation and why as Christians with redemption at the core of our belief we should look for restoration even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Our commitment to justice must be visible as well as audible.

What if we lived in a society where prisons were closing not because of funding cuts but because crime was falling and they were not needed?

The quartet of the vulnerable (widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor) were in the sight of biblical writers and they are in our world today. They cannot be ignored or conveniently pushed to the side, our belief means that we do justice for those who may not have the means of their own to access it. This means we care, we demonstrate compassion, and we are generous with what we have.

This is also the realm of unending public policy debates: how best should state and society support and help the least among them? Justice requires that we ask whether a situation is how it should be: are children left without families, and strangers to our land isolated and vilified?

And if things are not as they should be, then are we going to do something about it? Injustice is not just the pernicious and the maleficent, it is about the ignorance, and the feigned ignorance, the ambivalence, and the not doing something about a situation we know is wrong.

But who should do something about it? Not always the state, not always the individual, not always the charity sector, neighbourhood groups, families and friends. The mix is essential and the division of responsibility not ours here to settle, but we all have a role to play, and not just through paying taxes. Many of these most intractable

challenges are better dealt with at a local community level than by government. For example, is a government scheme the best way of reintegrating ex-offenders into society? Are not the actions of a community with neighbours, employers, and families better placed to provide the opportunities for a fulfilling life not defined by crime?

As individuals and Christian communities this means we need to be generous with our time, our money, and our compassion. Our commitment to justice must be visible as well as audible. We willingly pay taxes knowing that there are some aspects of justice requiring the scale and authority of state action, but we also give independently and work to help on a personal and community level. When we are close to need we know what is needed, we have to get our hands and feet involved in the challenging and messy work of justice.



JUSTICE OR JUST US?

Our work towards justice is motivated by what and who we love, so if our primary love is for ourselves we will prioritise what benefits us. When it comes to deciding how to vote, what will focus where the cross goes on the ballot paper? When we arrange our tax affairs will we aim to keep as much as we can, or contribute to the running of essential services?

Likewise our rhetoric of what should or shouldn't happen often changes when it affects our family or local community – this is where NIMBYism originates (not in my back yard). For example, when we recognise the need for considerably more housing in the UK but we want it to be built somewhere else. We agree on the need for more rail

capacity and faster links but want the line to go through a different village.

In a world of sovereign states international policy will always be complex. When a problem such as the flight of refugees from Syria and the Middle East emerges it requires decision making across borders, it is a problem of global governance. There are legitimate challenges: having a sudden growth of population can place a strain on services, not knowing who is coming into the country can raise fears about security, and one country acting unilaterally can have a distorting effect on the overall situation. But sometimes these legitimate concerns can be excuses for inaction. There are complexities to navigate, but, for example, a concern over strain on public services suggests we want to maintain what we have for ourselves while stopping others from receiving care they are in greater need of.

Justice is not justice if it is just for us.

THE TRUTH ABOUT JUSTICE

The truth about justice is that justice requires truth. For all the talk of social justice, the thing that transforms society the greatest is people knowing, accepting and living the truth of the gospel. It turns out that separating our pursuit of justice and our words of truth damages both.

NOTES

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TRUTH



*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.
Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

John 8:31-32

All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.

Psalms 119:160

In 1998 the Manic Street Preachers released their album *This is my truth, tell me yours*. The title came from a phrase attributed to Aneurin Bevan when opponents challenged his use of statistics in political debate. It was the mantra of society for at least a generation, which decided truth was only found in relation to observable and verifiable facts, all other truth was subjective. That generation has passed. Increasingly, observable and verifiable facts are not the basis for truth, these can be overruled by whatever one feels, knows, or decides is the case.

As a society that subjectivity means we are inconsistent in how we handle truth. Sometimes we (correctly) insist that there are some things that we can know as true and we maintain there are actions which are without question wrong. But on other occasions, and especially when it comes to overarching world view claims, the only acknowledged and generally accepted truth is that there isn't space for absolute truth claims.

