

Methodist Church in Ireland – Council on Social Responsibility

Social Responsibility Sunday – Sunday 28th January 2024

Theme – Christians and Politics

Introduction.

We offer the material here as a help in your worship for Social Responsibility Sunday on 28th January – or a Sunday around that time that suits you better. Feel free to use the material, in full or in part, in any way that you find helpful.

Remember the Officers and members of the Council in prayer – see page 46 in Prayer Focus (and p25-36 on the theme of Praying with regard to poverty.) Steven and David have both served well beyond the normal terms for chairs of the council – please pray that suitable replacements will be found in the next year or two.

Suggested readings

Genesis 41: 25-40; Psalm 33; Romans 13: 1-8

Children's story

If you normally include a related children's story, you might like to use the story of Joseph in Egypt, or Daniel in Babylon to illustrate that being faithful to God has sometimes led a person to high office in order to be a help to many people.

Sermon outline.

The Council on Social Responsibility deals with a wide range of social and political issues that affect all our lives in various ways. Our resources are limited, but we have tried to engage in a number of those issues – speaking to our own Methodist people, and at times speaking on behalf of our Methodist Church in Ireland.

This year in the material for Social Responsibility Sunday, we are offering some thoughts on the tricky subject of Christians and Politics.

You will all know of people who are involved in the world of politics and do so with a very strong Christian conviction.

Last year our President along with a few members of the Council had meetings with a number of political leaders in Northern Ireland. One interesting meeting, held in Edgehill, was with the Minister of State, Steve Baker MP. He is particularly open about his Christian faith. At the end of such meetings the President will usually ask if it would be appropriate to pray for the person we have been meeting with. On that occasion, not only did he welcome the offer of prayer, but asked he

might also pray for us. (He did give permission for his civil servants to leave the room, if they wished, before we prayed.) Not only did he appreciate our prayers but we found his prayer for us deeply moving.

(There may be an illustration from RoI that might be more appropriate here)

It has often been said about the Labour movement that they owed far more to Methodism than they ever did to Marxism. Roy Hattersley, a former deputy leader of the British Labour Party, argued that case convincingly in his book on John Wesley (published about 20 years ago.)

In the Old Testament we have quite a number of examples of people who were used by God to engage in the 'world of politics' in their day. It could be argued that God had a particular role for Israel – as His particular Covenant people – that does not simply transfer to us as the Christian Church. However, there are striking examples of God's people in the midst of the Gentile world who are used by God in very special ways.

Joseph in Egypt; Daniel in Babylon; the instructions of the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles; Queen Esther in the court in Persia. (You may wish to explain and unpack one or two of these illustrations)

Why then are so many Christians reluctant to get involved in politics?

Andy Flannigan, originally from Northern Ireland and known to many as a speaker at Castlewellan Holiday Week, heads up an organisation in London called Christians in Politics. Their website has some helpful articles and links – including one to the small group that meets in Northern Ireland.

(We are not sure if there is anything similar in RoI)

Andy says - here at Christians in Politics, we've heard all the excuses of why Christians shouldn't be involved in politics. Five stand out as the most common. So, let's tackle those reasons head on, Bible in hand. (We will add a number 6 – that has a particular Irish dimension)

1. IT'S A DIRTY GAME

Think of your typical politician and many people will think of a power hungry and dishonest individual. This is largely due to our current media age which is obsessed by scandal and selling papers. What grabs the headlines isn't the mundane everyday task of being an MP that serves a constituency; it's the scandalous and the shocking.

While it's true that many politicians have acted dishonestly in the past, this is only a very small part of a wider more complex picture. Many more MPs are doing their best to serve others while also being deeply disturbed by the corrupt actions of some.

The question we need to ask ourselves is will we simply critique like Pharisees, or serve like Jesus?

2. BUT I CAN'T AGREE WITH EVERYTHING THAT PARTY STANDS FOR

That you don't agree with everything a party stands for should come as no surprise. Indeed, you probably don't agree with everything your spouse or church or work colleagues think.

Sometimes you just have to live in the tension, pick a horse and get on it to work for the common good.

The other more obvious point is that if there are policies that we disagree with in a certain party, then how will those policies be changed unless people like us get involved in making the arguments? Your voice is heard much more clearly when you whisper from a place of relationship, rather than rant from a distance.

(This might be the place where you can use the 4 minute video that is linked below)

3. THOSE MEETINGS ARE SO BORING

Jesus never called us to comfortable situations, where there were always soft seats, donuts and ever-flowing fairly-traded coffee. He mentioned something about taking up a cross, which sounds a bit like hard work. He mentioned something about persistent prayer. And he didn't just talk about it. He fleshed it out in his life. Obedience to his Father and his call always came before comfort.

4. IT'S NOT REALLY THE TOP PRIORITY IS IT?

The argument goes – helping the poor is great but actually what is eternal is more important. Some of us believe this intentionally, while some of us believe this by default from years of presumption.

Now I wholeheartedly believe that people do need Jesus, but I also believe the bigger story needs telling.

