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News

'Challenge exaggeration, distortion and half-truth' - General Election 2017 round-up

How should we approach the General Election campaign? A number of organisations are aiming to resource Christians in the run up to voting on 8 June - here's a flavour of what they've been saying

The Joint Public Issues Team

The Joint Public Issues Team released a document called *This is a Time*. We now face questions as Christian disciples, it stated, not only about how we should vote, but what we and our churches should be doing and saying during the campaign.

To help our thinking, the document offered six brief reflections on key biblical themes.

It covered topics such as voter fatigue, disagreeing well, looking at issues other than Brexit, and the call on God's people to be a prophetic voice beyond the election campaign, when the task of government begins again.

One of the key principles that JPIT has sought to embrace as churches working together 'is to challenge narratives, assumptions and policies that seek to stigmatise and misrepresent others'. JPIT has done this consistently through its campaigns in recent years, such as Truth and Lies and Enough. That message was here again:

'During this election campaign, as a Christian people, what role do we have in challenging exaggeration, distortion and half-truth on the part of politicians and key media outlets?

'How do we guard ourselves and others against the harmful impact of such narratives and claims?'

JPIT will be adding further resources in the coming weeks.

Baptists Together

There is now a dedicated election section on the Baptists Together website, featuring reflections and prayers.

In the first reflection, Baptist minister Phil Jump suggests we might engage in the forthcoming election campaign aware of three key realities: we are world citizens, we are people of truth, we are people of prayer

A reflection and a prayer will be published each week.

Look out too for reflections in The Baptist Times.

Evangelical Alliance

The Evangelical Alliance said it is 'hoping to provoke thousands of conversations on what kind of society we want as the UK heads to the polls on 8 June.'

The Alliance calls on Christians to fully engage in the election and across the four nations of the UK take the opportunity to speak hopefully, and with vision for the future.

Steve Clifford, general director of the Evangelical Alliance, said,

'As unexpected as this election may be, it provides a chance for Christians to take part in debating the future of our society.'

'This is a chance for us to speak hope into a society that is so often searching for meaning. Between now and 8 June we can consider what the political parties are proposing, and what vision they are offering for our society.'

In the coming weeks the Evangelical Alliance will also be releasing resources to help churches consider how the election provides opportunities and challenges for our society.

Tearfund

Global development charity Tearfund called on all parties to keep focusing on global poverty and the environment.

It said the election should be about more than just Brexit, and urged Christians to think about global poverty and climate change before voting.

Tearfund's Head of Advocacy Paul Cook said,

'This election will undoubtedly be framed around the UK's departure from the European Union.

'But, as crucial as the Brexit negotiations will be, we cannot allow them to overshadow other vital issues like tackling global poverty and climate change.

'Tearfund is calling on all parties to focus on helping the poorest people in the world by reaffirming their commitments to fulfil our Paris agreement promises on climate change and continuing to support spending 0.7% of GDP on overseas development.

'This election is a great opportunity for Christians to remind their local candidates to deliver on promises made in the Paris Agreement on climate change and continue to champion international development by providing generous overseas aid.'

'Be part of the solution to loneliness'

Churches are being encouraged to tackle isolation by signing up to the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness

Before her death last year Jo formed an independent, cross-party Commission of MPs and charities to highlight the fact that we can all do something to help lonely people in our community.

The Commission has been taken forward in Jo's memory by Rachel Reeves MP from Labour and Seema Kennedy MP from the Conservatives in order to, in Jo's words, 'turbo charge the public's awareness of loneliness.'

The commission's slogan is 'Start a Conversation' - and now five Christian charities are aiming to mobilise churches to do just that.

In a joint statement, the charities want Christians to 'help themselves and others around them – to become part of the solution – whether through talking to a neighbour, visiting an old friend, or just making time for people they meet.'

The charities are Linking Lives UK, Livability, Pilgrims' Friend Society, The Bible Reading Fellowship and Capital Mass.

