

Who is my neighbour?

A Study Guide to the
House of Bishops'
Pastoral Letter for the
General Election 2015

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neighbour?

A Letter from the
House of Bishops
to the People and
Parishes of the Church
of England for the
General Election 2015

Introduction

What is this Pastoral Letter for?

On Shrove Tuesday 2015, the House of Bishops issued a Pastoral Letter about the forthcoming General Election to be held on 7th May. Who is my Neighbour? is addressed to the Parishes and People of the Church of England. However, the bishops add:

'... as the Church of England strives to be a church which seeks the good of all the people of this country, we hope that others, who may not profess church allegiance, will nevertheless join in the conversation and engage with the ideas we are sharing here'

So the Pastoral Letter aims to help anyone engage with the General Election, because the election affects every one of us.

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What is it about?

The bishops' letter comes out of their own experience. In their dioceses they have found that people are increasingly alienated from politics in general; that people are also cynical about politicians and largely unmoved by the things politicians talk about. Yet the bishops also know their local politicians well enough to know that, with very few exceptions, they are motivated by a deep desire to make life better for most people.

So the letter tries to think about what the problems are and to give some pointers to the kind of vision that could make us all more interested in politics and want to get involved and which would serve the country better. The bishops' letter does not suggest which party to vote for, nor is it a shopping list of policies which the bishops would like to see enacted. Above all, the letter urges Christians to vote, even if it is not possible to cast a vote for the vision that most inspires us.

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How to use this Study Guide

Only by reading the Letter in full will really make sense of what the bishops are saying. So this shorter Study Guide is intended to help start conversations and reflections, not provide a substitute for reading the Letter! You can use the Guide either as an individual or for study in groups, but it would be good to talk about and study the letter, not only with fellow church members but with your friends, neighbours and others in the community. It can help anyone who is concerned about the forthcoming election and feels, perhaps, that it is difficult to make any difference to our political life.

This Guide breaks the bishops' letter down into its main sections (see box below). Each section comes with a short summary of what the bishops say and offers a few conversation starters and questions for consideration, - but hopefully the conversations will go in all sorts of interesting directions after that..

If you are convening or leading a group you might want to choose one or two of the sections for a single session or spread the conversation over a number of sections. If time is limited you could choose a few of the conversation starters for a more general discussion.

If you would like to use this guide in the context of a Bible Study there are some suggestions for useful passages of scripture at the end of the Guide. There is also a prayer for the General Election which you might like to use as part of any study session.

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1. Who is my Neighbour?

(Paragraphs 1–5)

The bishops' Pastoral Letter introduces itself in this way:

'How should Christian men and women approach the General Election to be held on 7 May 2015? ... This letter is not a shopping list of policies we would like to see. It is a call for the new direction that we believe our political life ought to take.'

The letter deliberately sets out to explore a big, hopefully inspiring, vision and to lift political discussion beyond merely bargaining about who should get what at election time. It calls on church people to use their votes thoughtfully and prayerfully and with the good of others in mind. (Paragraphs 1–5)

Starting the conversation

- Thinking back: what did you hope might happen at the last election?
- How well do you know your current Member of Parliament and their record serving your constituency?
- Who are the people in your local community who are already talking about this upcoming election?
- Do you think faith has a role in how (or if) you use your vote?

2. Christian faith and political activity

(Paragraphs 6–21)

Here the bishops set out a theological case for the church speaking about politics – challenging the common claim that 'religion and politics don't mix'. They note that religion remains enormously important in world affairs – although it is not always a force for good (Paragraphs 6–9) – and go on to outline a Christian world view (Paragraphs 10–21) which might inform political thinking. The bishops say:

'We do not set ourselves up as possessing superior knowledge about the state of the world... (but) we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is enormously relevant to the questions which the coming Election will throw into sharp relief.'

Starting the conversation

- What do you think about the idea that ‘religion and politics don’t mix’?
- Do you think church leaders can have useful insights for the political debate?
- When you’re deciding who to vote for, where does your faith come into the decision?

