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der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland
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5. bis 9. November 2006

R E F E R A T

zum

Schwerpunktthema

**"Gerechtigkeit erhöht ein Volk -
Armut und Reichtum"**

**The Rt Revd David Walker
Bishop of Dudley**

SPERRFRIST: Montag, 6. November 2006, 10.00 Uhr

Introduction

I am very grateful to be here in Wurzburg with you today. This is only my second visit to Germany as a bishop. My first was a little over four years ago when I came as part of a delegation from a parish in Dudley to stay with members of the Auferstehungsgemeinde (Church of the Resurrection) in the city of Bremen. I learnt from that visit how in sharing the stories of the churches in our two countries we are able not only to understand each other better but also to have fresh light shine upon our understanding of our own situations at home. I am only sorry that now, as then, my language skills are not good enough for me to be able to address you in your own tongue.

I am particularly pleased to be with you at a synod when you are discussing matters of wealth and poverty. Not only has this been a major theme of my own ministry as priest and bishop for twenty-three years but the present moment is particularly timely in that the Commission on Urban Life and Faith has reported to the Church of England General Synod earlier this year. You should already have received copies of the recommendations contained in its report "Faithful Cities". This report is intended to guide the work of the churches in England as they engage with matters of wealth and poverty in our cities over the years ahead. And although the links are not explicit we are also conscious that there is much in the report that also rings true of rural wealth and poverty.

The English Context

Faithful Cities is not the first report the Church of England has been involved in producing on this subject. In 1985 the report *Faith in the City* was very influential – even to the extent of it being denounced by a member of Mrs Thatcher's cabinet. At that time England was experiencing very high unemployment. Major industries such as coal mining and steel production had collapsed in a very short number of years. The job prospects particularly for young men leaving school in the north of England were very limited. Much social housing was in disrepair. The philosophy of Government was to create wealth that would then in due course trickle down to reach the poor. There was very little evidence to support this belief. European money was just beginning to come into the country to tackle some of these problems. Churches, including the one where I was ministering, were often at the forefront in setting up projects to retrain unemployed adults and young people.

Twenty-one years later the situation is very different. By comparison with much of the rest of Europe unemployment is quite low in England. Indeed many workers from the accession countries of Eastern Europe have been drawn to work in our country, taking on jobs that local people do not want to do: in areas such as agriculture; hotel and catering trades; food packaging. There has been substantial regeneration of the built environment. The proportion of people who own the house they live in has continued to grow steadily year on year. And whilst there are many criticisms from the churches with regard to the Government of Mr. Blair, most of us would concede that there have been real and effective changes in policy to reduce the proportion of our population living in the worst poverty. Nonetheless, the gap between the poorest and the rest of society has continued to widen. And the rapidly increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of our urban areas has led to suspicion and distrust between communities. The report by the Commission on Urban Life and Faith seeks to respond to these present circumstances.

In Good Faith

The report *Faithful Cities* begins with three 'faithful convictions'

- God is the source of all life and the One from whom all creation draws its purpose and character.
- To be human means that we are all made 'in the image and likeness of God' and that therefore each of us has an innate and irreducible dignity.
- Our traditions call us into relationship with God because human purpose is fulfilled in lives of mutuality, love and justice.

To these are added four moral precepts

- Personal and collective transformation.
- Love for neighbour.
- Care for 'the stranger'.
- Human dignity and social justice.

Faithful Capital

None of what I have just said is particularly new or unusual. However the key to understanding the report, and how the churches wish to respond to modern cities lies in the concept of *Faithful Capital*. The English churches are now very familiar with the notion of *Social Capital* as coined by the American Robert Putnam in his paper (1) *Bowling Alone*. In Putnam's terminology churches would see themselves as being reservoirs of bonding, bridging and linking capital. Alongside Putnam's language the churches have developed some further terminology. *Spiritual Capital* defines the resource added to a community by the prayerful, God-centred and committed disciples and church communities who exist within it. *Religious Capital* refers to the contribution made to localities by religious bodies as institutions with buildings, activities and key individuals. These notions have been developed by the (2) Joseph Rowntree Foundation. While some theologians from the left of the political spectrum find the use of the word "Capital" in so many forms to be dangerous, for most the language has proved useful.

Faithful Cities adds to this dictionary the term *Faithful Capital*. The English are very fond of using words that carry quite a wide range of meanings and connotations. This is where I am really sorry that my speech has had to be translated for you. In English the word "Faithful" means firstly a person who is full of faith. And so the term *Faithful Capital* represents the contribution made to our communities by men and women full of faith, living and worshipping in them. In that regard it is quite close to the notion of *Religious Capital*.