And into this m el ee we have the phenomenon of post-truth, and the associated discussions about the role of facts and emotions in influencing opinion. Named by the Oxford English Dictionary as its word of 2016, 'post-truth' is defined as "an adjective relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals."⁵⁵

Post-truth is not a new idea, it simply builds on a willingness to define truth based on what the individual decides is of primary importance. Separate to this is fake news. This is where incorrect, and often deliberately incorrect, news is created and shared to further one point of view, usually to the detriment of an opponent or rival. In the run up to the 2016 US presidential election there were reports that fake news was shared as widely as real news on social media.⁵⁶ As the effectiveness of fake news has become apparent, the term has been adopted by politicians and campaigners as a way of dismissing opinions or voices that they disagree with or dislike.

While different, both post-truth and fake news show our current awkward relationship with truth. Our society



sometimes wants it, sometimes ignores it, often searches for it, but doesn't know what it is.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

Christians are not alone in holding that their beliefs represent ultimate truth. In one form or another all overarching belief systems do the same. The monotheistic religions of Islam and Judaism would not argue with that description of their belief. South Asian belief systems such as Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism are more complicated, but while they may accommodate a more diffuse set of beliefs, that accommodation itself places limits on what is accepted. The consistent atheist is equally clear about truth; there is no god.

Christianity stands alone in its belief that truth comes in a person. Not in a theoretical idea, or through a pattern of behaviour, or how we feel, but in the person of Jesus eternal truth came to earth and became known, enabling us to know God. It was in this act of love that truth was revealed and made accessible to all.

John's Gospel begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it. (John 1:1-5)

Christians believe that truth can be known and a key aspect of evangelical belief is the centrality of the Bible in providing that truth.⁵⁷ As John Stott put it: "Our claim is that God has revealed himself by speaking; that this divine (or God breathed) speech has been written down and preserved in Scripture; and that Scripture is, in fact, God's word written, which therefore is true and reliable and has divine authority over men."⁵⁸

THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE

Over the course of centuries the truth of the Bible has contributed to the flourishing of life across the United Kingdom. It has provided both a starting point for the rules of the nation and an acknowledgement that a rule of authority exists beyond and above the decisions of worldly powers.

The constant task of Christians is to translate the truth of the Bible into action in our daily lives and specific contexts, while at the same time acting in full awareness that life in Christ does not come through obedience to rules but from a relationship with the ruler.

The justice systems in the United Kingdom are rooted in Christian principles. As noted in the introduction, the idea of common law is based on an authority beyond written rules for the basis of decisions – historically this anchor for the law came through the customs and teachings of Christianity. However, since the start of the twentieth century this link between Christianity and common law has become less clear. In 1917 Lord Justice Sumner commented: “The phrase ‘Christianity is part of the law of England’ is really not law; it is rhetoric.”⁵⁹

The legacy of Christianity is shown in the financial arrangements of the UK as well, the motto for the London Stock Exchange is ‘*dictum meum pactum*’ – which translated means ‘my word is my bond’ emphasising the trust that is placed in one person’s word. A common understanding of truth has enabled trust to be shared between people and between people and institutions.

The gospel is for all people, and understanding scripture should be available to all people, and this drove early Christian endeavours to develop provision of education. But the commitment to education was not limited to this.

Christians were and still are committed to education, because leading people into truth and helping them understand truth, is a vital aspect of Christian witness in society. Our desire is to see people equipped to find truth in all its forms – this means a commitment to moral and scientific understanding of truth. We want people to seek after the good, the true and the beautiful, wherever they are found. We want them to understand the world that God has made, in all its complexity.

Truth also gives freedom from slavery, as a lack of education can easily enslave – we’ve seen this all too readily in the willingness to consume and share fake news, and reflexive moral panic to situations that arise and threaten us and our sensibilities. The increasing complexity of our world needs to be met with an increasing quality of education to equip people to navigate and engage with society.

Education also provides the basis for engagement in public life, and in a specific sense, for the much needed religious literacy in society. As a result, it is the foundation

that underpins working for love and justice in all of society. A more truthful understanding of society requires that we know more about our neighbours, and not just in the sense of knowing facts about them, but in having real relationships with them.