Linking Lives UK emerged from the Link Visiting Scheme, a successful charity initiated in 1998 through Woodley Baptist Church in Berkshire.

Its National Coordinator Jeremy Sharpe said, 'This is a significant opportunity for churches to be salt and light in our communities.'

‘Collectively, churches are probably already the single most powerful movement of people reaching out to support isolated older people and we are calling on people to make this visible by signing up to the Jo Cox Commission campaign to start a conversation.’

Already, churches in the UK are doing more to address loneliness and isolation than any other social issue, with 87 per cent of churches having informal or organised activities in place[1].

Our church’s work with refugees

Olton Baptist Church in has been intentionally helping asylum seekers and refugees for six years. This is its story

How it began - the allotment project

Our intentional support of AS&Rs began with two church members who had a passion for welcoming the stranger. They took on a double plot with a small shed at the local allotments and invited a few AS&Rs to join them – to work the ground, grow some veg and enjoy a place of safety and friendship. Some came to drink tea and chat, others came to dig because it reminded them of working their own land. The shared activity also allowed those who had suffered trauma to enjoy company without having to talk in any depth.

As the allotment project continued, other church members started to be involved in AS&R related groups. A few began to help at a Solihull Churches Together drop-in for asylum seekers obliged to report at the UK Border Agency’s Midlands centre. Another church member landed a job at nearby AS&R support organisation. A handful of church members were trained as befrienders by Restore, the Birmingham Churches Together AS&R support charity. This last connection has been especially important as we have sought advice from Restore on numerous occasions.

Growing, low level support

Gradually, we encountered an increasing number of AS&Rs. Some we knew for a brief season, while others developed strong friendships with people in the church. Apart from providing the bus fare to get to the allotment project, we have never guaranteed any form of financial or practical support. Instead, a number of people in the church give low-level support to those they have built a relationship with, such as the provision of a bus pass or a phone top-up (without the ability to be in contact or to travel, relationship-building is extremely hard), or giving lifts, or helping with access to local services, or helping fill in forms. On a couple of occasions, we have written to local MPs to ask for their assistance in progressing a claim or in challenging government processes.

Many AS&Rs have contact with us only through the allotment project. But some have asked to attend church, and a sizeable handful has become part of our worshipping congregation. Two have been baptised, three are now church members. They have variously joined our worship band and our children's team and our outreach to a residential home. Six came along to our church weekend away – perhaps the first holiday they have had in years. You can read what this has meant to one asylum seeker below.

Alongside this natural development, the church's teaching has frequently focussed on the theme of welcoming the stranger. We eventually signed up at a church meeting to a charter of support for AS&Rs, formally placing welcome of the stranger on the church's list of priorities.

In one case only so far, an asylum seeker has been accommodated by a couple in the church. The asylum seeker already had a strong friendship with the couple involved and expectations were openly discussed before this began. It proved both costly and enriching to the couple who acted as hosts for six months.

Our mistakes

Behind this story lie many setbacks and mistakes.

- We have sometimes been taken for granted or not told the truth.
- We have realised that some church volunteers are vulnerable themselves and need guarding.
- We have felt powerless in the face of mental health difficulties.
- We have had to deal with anger within ourselves at the injustice of what we have seen and heard.
- We have found ourselves drawn in alarmingly to the needs of others as it becomes apparent we are the only ones offering support.
- We have been guilty of leaving the integration of AS&Rs to a few overburdened volunteers.
- We have had to deal with suspicion and conflict among the different ethnic groups we are reaching.
- And of course, we have had to challenge our own prejudices, assumptions and sense of entitlement.

The vowels of grace

Finally, there is a phrase, the 'vowels of grace', that has become useful to us. Welcoming the stranger, integrating those of other cultures, and supporting the marginalised can often be hard work.

