

**Together for the Common Good**  
**Nugent Care AGM**  
**8<sup>th</sup> November 2013, Liverpool Town Hall**

My title this afternoon is Together for the Common Good. I chose it because, as some of you will know, I am currently involved in an initiative with this name and we had a national conference that was held in Liverpool in September. But it is also an excellent all-encompassing title which I could submit well in advance confident that I was not tying myself down too much and hopeful that I could develop it in a way relevant to Nugent Care.

T4CG began from the idea that there might still be something to be learnt from the partnership of the church leaders here on Merseyside from the 1970s through to the 1990s, when Archbishop Derek Worlock, Bishop David Sheppard and their Free Church colleagues such as Dr John Newton worked so closely together. Liverpool then was a very different place religiously, politically, socially, economically – and different from other cities in England. It desperately needed advocates at the time and it found them in these church leaders. They set aside what might have divided them in church terms to concentrate on what united them. Theirs was not a navel gazing, inward looking ecumenism focusing on the finer points of theological difference and negotiating institutional interest. Rather it was an ecumenism of kingdom building. They wanted to bring practical improvements to people's lives and to local neighbourhoods. And through their 'better together' ministry, they brought a gospel that really spoke to people, especially those who were disadvantaged and marginalised.

Why is this relevant to Nugent Care? Well, it seems to me, first of all, that this approach had strong resonances with that of Father Nugent. He also saw response to human need as the natural expression of Christian faith. He also brought a very context-specific response – and one that was not just a knee jerk reaction to manifest need but was based upon a careful examination of problems and circumstances. His concern, therefore, did not stop at amelioration. He was seeking transformative change for communities as well as individuals. And, although much of what he was doing was concerned with the Irish newcomers to the city, many of

whom were Roman Catholic, he also worked ecumenically. In other words, he focused on the job in hand, not on the institutional identity and interests of his Church.

So, what about Nugent Care today? It is encouraging to see how the principles of Father Nugent's work are being continued in ways adapted to today's circumstances. This is evident looking at various dimensions of your work.

- First, there is the emphasis on high quality services. This is underpinned by the high value placed on individuals, which is also conveyed through an ethos of respect.
- Then there is the fact that you go beyond delivering services to engaging in advocacy and campaigning as well. Market forces create winners and losers. You can see the effects on those who lose out. Fiscal policy ought to help towards a rebalancing, but when we realise that the poorest 20% of our society pay more in direct and indirect taxes per £100 of income than the richest 20%, redistribution is obviously going in the wrong direction. Work is said to be the route out of poverty. But this must lead to hollow laughter when there are far more unemployed than there are vacancies and when, in any case, low pay and reduced hours are set beside rising cost of living. Over half the children in poverty in the UK today are in working households. Similarly, there must be questions about the efficacy and fairness of the spare room subsidy – bedroom tax to you and me – if there are no smaller properties available. In Nugent Care, you see the resulting problems at first hand and can speak with authority with and for those affected. One of the speakers at the T4CG conference – a Jewish contributor – talked about the 'still small voice' being "the sound you can only hear when you are listening". This is the basis of prophesy.
- In this, you can also present a challenge to the rest of us. It is a challenge already taken up by your excellent volunteers and donors, but it should also give the rest of us pause to think about the nature of our society. It is evident that in your work, you take a broad definition of poverty – going beyond material

deprivation to the destructiveness of impoverished relationships and, conversely, seeing the common good as being measured by the well-being and participation, again not just about material poverty. At an inter-personal level, for example, this means a concern for loneliness and isolation amongst the growing number of elderly people. Society-wide, we need to be worried about growing inequality – not just because many in poverty are suffering today, though that is reason enough; not just because in practice the rest of us also pay a price, though that is true (for instance, the public cost of child poverty has been estimated at £29 bn); but also because we shouldn't tolerate living in a fractured society with such divergent life chances.

So to return to T4CG. One of the conclusions coming out of the conference was that we need a new narrative of the common good. As one of the speakers said: at their root, politics and faith are mutual expressions of the question: what life do we wish – or, in our case, are we called - to live together?" It was clear at the conference that although the common good is a very helpful concept, there is no necessary consistency in the way it is used. For many Roman Catholics, it is well defined with its roots in Catholic Social Teaching and critically it includes the ideas of subsidiarity and solidarity, human dignity and the preferential option for the poor. Others use it in a much more general way so that a variety of people may deploy the term without quite meaning the same thing. But even more crucially there can be something of a gap between those who bring an academic approach and practitioners on the ground who may implicitly be working towards 'the common good' without ever spelling it out. Yet it is precisely those who are there active in the messiness of life that are in the best position to turn common good language into the narrative that we need in order to bring common good principles to the forefront of public debate. Testing policies and practices against 'common good criteria' reveals just how counter-cultural it is. So there is a challenge for Nugent Care.

But let me end with a quote from Jim Wallis, an American theologian whose most recent book is called *On God's Side – what religion forgets and politics hasn't learned about serving the common good*. He says, "Solving the world's problems requires a commitment to a very ancient idea whose time has urgently come: *the common good*. How do we work together, even with people we don't agree with?"

How do we treat each other, especially the poorest and most vulnerable? How do we take care not just of ourselves but also one another? How do we move beyond interests of left and right and become accountable to a higher good? Only by inspiring a spiritual *and* practical commitment to the common good can we make our personal and public lives better.”

Now there’s a challenge to us all.

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