

**Pastoral Letter from the House of Bishops
Introductory Statement by the Bishop of Norwich
Tuesday 17th February 2015**

We have known the date of the next General Election, May 7th, for a long time as a result of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act. In this context the House of Bishops has had an opportunity to reflect on some of the social, political and spiritual challenges facing our nation today. This Pastoral Letter is addressed to members of the Church of England. It does not indicate preference for any single political party or programme. It encourages Christians to engage positively in our political processes, to use their vote and to value hard won democratic freedoms. More specifically it reminds Anglicans of some important features of Christian belief, namely that God's creation is good, that human beings are made in God's image and likeness, that Jesus Christ came to live alongside us, and that we are called to follow His teaching to love one another as He has loved us.

Christians engage in acts of service to the wider community as a natural consequence of their faith. In recent years the food banks which have sprung up all over the country have largely been established by Christians of all denominations and traditions. Equally people in the Church of England and other churches have supported the homeless, the unemployed, those affected by drug and alcohol misuse and many other social issues. In another field the Church of England has employed many more youth workers in the past decade whilst such workers paid from public funding have diminished considerably. These things are not done to criticise lack of provision by government, whether national or local, but because there are needs which should be recognised and met. Such active service means the Church of England has first-hand local experience of the challenges in our communities throughout the country.¹

Our society needs intermediate institutions such as our churches which serve the common good and build strong community life. Everything cannot be left to government. Yet we often seem to assume governments are omni-competent. As we approach a General Election Christians should not place upon any government wholly unrealistic expectations.

We recognise every government is imperfect. Christians are not put off politics by that. We believe the world is good and created by God but disordered by human sin. Christians can therefore cope with defective institutions. Viewed in simply human terms the Church is herself far from perfect. Yet Christians are always inspired by the vision of the Kingdom of God which, in the Lord's Prayer, we pray will one day come "on earth as it is in heaven". It is

¹Good evidence of this work may be found in the recent Church in Action report from the Church Urban Fund network:

http://www.cuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/PDFs/Research/Church-in-Action-Exec-Summary-2015_0.pdf

that vision of peace and unity which means that in this Pastoral Letter we warn that we must not become a “society of strangers” to one another but that, in our diversity, we should be a “community of communities”. In many parts of England, congregations in the Church of England are increasingly multi-ethnic, reflecting the international character of the Church and also that in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free”. (Galatians 3.28)

The danger of demonising racial or religious groups is considerable, especially at a time when international terrorism is a destabilising factor among the community of nations. We have to resist this, and there are many examples from the past to guide us, not least in my own city of Norwich. When French Huguenots were expelled from their country in the 16th century, many settled in Norwich. One of my predecessors gave them the chapel of the Bishop’s Palace as their place of worship. It was a bold gesture but it sprang from the same Christian ethic which inspires this Pastoral Letter.