We have learnt to embrace the reality that 'grace' is spelt not only with an A and an E, but also an I, O and a U. Those who exhibit grace become familiar with Awkwardness, Embarrassment, Inconvenience, Offence and Uncertainty.

When we are tempted to complain or walk away, reminding each other of this group of words has helped us to count the cost but still persevere. It is worth it, for when all is said and done, we have discovered that we have been enriched as we have demonstrated grace.

As the marginalised among us, the AS&Rs have caused us to sharpen our faith, learn generosity and develop an openness of spirit. Our otherwise homogeneous middle class church culture needs their participation as much as they need our welcome.

A story from an African asylum seeker:

“Since being befriended, my life has completely changed. I have become a part of Olton Baptist church and found a new family – people that love me and trust me. In my personal opinion, I believe that churches have to stand together and speak into politics just to make sure people are treated fairly. What I have found helpful about OBC is the way people treated me like a human being, contrary to what I experienced in all the three detention centres I have been through since claiming asylum.

I now feel confident because I have a new family who believe in me and are all helping me integrate into church life. I am saying this because many people will not realise how important little things they do can be – like saying hello, or just talking to you and treating you as a person. I would like the church to see how powerful their ministry of welcome is to those who have known only hostility since they arrived in Britain.”

‘We are God’s craftsmanship’

Ministers from the Central Baptist Association shared their stories at the April Baptist Steering Group

Jacqui Green from Stony Stratford Community Church (close to Milton Keynes) shared how they are a loving family filled with the Holy Spirit. They are a Charismatic community and their prophets will regularly go out on to the streets to pray for those God has placed on their hearts. That is not an adult only expression of God’s love – their Sunday School regularly does the same.

The church decided to remove ‘Baptist’ from their name in an effort to connect more directly with their community. It has recently enabled five baptisms to happen.

When Michael Hogg arrived at Wollaston Baptist Church 14 years ago it soon became apparent change was needed. Having to break the ice on the outside toilets

was one way that was made known! Their story was one of carefully listening to God over ten years.

In that time, the way forward was made known – knock the building down and start again (pictured). This was a painful decision, but they followed in obedience and since 2012 when it was completed they have seen why God wanted a new pot for an old plant. Apart from the growth of groups they now run, they support local businesses and hold events that bring up to 500 people.

‘We are God’s craftsmanship’ and ‘revival is happening one person at a time’ was the way Lisa Kerry described Croxley Green Baptist Church. A Baptist nun established the church during the war years as she wanted to give hope at a time of darkness.

Since then this loving, traditional church in a picturesque, traditional community has had a long obedience in the same direction. They have had 40 years of holiday club and it has always been filled within a day. Despite the area and church being a place where many aspects of life have stayed the same, Lisa shared stories of the people they are walking with where they are now having to support and reflect into the complexities of contemporary society. We may well hear more from them next year as the 2018-19 Baptists Together President will be Dave Gregory, the Senior Minister.

David Skinner has been at Houghton Regis Baptist Church for eight years and a changing landscape literally and metaphorically describes their ministry. They have moved from being exclusively white working class to now being significantly multicultural. They engage with the issues of their area where there is high deprivation.

When David started the church was supported significantly by Home Mission, but they no longer need a grant as they have grown. As part of this God has placed on their hearts a desire to pioneer and plant a community when two huge new expansions of the area begin shortly.

New volume on Baptist history and heritage

Challenge and Change: English Baptist life in the Eighteenth Century charts the development of Baptist life during an exciting and strategic period

Challenge and Change is a multi-authored work edited by Peter Morden and Stephen Copson which builds on the earlier Baptist Historical Society (BHS) volume English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century, written by Dr Raymond Brown. The new volume is dedicated to Dr Brown, in gratitude to him for his work as a Baptist historian.