3. Apathy, cynicism and politics today (Paragraphs 22–32)

The bishops explore an interesting paradox: most of the politicians they meet are sincerely trying to do their best to improve the lives of their fellow men and women. But the public attitude to politics is increasingly despairing, lumping all politicians together and becoming disillusioned with their ability to do anything to make a real difference. Complaints that ‘they’re all the same’ reflect a the smaller numbers of people who bother to vote at all. The bishops’ decision to prepare and circulate a Pastoral Letter for the Election largely came out of dismay about how people have disengaged from the processes of democracy.

Starting the conversation

- Why do you think people get fed up with politics and politicians?
- The bishops talk about ‘retail politics’. What do you think about that?
- What’s more important to your vote: specific policies, or the overall vision that a party sets out? Does having faith make any difference to how you think about it?

4. Visions worth voting for (Paragraphs 33–42)

The bishops’ letter points to two post-war administrations that changed the way we thought about ourselves and the society we live in – the Labour victory in 1945 which led to the founding of the NHS and the welfare state, and the Conservative victory of 1979 which stressed the importance of

market economics and challenged the growth of the state. The bishops argue that, 35 years after that Conservative victory, neither model meets the needs of today and it is time for a new political vision that captures the strengths (and avoids the weaknesses) of both. The ‘missing link’, they suggest, is that we need to reverse the way power has built up in the state or the corporate sector, and return it to local communities and neighbourhoods.

Starting the conversation

- Imagine what sort of new political vision for our society might be good for the issues facing us today?
- Thinking about where you live: how do you feel about the balance between what the state does, what the market economy does and what local and voluntary action does?
- Where do you see power struggles in your particular area?
- How might your faith help you imagine the future?
- What would you look for from politicians if you wanted to vote for a new, inspiring political vision?

5. A Society of Strangers?

(Paragraphs 43–48)

This is how the bishops describe the kind of society we seem to be becoming – a Society of Strangers where individuals compete against each other as consumers.

Starting the conversation

- What do you think makes a ‘Society of Strangers’ happen?
 - Does a ‘Society of Strangers’ fit your own community? Why/Why not?
 - Where does faith come into a ‘Society of Strangers’?
 - What difference could voting in an election make to the sort of society we would want to be?
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6. A Community of Communities (Paragraphs 49–57)

In contrast to a 'Society of Strangers', the bishops suggest that it would be better to work towards being a 'Community of Communities'. They suggest that this means recognising that 'place' matters to people's sense of identity and that power should be exercised at the most local level that is effective. They want to see power and decision making taking place at a level where people can feel more involved. They are not suggesting that this answers all our political problems but moving in this direction can help stop us becoming, more and more, a society of strangers.

Starting the conversation

- Imagine what a Community of Communities might look like. Can your faith help you with those ideas?
- What do you think might be good about power being exercised at a local level?
- Does 'place' matter to you? What about the 'post-code lottery'?
- Where do you hear parties talking about local decision making and how might that help you decide how to vote?

7. The Person in Community (Paragraphs 58–64)

The bishops argue that:

'Our hope for a stronger politics of community is driven by the conviction, founded on experience and evidence, that individuals flourish best when they belong with confidence to communities which extend well beyond the nuclear family... We are most human when we know ourselves to be dependent on others.'

This section of the Pastoral Letter tries to balance the things we need for our wellbeing as individuals with the need for a stronger sense of community.

Starting the conversation

- In what sort of communities do you think people do best?
- What do you think about the bishops' idea about how we depend on others and others depend on us? How does faith help you think about that?
- Have a look at the examples the bishops give in the letter. Which aspects of life do you think most need the support of strong relationships in the wider community?
- Where do you feel a strong sense of community: in your street, with your family, at work, in school, at church? What about when you go to the polling station?