Tom Wright says that our idea of heaven has been based more on medieval art depicting clouds and angels than on a biblical understanding. In Revelation 21 we see that the new heavens and new earth combine. Earth will be restored, redeemed and reconciled to its creator, through every dimension of human life.

Ridiculously, we are called to be partners with God in his mission to see the restoration, redemption and reconciliation of all things. If that is the ultimate goal, then suddenly our involvement in all the structures of this world starts to make sense. If there is to be total transformation, it will involve every sphere of economics, art, science, architecture, plumbing, agriculture.

This place IS the next place. It will be transformed. And incredibly we are called to be part of demonstrating what this next place will be like right now.

5. WE'RE BUSY DOING A GOOD JOB HERE. LOOK AT OUR IMPACT

Whether it's debt counselling, youth clubs, pregnancy advice centres, or foodbanks, God's people are seeking to bring transformation to every aspect of people's lives.

All of this is crucial. But there is a definite temptation. You see there's a big difference between charity and justice. We enjoy dishing out charity, as it actually makes us feel good. What is more difficult is being part of the process that makes that charity unnecessary. Desmond Tutu put it this way. "As Christians, we need to not just be pulling the drowning bodies out of the river. We need to be going upstream to find out who is pushing them in."

(additional point to the ones Andy Flanagan has made)

6. In Ireland we are particularly anxious about mixing religion and politics.

The history of Ireland is littered with many unhelpful associations between religion and politics – from whatever point of view you look at it. This has been true of Administrations in both Dublin and Belfast.

We know that the long years of conflict here, particularly in the North, owe more to differing political aspirations than religious ones. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that the persistent scourge of sectarianism does have a religious element to it.

The tidal wave of secularism has significantly changed that political landscape – North and South. That brings both threats, of which we should be aware; but also, opportunities which we should be willing to grasp – working hard for the peace and prosperity of the city. (Jer 29:7)

(What follows next is based on another short article from Christians in Politics – fuller version on their website. You may wish to further summarise the three points below – or just skip on to the final points of application.)

Can religion and politics mix today?

As the famous saying goes, you don't talk about religion or politics at a dinner party. What about the two combined? Is that too toxic a mix to even begin to entertain as a topic of conversation at the dinner table, let alone in the public square?

It was Tony Blair's 'spin doctor' Alistair Campbell who infamously declared, "We don't do God". His statement was a reflection of the fear that 'doing God' would compromise the secular-sacred divide and bring the combined influence of God and faith into the public square. Faith, according to Campbell, is strictly a private affair and God's services weren't required in a brave new secular world.

In light of history, it's important that the church and Christians 'get it right' when it comes political engagement. Below we explore two examples of 'getting it wrong' and identify a third ideal model of 'getting it right'.

GETTING IT WRONG: THEOCRACY

The first is the idea that God somehow expects the Church to 'take power' and enforce Godly laws and behaviours on society at large. In the booklet ['Neither Private nor Privileged'](#), Nick Spencer of the think-tank Theos calls this the 'theocratic temptation'. At its most extreme it can lead to a kind of religious dictatorship (think of ISIS or the worst excesses of the medieval church in Europe).

It has been frequently pointed out that this kind of abuse is not confined to religious groups. Communist and fascist states behaved in a very similar way, combining a 'religiously held' set of atheistic beliefs with a willingness to use brutal force to impose them. Nonetheless, the fact that this thinking has been used to justify evil acts committed in the name of Christ means that we must pay careful attention to the Bible's frequent warnings against abuse of worldly power.

Thankfully there are no credible voices today advocating the use of coercive power to enforce some kind of Christian state. The temptation to do so out of a misguided belief that 'the ends justify the

means' is one that we must remain mindful of. But in modern Britain and Ireland, it is probably the opposite extreme which has greater potential to cause problems.

GETTING IT WRONG: PRIVATISATION OF FAITH

The second error is to see our faith as an essentially 'private matter'. This is dangerous because it tempts us to separate our inward beliefs and spirituality from our outward words and actions. The result is an impotent and hypocritical form of Christianity which suggests that 'believing the right things' is all that God requires of us. As the letter of James tells us: "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:12, NIV).

In the political realm, a privatised faith will cause us either to feel that we are under no obligation to speak out against unrighteousness and injustice (because our beliefs are our own concern), or to look to purely human ideologies for answers to society's problems.

At the same time, there are enormous opportunities to bring Godly wisdom to a world which is grappling with profound humanitarian, economic, social, and environmental challenges. Many important social movements in history have been led or supported by Christians. If the same is to happen in our generation, we need to bring our faith in Jesus to a very public form of expression.

GETTING IT RIGHT: DISTINCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Moving beyond the temptations of theocracy or a 'private' faith is the calling to be involved yet remain distinctive; to be 'in the world but not of it'. This means participating fully in society without losing essential Christian values, identity and vision in the process. Such a confident form of Christian engagement can accept the flaws and failures of our social and political institutions, not as an excuse to compromise our beliefs, but as the starting point for a journey of redemption and restoration in a sinful world – and an opportunity to demonstrate signs of the kingdom of God.