But in English the word "Faithful" is more commonly used to mean loyal, reliable, someone who does not give up under pressure, and someone who we can count on. And it is in this sense more particularly that the report uses the term. The church communities in our urban areas are faithful because they stay there and continue to serve the people year in and year out. Our poorest communities are marked by a high degree of transience: the average stay in a particular house maybe as little as eighteen months for a resident. The churches do not give up on these communities. We continue to be there praying and ministering alongside them. We are known, respected, often seen as the voice of the community. Our ministers live in the midst of these communities. Our church councils are made up of residents of them. We continue to develop and re-develop our buildings and our projects to work with them. The report argues that this *Faithful Capital* is one of the most important contributions that the church (or on occasions some other faith community) provides. Faith communities are not only physically present but are actively, dutifully and sometimes passionately, engaged in caring and campaigning for those who need care most – sometimes people who wider society has forgotten. From the Government's point of view this can be both a valuable resource and a source of discomfort. Church communities offer pathways to community cohesion and urban regeneration. On the other hand their distinctive and conflicting language of faith, values that challenge rather than support Government policy, and working styles that fail to mesh with time limited outcome driven Government schemes can pose a huge challenge.

Applying our theology

The conventional wisdom of British society speaks loudly of the need for "tolerance". The traditions of faith, established in the theological concepts I have offered, go beyond this rather passive and paternalistic notion, replacing it with the much stronger concept of hospitality. Hospitality offers a sharing across the boundaries of diversity and moves us from mere recognition of difference to a positive celebration of it.

For many years the debate about quality of life in Britain focussed almost exclusively on economic matters. Churches were often marginalised on the basis that much of our work is done by volunteers and hence cannot be measured simply in economic terms. The new Labour Government from 1997 onwards widened this by addressing first the concept of social exclusion and then advocating policies which were deemed to produce social inclusion – bringing those marginalised through poverty, ill health, disability, ethnicity or other reasons back into the mainstream of society. Through *Faithful Cities* the churches are now at the forefront of pushing this debate wider still. We are asking questions about what promotes well-being and happiness both for individuals and communities. An encouraging number of politicians are joining us in this debate. The report in particular identifies as key factors.

- Fulfilled and secure relations in personal life.
- Relations that spread beyond the personal to create good community life and relationships.
- Good health, especially mental health.
- Freedom, including the scope to participate in matters affecting ones' life.
- A philosophy of life, faith or worldview, which includes a commitment to something beyond serving one's individual needs.

But more generally we just keep asking the question as to why, as our country grows richer, its people do not become happier.

Regeneration

Despite over twenty years of experience the report recognises that churches in England have not been as successful as we would have wished in engaging in regeneration activities in ways that make a distinctive and effective contribution. Too often we have allowed ourselves to be co-opted by the latest offer of Government money. We have colluded with top down consultations where the promises that local citizens would have genuine influence and power have been repeatedly broken. The resources of our people, often in fragile inner city communities, have been stretched too far in unequal partnerships with the agencies of Government. And too often the regeneration of a neighbourhood has led to the original inhabitants being displaced by those who are in less need. Faithfulness demands a critical rather than docile partnership with the agencies of regeneration and development who ever they might be. Nevertheless, our commitment remains to make poverty history. In this mission we are glad to work hand in hand with anyone who will share those objectives.

Faithful Cities therefore calls upon the Church of England and other denominations to make a fierce commitment to staying in the urban communities of our nation and to contribute to their flourishing. We want a wide and open debate about what makes a good city and promotes the deep well being of its citizens. We wish to reclaim the language of renewal, regeneration and renaissance – words that are used more commonly in secular than religious conversations. We are called to celebrate life and faith in our urban communities and commit ourselves to calling for justice for all. We are people of vision.

Concluding remarks

You have seen the recommendations of the report. I don't wish to address those directly in this talk. Firstly because time is limited, but more importantly because *Faithful Cities* does not set out to be judged by its recommendations. They are examples of the practical outworking of the principles set forth. But this is not a report where the recommendations were devised first and then the content written to be consistent with them. Especially in sharing our thinking outside of our own country. It is the general principles and experiences that matter most.

I would like to finish by reflecting briefly on where our thinking in England remains weak; especially where I believe that you in Germany have much to offer us. I am struck by the way in which you have developed notions of justice in your report. Perhaps it says something about the relative political orthodoxies of our two nations that you have developed clarifying adjectives for that word

such as *income justice*, *opportunity justice*, *exchange justice* and above all *participatory justice*, whilst we have followed the Americans in working with the notion of *Capital*.

I think that your work also points out that we are in Britain too individualistic. The concept of solidarity, which comes out so strongly in your writings, is almost invisible in our own. At best, it is implicit. We have also been ground-down by the political orthodoxy of low taxation – especially with regard to income-based taxes. We do not adequately challenge a taxation system in which the highest rates of tax are paid by the poorest. And finally, because our own system is so different, we could learn valuable lessons from the work of your diaconal institutions.

It is often said that the British and Americans are two nations separated by a common language. I do believe that in Europe the very differences of language, and the need to translate our words, helps us to listen more closely to each others' stories and recognise what is common and what is distinctive. And in so doing we gain a clearer understanding of our own situations. I hope that today maybe a small contribution in that direction. Thank you once again for the opportunity you have given me to be with you.

(1) *The Collapse and Revival of American Community*
(London: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

(2) *Faith as social Capital. Connecting or dividing?*
(Sheffield Hallam University 2006, ISBN 10 1 86134 837 1.Policy Press)