Dr Morden, Acting Principal, Spurgeon's College, said that while the new book is aimed especially at Baptist ministers and Ministers-in-Training, it is of interest to all Baptists. Worship, mission, politics, culture, family life and relationships to other Christians are all explored. 'There is much here to stimulate those who are seeking to be faithful and creative as they serve Christ today,' he said.

The launch took place on Saturday (25 March) at a study conference on the 18th-century Baptist leader, Dan Taylor, sponsored by the BHS and the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage at Regent's Park College.

Dr Brown, formerly a Spurgeon's College principal, was at the conference in person and was presented with a copy of the book. Dr Morden paid tribute to him, not only as a historian, but also as a pastor, preacher, and college principal.

'Dr Brown combines great scholarly gifts with a pastor's heart and has been an example and encouragement to many', he declared. Professor Paul Fiddes also paid tribute on behalf of Regent's Park College.

Baptisms

Bishop's Stortford Baptist Church, Herts: Deborah Hunt

Burwell Baptist Church, Ipswich: Daniel Gonzalez Norris

Cemetery Road Baptist Church, Sheffield: Babak, Vahdat, Ali Reza, Mehdi, Farhad, Hossein, Masoud, Hossein, Amir, Daban, Hamid, Jutyar, Shahin, Ali Reza, Davoud, Shaxawan

Cranham Baptist Church, Upminster: Charmaine Adjetey

Dereham Baptist Church, Norfolk: Paul Frampton

Doncaster Baptist Church, Yorkshire: Christopher Houghton, Anthony Blakesley

Hope Baptist Church, Stourbridge (formerly Hanbury Hill and Halesowen Baptist Churches): Hannah Davies, Janis Nicholas and David Nicholas

Mill Hill East Church, London: Nasir, Angela McColgan, Nimona Aberra, Olivia Grell, Courtney Collins, Simon Duffy, Ben Seabright, Sam Giddins, Amanda Ogede

New Milton Baptist Church, Hampshire: Marion Elliott, Jim Cade, Jean Cade, John Ealing, Di Ealing

Pinchbeck Baptist Church, Lincolnshire: Jeannine Jenkins, Rosie Smith, Karen Davis, Liz Styles

Stockport Baptist Church, Cheshire: Afshin, Ladan, Mohammad, Mehdad, Sohail, Mojde and Hossein

Streatham Baptist Church, London: Samuel Adefowora, Sandra Boettcher, Laura Johnson, Micah Pilgrim, Marvis Mutungi, Yvette Njomo

Whitley Bay Baptist Church, Tyne and Wear: Pamela Smith & Neil Hamilton

Know anyone preparing for baptism? Check out our range of cards

Baptism stories

Daniel Gonzalez Norris (23) was baptised on Easter day at Burwell Baptist Church (Ipswich) just a couple of months after his younger brother Marc.

Daniel grew up in a Christian home. He made a personal commitment when doing a Bible study with his parents aged 10 but admitted that his faith had often become separated from the rest of his life.

Whilst at university he has come to a settled decision to follow Christ. He concluded his testimony by saying: "I want to let you know today that the power of the cross is life-changing, no matter your background. I have always known God, and yet throughout my life, I have fallen so short of his standard. But his grace is like nothing else I have ever experienced. Following Jesus is so much more than anything that you could be conditioned to believe. And it's in knowing and accepting that grace that you will find complete fulfilment, hope and peace, just as I did."

The Revd Chris Johnson was accompanied in the pool by Daniel's and Marc's mother Sue. Their enthusiasm and Daniel's height conspired to create a minor tidal wave which fused the church electrics!

Pray for Daniel as he returns to university to complete his studies.

Death

HEATH, the Revd Maurice Heath

The Revd Maurice William Heath died on 8 March 2017, aged 88 years. The funeral service was held at Pentref Baptist Church, Newbridge-on-Wye, on Friday, 31 March, 2017. He was a former President of the English Wing of the Baptist Union of Wales and Minister of Llandrindod Wells Baptist Church, 1968-1998.