TRUTH HAS STUMBLERD IN THE STREETS

In the words of scripture: “truth has stumbled in the streets.”⁶⁰ We no longer have a common understanding of truth that lets us trust one another, and truth is only true if it can be fact checked, if indeed it exists at all. As a society we have moved over the centuries from a pre-modern culture where the Bible was central for our understanding of truth, to a modern culture which placed reason at the centre, to our current post-modern climate which rejects the absolute truth of the Bible, is ambivalent to reason and rationality and inconsistent about whether such a thing as truth exists.

Because truth is not valued trust is undermined. If we lack the measure to determine truthfulness trust becomes a barometer of what we approve of, not what is true. We see this in all sectors, as frequent surveys show the declining level of trust in the people who make decisions which affect our daily life. A recent survey showed that in the UK, the media are trusted by 32 per cent of the population, the government fared slightly better on 36 per cent, business on 45 per cent and NGOs were also more distrusted than trusted (trust: 46 per cent). The same survey found that 60 per cent of people in the UK felt that ‘the system’ was failing.⁶¹

When giving evidence in court witnesses and defendants take an oath that they will tell ‘the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’. They are not expected to tell of what they do not know – for example what they did not witness or do not have the expertise to comment on – but to answer the questions fully and without deceit. This commitment enables the jury to be confident in what they are hearing, but in reaching a decision where there is conflicting testimony they will need to decide whether witnesses are keeping their oath.

Speaking truth is powerful, especially when it overturns established power arrangements. Speaking truth to power is a popular idea, and a vital way of challenging authority. People in positions of influence should be accountable for their actions and the press and media should act responsibly and be held to account when they don’t. These are difficult concepts to contest, but the

Because truth is not valued trust is undermined.

reality becomes more complicated because who gets to decide whether those speaking truth to power are in fact speaking truth?

THUS SAITH THE LORD

The public image of Christians speaking truth in public life is of placard-waving protestors outside a thing they don't like. It might be a cinema showing a film they disapprove of or outside parliament protesting a change in the law they do not want to happen. Protests have a point, and being vocal about what you believe can be important, but they should not be the defining feature of our contribution to truth in public life.

The other image – one that is fairly inaccurate – is of Christian politicians standing up in parliament speaking for or against a bill and invoking the Bible to make their case. Between May 2010 and May 2017 the phrase 'the Bible says' was used three times in parliament. In the House of Lords during the Assisted Dying Bill debate in 2014 when Baroness Richardson of Calow stated that the Bible says there is "a time to be born, and a time to die."⁶² In 2013 Sir Gerald Howarth, in the debate over Same Sex Marriage, said "The Church of England is concerned that teachers in Church of England-maintained schools will not be able to preach as the Bible says – that marriage can only be the union between a man and a woman."⁶³ The third occurrence was in discussions over a High Court judgment when William McCrea said: "The Bible says: 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth'. And that seems apt today."⁶⁴

Christian politicians do occasionally quote the Bible in parliament, but this is not the primary way it is used in public life. The Bible guides our actions and words as much as it gives us specific words to say. That is perhaps behind some of the criticism of Tim Farron and hostility towards his beliefs, he certainly did not quote scripture to support legislation, but there was an enduring suspicion that he believed certain things which others felt were inconsistent with his office, despite his public pronouncements and voting record.

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Although the phrase 'speaking the truth in love' can be invoked by people who are doing no such thing, it is incredibly important that this is genuinely how we approach truth-telling. Speaking the truth without love is ugly and doesn't win anyone over. We must learn how to

be loving, gentle and wise, and understand how to speak truth in ways that those who disagree with us can hear and, perhaps, come to accept.

This doesn't mean that we shy away from speaking truth. Much like politicians in parliament who speak wisdom from the Bible, there is a crucial place for using discretion in the words we use so they are heard and accepted by the greatest number of people. A politician starting a statement with: 'the Bible says' runs the risk of alienating listeners, and prompting them to disagree with their words before they have been spoken. Likewise when we say we are 'speaking the truth in love' that is a prompt for many to decide without listening that these words are neither true nor loving.