8. The Community of Nations

(Paragraphs 65–74)

The Church of England is part of the worldwide Anglican Community. The bishops are very conscious that seeking the good of the people of Britain needs to go alongside a concern for the wellbeing of people across the world. This section of the letter extends the idea of a Community of Communities to think about the community of the nations. It particularly considers relationships among the nations of Europe who share a long history moulded by the Christian faith, and it considers how the needs of developing nations can be factored into domestic politics. It also calls for a fresh debate about how the possession (and threat of use) of nuclear weapons fits the global politics of today.

In the media coverage immediately after the letter was published, this section was one of the most controversial. Any one of the following questions could stir up debate lasting a very long time!

Starting the conversation

- What do you think this country's responsibilities are towards developing nations?
 - Does a shared history of Christian faith within Europe matter?
 - With the world as it is today, should we be re-thinking nuclear weapons?
 - Where do you see the parties talking about these issues and how does what they say influence your chance of voting for them?
-

9. Equality – us and them (Paragraphs 75–77)

This section of the Pastoral Letter quotes the Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, who wrote that Britain had become:

‘Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets. The rich and the poor.’

Starting the conversation

- What do you think about Disraeli’s words in today’s context?
- What do you think about the way the bishops describe ‘us’ and ‘them’?
How do you think that appears within the election campaign?
- What is your own experience of seeing people treated as ‘them’?
- Should we vote on behalf of ‘people like us’ (including ‘us’ as Christians) or think more about the needs of people who are different from us?

10. Strengthening Institutions (Paragraphs 78–87)

Here, the letter develops the bishops’ ideas about how we might see local communities strengthened further. They explore the idea of Intermediate Institutions, and use the examples of Credit Unions, Housing Associations, schools – and churches. Within this section, there are several potentially controversial suggestions, including some criticisms of the way Health and Safety legislation has been popularly misrepresented and the idea that it is possible to build community from a position of neutrality.

Starting the conversation

- How important do you think Credit Unions, Housing Associations or schools are in the place where you live?
 - What’s the role of your church/faith community/organisation in the building up of community?
 - How do you think voting in a General Election might lead to the strengthening of these Intermediate Institutions?
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11. Disagreement, diversity and coalitions

(Paragraphs 88–89)

In another short section, the Pastoral Letter looks at the potential for people who disagree on many things nonetheless to work together for the common good of others.

Starting the conversation

- What's your experience of working with people you disagree with?
- What sort of people would you not be prepared to work with?
- Can faith help us work with disagreements?
- Does disagreeing with people make a difference in how you vote?
What do you think about people making 'tactical' votes to keep a particular party out?

12. Beyond 'Left' and 'Right'

(Paragraphs 90–96)

The letter argues that ideas about stronger local communities are finding supporters on both the political left and the political right. It refers to the ideas which were known as The Big Society at the time of the 2010 General Election and suggests that they might usefully be revived.

Starting the conversation

- If members of different political parties were to find common ground how do you think that might have a positive impact where you live?
 - Would you say you were on the 'left' or 'right' politically? How does that affect how you see others who say they are politically one or the other? What about if all involved are Christians or are members of other faith communities?
 - How would you feel if a local candidate expressed his or her willingness to work with 'the opposition' when in government? Would that make you more willing to support them in an election?
-

13. History in an Old Country

(Paragraphs 97–99)

This short section deals with constitutional change, not least in the light of the recent Scottish Referendum and the immediate reactions in England. It suggests that our political institutions have evolved over a very long period and should not be tampered with for immediate political gain.

Starting the conversation

- Do you feel proud of our British political history and its institutions?
- Would you say you feel more 'British' or more 'English'? Why?
Does the Church of England have anything to do with this?
- Do you feel proud of having the chance to vote as part of a democracy?

14. Power, identities and minorities

(Paragraphs 100–105)

This section starts with a reflection on Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan from which the title of the letter is taken. It goes on to consider how we discuss questions of migration in today's politics and calls for a new dialogue about migration which asks who bears the cost of rapid social change.