While being called to roll up our sleeves and get on with the messy business of political life, we are also called to offer a glimpse of a different way. All too often the world accepts selfishness and greed as the basis for our political and economic systems, yet Jesus commands his followers to love our neighbour as ourselves. All too often the world offers personal gratification and fulfilment as the ultimate goal, yet Jesus teaches that loving and honouring God is our highest calling. All too often the world is resigned to relationships tainted by fear and mistrust, yet Jesus calls his followers to live in communities characterised by love and mutual dependence.

Being 'distinctively engaged' offers a dynamic and fruitful approach that avoids the fears and pitfalls that have historically limited Christian influence in politics. One which rejects the notion that 'the end justifies the means', and instead offers up all policies, issues, debates and positions as an outworking of the prayer: 'Your kingdom come, Your will be done'.

APPLICATION

By way of conclusion, we want to suggest that there are at least 3 practical applications that all Methodists should carefully consider.

1. Pray

Many of us do pray for our political leaders on an occasional basis. Could we be more intentional in our prayers for them? Not just for Presidents and Prime Ministers, but for all party leaders, for members of Parliament / the Oireachtas, for local councillors and for community activists in our own areas. For all who have any interest and influence in our political life here on these islands.

2. Vote.

In fulfilling our civic responsibility, the very least we can do is to vote in elections. It may be understandable if some should think that their one vote will make no difference to the outcome, but that fails to recognise the privilege of living in a democracy. It was Winston Churchill who famously said in 1947; *'Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....'*

In 2024 the Republic is due to have multiple elections: referendums, local Council elections, European election and Dáil elections. In NI there will also be elections, including at some point a General election. Please ensure that you are registered to vote at this stage.

The Southern Executive of CSR will be issuing a leaflet with questions relating to our concerns that you may be able to ask local candidates before elections.

3. Engage.

A few of you may have a call from God to be involved in the world of party politics – to stand for election for local councils, or for higher assemblies. May the Lord guide and direct you, and whether you are successful in the election or not, may your integrity and willingness to offer for service be a blessing to your community.

Most of us will never stand for any election, but as Christians within the communities in which God has placed us, we have the privilege and duty of engaging in our Christian service – for the blessing of those around us.

If you have the facility to use a short video there are a number of interesting ones on the Christians in Politics website – perhaps the most helpful one is called - Disagree with tea. You can download it or play it here from YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23MESHLYoJ4&t=3s>

Prayers of Intercession

O Sovereign Lord . . . *hear our prayer.*

O Lord, we confess that we have not always been willing to engage with the world of politics – a world over which You are ultimately the Sovereign Lord. Whatever reasons lie behind our failures, fear, disinterest, apathy or perhaps our unwillingness to obey the second great commandment – to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. When we have failed to use our time and talents for the benefit of the communities in which You have put us – forgive us, O Lord.

O Sovereign Lord . . . *hear our prayer.*

We pray for all who are politically active in our local communities. Local elected Councillors, activists in local community groups, volunteers who help to run food banks and other community based initiatives that try to meet the needs in our local community. (You may wish to name some specific organisations or people . . .)

O Sovereign Lord . . . *hear our prayer.*

We pray for all our politicians who have been elected to seat in Regional and National Assemblies. Give them a profound sense of both the privilege and responsibility of representing those who have elected them. May they fulfil their roles with honour and integrity, give them health and strength for their long hours of work and grant them all a sense of fulfilment as they do their work to the best of their abilities.

O Sovereign Lord . . . *hear our prayer.*

We pray for those who hold office in our government (you may wish to mention particular names or offices – depending on jurisdiction) Grant to each wisdom and insight to make the right choices in difficult circumstances. Give them courage to do what is best for the common good and not just what they think will please their own supporters. Help those in opposition parties to hold the government to account in ways that are constructive and positive, not just seeking narrow political advantage.

O Sovereign Lord . . . *hear our prayer.*

We pray for all who have some interest and influence in the wider political processes in our country – for church and community leaders, for journalists and political commentators, for lobby groups and NGOs who have an active interest in a particular area of political life – education, health care, the police service and the security of our nation, those caring for the marginalised and the poorest in our

society – grant to them all a clear sense of purpose and may they contribute in ways that are helpful to all.

O Sovereign Lord . . . *hear our prayer.*

Finally, we pray for ourselves. Some may sense a call of God to be involved in the world of politics – locally, regionally or nationally. Lord, give to them a clear call and a servant’s heart to follow and obey. For the rest of us, who may not have this particular call, give a deep sense of our civic responsibility, to pray for all those in authority and to play our part, whatever that may be, to build a prosperous, peaceful and just society. Your Kingsom come, Your will be done – on earth as it is in heaven.

In Jesus name, Amen.

Hymns and songs suggestions

All praise to our Redeeming Lord

What love could remember no wrongs we have done

All people that on earth do dwell (Ps100)

When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go, my daily labour to pursue

Lord for the years your love has kept and guided

Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you

The church of Christ in every age

Beauty of brokenness, hope for despair

For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord

Sing we the King who is coming to reign

Show me how to stand for justice

Make me a channel of your peace

Colours of day dawn into the mind