This is the depth of challenge Christians face when speaking truth in public life. Truth hasn't just lost its currency, it has become something easily rejected. Christians shouldn't shy away from speaking truth, and speaking truth to power, it is something that is deeply rooted in protestant, dissenting and evangelical traditions, and something which churches and Christians still do to this day.

There is power in speaking truth, as Lewis Smedes notes when talking about promises: "A human promise is an awesome reality. When a woman makes a promise, she thrusts her hand into the unpredictable circumstances of her tomorrow and creates an enclave of predictable reality. When a man makes a promise, he creates an island of certainty in a heaving ocean of uncertainty."⁶⁵

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

Christians don't speak truth simply so the things they say are correct and accurate. What the focus on fake news, or alternative facts, misses is that truth is more complex than whether a statistic is accurate, an event real or a quote genuine. Tales of President Trump and his staff conflating events and confusing locations and seemingly inventing terrorist atrocities to justify their actions clearly undermine truth.⁶⁶ But the reason this happens so easily is that our foundation of truth has become so shaky.

Christians are committed to truth because it provides the foundation of their life and faith, trust in the knowledge of God and a belief in Jesus' life, death and resurrection for our salvation focuses our actions and words, and being truthful is a matter of justice – it is putting words to what is right. The details of Christian belief

TRUTH IN ACTION - ELECTION HUSTINGS

Election debates – known as hustings – are often held in local communities in the run-up to elections. Unlike carefully-orchestrated television debates, they are opportunities for members of the public to ask probing questions of the people who are seeking to represent us in parliament or other assemblies.



At least 325 took place before the 2015 General Election, many of them held in churches, providing opportunities for Christians both to serve their communities and to raise the issues that most concerned them with their local candidates.

Nola Leach, CEO of Alliance member organisation CARE, commented on this resource that the church offers to society: “despite all the apathy and indifference we are constantly hearing about, the church is providing a place for debate, engagement and political involvement. It’s fantastic to see the church facilitating debate and political interaction.”

In 2014 Evangelical Alliance Scotland published *What kind of nation?* (which in part formed the inspiration for this report) ahead of the vote on independence. The Alliance team in Scotland followed this report up with hustings events in the seven cities of Scotland. These provided opportunities for Christians as well as the wider community to ask representatives from the Yes and No campaigns about the kind of nation they wanted Scotland to become.

Senior politicians were challenged about their records and their plans for tackling reoffending, economics, family issues and many more issues of justice. The hustings demonstrated points of consensus across parties and campaigns. For example, then justice minister Roseanna Cunningham said, in a discussion about reforming the criminal justice system, “We can do something reformatory with the justice system but we need the space for debate which is not pounced on by certain sections of the media.”

In election campaigns politicians make pledges and promises, but if they are the ones setting the terms of the debate it is hard to judge their claims. Hustings are often an unrivalled opportunity for claims to be challenged, and for candidates to be quizzed on what exactly their snappy soundbites mean, and how they propose to implement them. Talking with our potential representatives face to face is crucial, we are then better able to judge whether they are telling the truth and whether or not they can be trusted with our votes. The local church is ideally placed to provide the forum for such public participation in the democratic process, and in the quest for truth in politics.



stand up to scrutiny, time and time again people have set out to fact check the Christian faith and came away convinced of its truthfulness.⁶⁷ But there is a dimension of the Christian faith that does not fit the fact checking nature of contemporary society's scepticism towards truth: faith by its very nature cannot be 100 per cent verified, it requires trust, it requires accepting something we cannot fully guarantee. Society wants truth but won't trust: it is truth that is now in the eye of the beholder.

In John's gospel we read: "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"⁶⁸ Truth is something which comes as we obey Jesus' teachings rather than something to be proved before we decide whether to obey.

The first response of Christians to the crisis of trust and the abandonment of truth in society is to live lives that are committed to the truth that they believe in. This means we have a clear commitment to the authority of the Bible to guide our faith and practice.

Second, we speak of the truth that we believe in. We have the freedom in the UK to speak the good news of salvation, and we should make the most of that freedom.