Starting the conversation

- Where are immigration issues felt in your own community?
 - How difficult is it to talk frankly about immigration?
 - Do you think immigration is also a faith issue?
 - How does immigration policy affect how you might vote?
-

15. Debt and a humane economy (Paragraphs 106–114)

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the question of debt has dominated many political arguments. Since 2010, the government has introduced various austerity measures aimed at reducing levels of debt. As the bishops note, it is to the credit of our politicians that the financial crisis has been less severe in Britain than in many other European countries. But, the bishops say, the way we talk about debt has become partisan – it is possible to care equally about the levels of debt and about the burdens borne by the most vulnerable in society. They refer to three principles proposed by the General Synod to evaluate any policy aimed at reducing debt: Is it fair? Is it generous? Is it sustainable?

Starting the conversation

- How have the austerity measures taken to reduce national debt impacted on you and your family?
- How do you think different political parties can manage both to handle debt and take care of vulnerable people as well?
- Does it help you to ask ‘Is it fair? Is it generous? Is it sustainable?’ when thinking about policy matters? Do those questions help you decide how to vote? What other questions do you want to ask?

16. Our grandchildren’s future (Paragraphs 115–117)

The bishops argue here for politics to take the long term view and to think of the kind of world we want our grandchildren to inherit. They suggest that the way our economic life works today, there is too little incentive to think and plan long-term.

Starting the conversation

- What sort of world do you hope your grandchildren will live in?
 - What aspects of life today would you not want them to experience?
 - How do you think political parties could take a long term view? Can Christians help with this?
 - If you imagine that you are voting for your grandchildren’s future, how does that affect how you use your vote?
-

17. The campaign ahead

(Paragraphs 118–126)

This final section of the letter considers the General Election campaign ahead. Paragraphs 120 and 121 set out some questions that might be asked of candidates and against which the parties' manifestoes might be judged.

Starting the conversation

- What do you think about the questions suggested in relation to your own concerns?
- What other questions you would ask candidates? And what sort of replies would you be looking for?
- How are the parties and candidates you have encountered so far measuring up to these questions?

And Finally:

The Pastoral Letter urges all Christians to vote - **'even though it may be a vote for something less than the vision that inspires us'**.

The letter ends, as it began, with a quotation from St Paul's letter to the Philippians:

'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.' (Philippians 4:8)

Starting the conversation

- How does Philippians 4-8 help us think about what's at stake in this General Election?
 - In the light of the bishops' Pastoral Letter, how do you now feel about voting on May 7th?
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Engaging with Scripture

(most of these passages are referred to in the letter)

Psalm 146

Isaiah 65:17–25

Amos 8:4–6

Matthew 5:1–16

Matthew 23:23–36

Luke 10:25–37

John 10.10

Philippians 4.8

Prayers for the General Election:

Heavenly Father

source of all truth and wisdom, who knows and loves the whole creation,

watch over our nation at election time:

that truth may prevail over distortion,

wisdom triumph over recklessness

and the concerns of every person be heard.

Lord Jesus,

who chose the way of the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane,

help us to turn our backs on self interest

and to support policies that sustain the poor, the vulnerable and the frightened people of this world.

Holy Spirit,

who brought understanding among myriad peoples and languages at Pentecost,

give to all your people a passion for peace

and inspire us to work for unity and co-operation throughout the world and in our political life together.

Amen.

*Lord, we give thanks for the privileges and responsibilities of
living in a democratic society.*

*Give us wisdom to play our part at election time,
that, through the exercise of each vote,
your Kingdom may come closer.*

*Protect us from the sins of despair and cynicism,
guard us against the idols of false utopias
and strengthen us to make politics a noble calling
that serves the common good of all.*

*We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ Our Lord.
Amen.*



**This study guide has been prepared by staff of the Mission and Public Affairs Division of
the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England.**

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Philippians 4:8



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