

GENERAL SYNOD

The August Riots, responding to austerity, and the state of society: current MPA work programmes

Reflections on Capitalism

1. The high profile of the Occupy protest at St Paul's Cathedral has led to many enquiries along the lines of "What does the Church of England believe about capitalism?" To help address such questions, we have posted a new reflection on theology, markets, economics and capitalism on the Church of England website, exploring some of the underlying moral issues and offering an extensive reading list and links to other resources. It can be found at:
<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1355764/churchandcapitalism.pdf>
2. For those who may wonder whether the Church of England is for or against capitalism, the paper begins by noting that there are many versions of capitalism and several theological approaches to evaluating them.

Responding to the Riots

3. During the disturbances which hit many cities during August 2011, and in the following days, the churches were prominent among those supporting local communities, their neighbours and the emergency services.
4. At the meeting of the College of Bishops in September, many bishops spoke eloquently of the work that had gone on in their dioceses in those difficult days. It was clear that the extent and variety of local church responses was impressive.
5. The bishops asked MPA to develop a report in response to the disturbances and their aftermath. The Revd Dr Andrew Davey has consequently visited churches in areas affected by the disturbances listening to the stories of those "on the ground". He has also digested many of the reports from diverse sources which have attempted to analyse the events and those involved and to put the riots into a social and political context.
6. MPA's report will not emulate the statistical and conceptual analyses which others are better equipped to produce. Instead, we are working on a practical and theological report which will show what churches actually did, and go on to reflect on what these actions say about the motivation and beliefs of Christians in tense and unexpected circumstances.
7. We hope this will strike a chord at several levels. For church members, we want to communicate the theological significance of how churches responded, often instinctively, within their communities at a time of extreme social stress. We hope that these actions on behalf of others will be read by those beyond the church as evidence of how faith in Christ translates into service for the common good. It will also challenge the church to understand the ministry and leadership that has been offered, and is needed, in what could be angry, anxious and volatile times.

8. This work should be completed in the first few weeks of 2012 and the Business Committee will be asked to consider how best to make it available to Synod members and whether a debate at a later group of sessions would be justified.

Resourcing Christian Community Action – Launch

9. At a fringe meeting during the February 2012 Group of Sessions, we will be launching a new interactive website resource for parishes and church groups who want to get involved in action to serve their local community but do not want to reinvent the wheel.
10. This follows the debate in November 2010 on “The Big Society” when a Following Motion called for such a resource. Thanks to a generous (anonymous) benefactor, we have been able to conduct an intensive research project, led by Prof Hilary Russell, into the extent and variety of Christian social action projects around the country and to distil the learning from their hard-won experience so that it can be available to all.
11. The website is designed so that users can begin with any of the numerous questions which prompt local action. It may be: “We have many unemployed young people/ lonely elderly people/ young mothers in our parish, what could we do to help?”, “We find ourselves meeting drug users, ex-offenders, asylum seekers, how can the church improve their lives?” It may be that parishes have an under-used hall, or find their local facilities closing..... all will be able to use the site to answer questions and see what others have done and are doing.
12. Further launch events will happen after Synod and the site will include a downloadable Powerpoint presentation so that others can share the site with potential users.

Anglican Social Theology Revisited

13. Many in the church see parallels between the current economic and social difficulties and the situation in the 1980s when the Church of England was widely seen as a leader in serving local communities and arguing the case of the poor and marginalised. Although there are many differences between then and now, there are also several important parallels. Many who were active at that time felt that they were inadequately resourced theologically – too reliant on a tradition forged in England between the Wars and on an often ill-digested Liberation Theology which did not transplant easily into a Western context.
14. A number of established theologians are already exploring how best to express the Anglican Tradition of Social Theology for today. This may build on familiar foundations (such as Archbishop William Temple’s work in the 1930s and ‘40s) but must also take account of the rise of different approaches to social theology and the ways in which the relationship between church and society has changed and continues to change.
15. At the instigation of the Urban Bishops’ Panel, we have begun conversations with interested academics, from different parts of the Anglican theological spectrum, with a view to a piece of collaborative work which will serve the church in its ministry and mission.

16. This work has only just begun. We hope that the group of theologians will have been formed by the time Synod meets, and must then agree a *modus operandi* and intended outcomes. It would be realistic to expect some substantial findings from this work by the time Synod meets in February 2013 – probably preceded by an earlier report on progress.

Other work

17. MPA is involved in much other work connected with these themes. Our recent work responding to the Health Bill and the Welfare Bill has sought to articulate the church's concerns for the most vulnerable whilst remaining alert to the hard choices faced by any government in these economic times. Some of the work on Health will contribute to the debate at Synod this February.
18. We continue to stay close to the government's "Big Society" agenda, which continues, even though the title has slipped off the headlines. And we are working with a number of thinkers, at different points on the political spectrum, who agree that the times we live in require stronger communities, revived intermediate institutions and a renewed recognition of the importance of religion in generating a moral society. MPA is working with a group of bishops who are negotiating with a major think-tank to study the specific contribution of the Church of England to the social institutions of society. This project would inform, and be informed by, the theological work outlined in paragraphs 13-16 above.
19. As 2012 progresses, the MPA Council and staff will be working to define the kind of contributions which we can best make in difficult social times – whether resourcing local action in new ways or engaging with government, thinkers and others to reshape the way we talk about the church, our communities and our society.

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January 2012

**Published by the General Synod of the Church of England
and on sale at the Church House Bookshop**

31 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BN

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£1