It is truth that is now in the eye of the beholder.

There will be times when sensitivity and care are needed, and times when boldness is required, but if we want a society that values truth we have to speak up. It's not just salvation that we should speak truth about, we believe that the Christian faith provides the foundation for how we all live our lives and as individuals, churches, and organisations we have an important role in speaking the truth about that foundation.

Our third response should be to work for truth to be known in all areas of life, uncovering corruption and deceit and refusing to conform to practices and cultures that marginalise truth. We should live lives of integrity, and help create an environment that makes it as easy as possible for others to do likewise.

Finally, we have to show that the truth we believe is good news for all really is good news for all. Our words of truth have to be backed up by actions, truth needs to be demonstrated as well as articulated. Across the UK and the world Christians serve their neighbours out of obedience to the truth, Christians sacrifice to support others, and they give of their time, energy, and resources to demonstrate that the truth we believe in is life changing, world transforming, good news.

NOTES

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56. David Blood, 'Fake news shared as widely as the real thing', *Financial Times*, 27 March 2017. Available online at ft.com/content/99ea2fae-107c-11e7-b030-768954394623 Accessed 11/4/2017
57. It is not the purpose of this document to examine issues of biblical authority, but it is worth noting that when Christians say that the Bible is true they don't always mean the same thing. Terms such as inerrancy, infallibility and the authority of scripture are sometimes used with precise purpose and on other occasions loosely and interchangeably. For a more in depth but still accessible discussion on this topic see: Steve Holmes, 'Evangelicals and the Bible', 19 March 2014. Available at eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/evangelicals-and-the-bible.cfm Accessed 23/12/2016
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59. *Bowman v Secular Society* [1917] AC 406. (UK House of Lords) p 463
60. Isaiah 59:14
61. Edelman (2017) '2017 Edelman Trust Barometer' results available online at edelman.com/trust2017/ Accessed 13/4/2017
62. HL debate 18 July 2014 vol 755 col 838
63. HC debate 20 May 2013 vol 563 col 944
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65. Lewis Smedes, 'Controlling the Unpredictable – the Power of Promising', *Christianity Today*, 21 January 1983. Available online at christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/decemberweb-only/12-16-56.0.htm Accessed 01/03/2017
66. For example, the *Washington Post* reported that White House counsellor Kellyanne Conway referenced a fictitious 'Bowling Green massacre': Samantha Schmidt and Lindsey Bever, 'Kellyanne Conway cites 'Bowling Green massacre' that never happened to defend travel ban', *Washington Post*, 3 February 2017 washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/02/03/kellyanne-conway-cites-bowling-green-massacre-that-never-happened-to-defend-travel-ban Accessed 22/06/2017
67. Two of the best known examples are Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (1975) and Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (1998)
68. John 8:31-32



CONCLUSION

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

Our aim throughout this report is to help Christians articulate a hopeful vision for the kind of society they want to see in the UK. At a time of considerable change, with uncertainty in politics and a lack of confidence in public life, there is great need for Christians to raise their voice.

We do not attempt to provide all the answers to the manifold challenges we face as a country, but offer this as a starting point for Christians to work out what that vision might look like. There is considerable work to be done in every sector and area of society to ask what this means and what our response should be. In some areas this might lead to specific policy responses from government, but probably in many more it will require action from everyone rather than laws made by a few. What can you do in your community to bring about the kind of society you want to see? We may not be able to change our nations but we can make a difference to our neighbours. And a changed nation is made up of changed neighbourhoods.

Hope runs through our vision for society, we believe that things can be better, we believe that a vision of society grounded in Christian values is good for all, and we want Christians to have confidence in giving voice to that vision. We are not seeking a return to Christendom, but want a plural public space where we can live together and thrive, and we believe that Christian foundations provide the roots that we all benefit from. The UK has benefited over centuries from the fruit of Christianity, but

the roots have not been nourished in recent years and the tree has withered.

We unashamedly believe that the greatest hope for the world is Jesus, and the greatest act of love a Christian can perform is to introduce people to him. We believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.⁶⁹ That is why ensuring we continue to have the freedom to speak of our faith and live it out is at the heart of the kind of society we want. We want a society where the good news of Jesus is confidently spoken and widely heard, and where people have the freedom to accept or reject the message of hope and salvation.

