

A briefing paper from Together for the Common Good

Debate GS 1956 on the Common Good, 12 July 2014



This debate on the common good is both timely and important. It has the potential to impact significantly on public and political life in this country in the lead-up to the General Election next May and beyond.

It is a truism that, as a country and society, we are in need of fresh vision and a new sense of hope; and we think that people in the churches and faith-based organisations are particularly well-placed to offer this by sharing common good thinking at the grassroots. Churches and Christians are in the business of working alongside communities, helping people transform their lives and have authentic roots in every neighbourhood.

As paper GS 1956 spells out very clearly, in the wake of the global financial crisis we have become even more fragmented as a society. While this crisis, and the recession which followed it, have brought hardship and loss to countless individuals and families, they have also further weakened our shared sense of the common good. As paragraph 5 of GS 1956 affirms, the economic model which precipitated the crisis is one which prioritises the interests of the individual over the community and ‘assumes self-interest as the basis for all decisions’ – weakening our sense of inter-dependence and undervaluing those aspects of life with ‘no obvious cash value’.

Yet as paragraph 7 explains, our sense of sharing a common life together has also been undermined by the growth of the state, a necessary consequence of increased individualism. So there has been a ‘collusion’ of state and market eroding the common good, replacing it with an individual quest for happiness and utility and crowding out the space for those ‘intermediate institutions’ which once bore testimony to values we shared as communities – such as friendly societies, free hospitals, and the like. Post-crisis we are also witnessing greater disillusionment with an increasingly-polarised institutional politics and a growing propensity on the part of many to vote out of fear rather than in hope.

So we need a radically new political conversation, for which the common good can provide a grammar and framework. As briefing paper GS 1956 points out, not only is the common good something which Anglicans can be at the forefront of promoting, as the political parties begin writing their manifestoes for 2015 the Church has a ‘window’ to make known its hope that these will reflect the common good. There are many ways in which the Church can do this, but *one would be to give moral and practical support to an initiative already under way, the ‘Together for the Common Good’ network mentioned in paragraph 3 of GS 1956.*

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Drawing inspiration from the pioneering 20-year partnership between Bishop David Sheppard and Archbishop Derek Worlock in Liverpool a generation ago, 'Together for the Common Good' is building a broad coalition of Christians of all traditions, people of other faiths and secular allies to re-imagine political life and become agents of change. By both word and example it is articulating the benefits of a common good approach to political and community engagement, developing a movement which will transcend party politics and bring a wide diversity of interests into a positive convergence.

Counting a number of leading ordained and lay Anglicans among its ecumenical steering group, Together for the Common Good has already hosted a major conference in Liverpool, undertaken research, and brought together MPs and peers at Westminster across party lines to discuss the common good. Among its future plans are a book of essays relating the common good to the contemporary situation in the UK, and a series of professionally facilitated conversations on the very human issues of 'Home', 'Money' and 'Work'. The Gospel challenges each of us to reach out beyond our comfort zones, and these 'Common Good Conversations' will allow people a safe and structured environment in which to do so. They will bring together people of estranged positions in a spirit of genuine concern to negotiate new solutions grounded in the common good.

So can we tap into the potential that Christians at every level of society have, by virtue of their desire to serve others, to be agents of reconciliation – between left and right, rich and poor, business and unions, educated and uneducated, women and men, local and national, old and young, 'secular' and people of faith? We need to engage, not only in social action alongside vulnerable communities, but also in supporting negotiation between estranged interests to develop structural solutions that enable all to flourish.

The language of the common good sees human beings as having a worth greater than their individual rights, not least because they are created in the image of God and share filial bonds. It challenges us to move from a paradigm focusing on rights, where individuals are in opposition to one another, to one driven by virtue, vocation, conscience and relationships and which stresses our interdependence and our corporate nature. It believes that, rather than antagonise each other, we must negotiate – and this will only be possible if we have genuine respect for human beings with whom we disagree. It will challenge us all, and requires the application of both 'Love your enemies' and 'Love one another' in practice.

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Together for the Common Good is guided by an ecumenical Steering Group: Patrick Coldstream (Chair), Hilary Russell, Nicholas Sagovsky, Jenny Sinclair, Alison Gelder, Andrew Bradstock, Maria Power, +Stephen Platten, Tim Livesey, Peter McGrail. We consult with a wider group of advisors.