This is a risky business. God gave people the freedom to accept or reject His love, He took a risk with us, and the society we want to see is a plural society where religious freedom leads to flourishing, but freedom also means accepting the prospect of rejection.

We believe that freedom from sin and its consequences is the eternal hope that orders our life, but it is not just a faraway hope. It is both the beginning of a Christian's story and the end, and in between we believe there is an application for all of creation, we have a role demonstrating the goodness and glory of God to all of society. That means we love the world we live in and the society around us, it means we stand up for justice, defend freedom and speak truth. While we hope that many will know the permanent freedom, perfect justice, life giving truth and unsurpassable love offered by God, we work for a society for all that reflects some of that now.

As we work for the good of society we know that God is with us, we know that it is His love that enables us to

love, and we work in the belief and assurance that His love changes everything.

The love that God gives is a steadfast love that crosses the greatest of divides.

It is a love that calls us to go the extra mile and faithfully serve everyone.

We are not loved for what we give back, it is not a transactional kind of love – if that really is love. But it is a love that demands a response from us to make that love visible to the world around us. Christians should be the first to serve, the first to stand up, and the first to pick up the baton of leadership needed in our society. In places where state services are retracting Christians are frequently the first to step in and the ones remaining when many others have left. It is love for creation and the people God created that prompts such action.

We cannot fail to see the needs around us, but through our faith in a God who is greater than we can imagine, we have the motivation to respond to the challenges. There are many places Christians are working to pursue love, freedom, justice and truth in our society, we've mentioned just a few throughout this report. We want to affirm the way they, and many others who do not share our faith, work for the good of society, and we want to raise the bar for what could be if society were transformed by values rooted in Christian teaching.

Living in a more just society is not a right we are given, but it is a responsibility we have to respond to. Justice is putting things right, and as we follow a God who sent His Son so we could be in right relationship with Him, we work to put things right.

Putting things right requires that we articulate a vision for society that is rooted in truth, Christians believe that truth is revealed in the person of Christ and faithfully passed down through scripture. We believe that truth makes sense and that it works. As a society we show signs of growing tired of relativism and the casual disregard of truth.

Our words matter, when we speak the truth about Jesus' good news we are speaking about what we know to be true. We know that words can destroy and they can build. Our task is to give voice to a constructive vision for society that will see the flourishing of all.

We believe that our society can be more loving, it can be freer, more just, and more truthful.

This is a call for the Church to be a brave voice for such a society, a society transformed by the teaching of Jesus.

And together we pray:

*Your Kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

NOTES

69. John 14:6





SIGNAL
TIMINGS
CHANGED

WHAT NEXT?

READ

Further resources and case studies will be available online at eauk.org/wkos

DISCUSS

Take some time to discuss what this vision for society might look like in your community or workplace. Perhaps meet with people from your church to talk about it together.

DEVELOP

This is just a starting point. We would love to see you work out what it might look like to see more love, freedom, justice and truth where you live and work. What are the hurdles to that happening? What might you be able to do in your community to see it happen?

MEET

Take your ideas for a better society, and the hurdles that get in the way, and speak to those who are in positions of authority. This might mean seeking support from church leaders for your vision, asking workplace leaders for changes to be made, working with public institutions to see hurdles removed, or speaking to politicians about the kind of society you want.

SPEAK

Vision needs to be verbalised, so we encourage you to speak out about a vision for a society transformed by the goodness of the gospel. Look for opportunities to speak hopefully about what a freer, more loving, just and truthful society could look like.

HEAR

Invite the Evangelical Alliance to speak at your church on the themes of love, justice, freedom and truth, and our vision for the kind of society we want. Email info@eauk.org

“The biblical vision of our human calling to tend the earth and love our neighbours – a calling that is renewed by the gospel, not superseded – propels us into social concern for the societies in which we find ourselves. The church sends us into the world as agents of renewal.” **James KA Smith, *Comment magazine***



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