

Opening: Politics, Withdrawal, and the City We're Called to Seek – Bishop Martyn Snow

I want to speak to you, not just about politics, but about my own sense of vocation.

Sometimes, I'm invited to speak in other dioceses, or the House of Bishops, or to General Synod – I shall be leading a debate again in July - but I tend not to share much about myself in those contexts. So I wanted this opportunity to share with you today – as the clergy with whom I share the cure of souls, and lay ministers with whom I share ministry - to say a little about my own sense of vocation. I could have invited some well known theologian or politician to start today's conference – I'm sure the content would have been much more inspiring and learned. But I value our shared ministry, and I believe that I owe it to you to say something of the journey that I've been on in recent years.

I'm a great believer that vocation is dynamic – God's call doesn't just come to us once in life and then never again. Rather God's speaks at different times and in different ways. So even those of you who have been in the one role 20 or 30 years (and we do have, I think 3 clergy, in that category in the diocese – 2 I know have just celebrated 25 years in the same parish) but even you will probably have sensed different seasons in your ministry. You may have been in the same place, serving the same people (although many will have died and many will have been born during that time), but I imagine you will have found yourself doing more or less in your local school, or in a local community group, or running different types of small groups, or experimenting with different styles of service at different points during your ministry – any or all of these things could constitute a small, but significant shift in your vocation.

VOCATIONAL CONVERSATIONS

So for me, entry into the House of Lords raised various vocational questions. To start with, if you'd asked me when I was ordained what I thought about bishops serving in the House of Lords, I would probably have been very sceptical. Waste of time, all part of our slightly dubious links to "the establishment", bishops getting distracted from their core role – would probably have been my comments. Even ten years ago, when I arrived in the diocese, I didn't really stop to think about the House of Lords, I was very happy focusing on the diocese.

So have I been seduced? Am I now about to give a defence for something I don't really believe in? What has happened?

Well, let me put it this way: did you know that every day in Parliament, this prayer is said: *Almighty God, by whom alone Kings reign, and Princes decree justice; and from whom alone cometh all counsel, wisdom, and understanding; we thine unworthy servants, here gathered*

together in thy Name, do most humbly beseech thee to send down thy Heavenly Wisdom from above, to direct and guide us in all our consultations; and grant that, we having thy fear always before our eyes, and laying aside all private interests, prejudices, and partial affections, the result of all our counsels may be to the glory of thy blessed Name, the maintenance of true Religion and Justice, the safety, honour, and happiness of the King, the publick wealth, peace and tranquillity of the Realm, and the uniting and knitting together of the hearts of all persons and estates within the same, in true Christian Love and Charity one towards another, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

So, we pray daily for 1. The king; 2. Parliament; 3. Maintenance of true religion and justice; 4: the prosperity, peace and tranquillity of the UK; 5: **the unity of all people in the UK in love.**

Several theological convictions are presupposed by these petitions. The first is that political authority is real and legitimate, and that those who hold it bear genuine responsibility for the nation entrusted to their care. The second is that such authority is accountable to a transcendent standard which it does not establish for itself, and from which no political success can exempt it. The third is a sober anthropology: the prayer names two notable corruptions of public life – private interests and prejudices— and assumes that those who govern are not immune from any of them. All these presuppositions are, I contend, backed by Scripture and evidenced in our tradition (those much blood has been shed at various points in our history over how these principles should be applied).

So, the Church of England honours the institutions of the realm while subjecting them, and itself, to the judgement of God.

There are many reasons I could give for Bishops being in the House of Lords – but this is my starting point. Does this mean that the House of Lords shouldn't undergo reform – absolutely not – there is much that needs to change. Does this mean that bishops should be exempt from any reform – absolutely not. I suspect the debate about bishops in the House of Lords will grow in volume in the coming years – and it may well be that our numbers will be reduced and other faith representatives introduced. That would be understandable, and I won't die in a ditch over defending our current position.

But in terms of my own vocation – I have come to see this calling as an extension of my original calling to be a missionary. At one time, that calling took me to West Africa to work with young people, then to inner city Sheffield and a very diverse parish. Then to the role of supporting others in mission as an archdeacon and suffragan bishop. Then to the very public representative role of diocesan bishop. Now to the House of Lords – to be involved in the third, fourth and fifth marks of mission.

Now, we could do a whole critique of the marks of mission – in fact, I do that with students at St Mellitus East Midlands when I teach there. But whatever the gaps, and weaknesses of this as a statement of God’s holistic mission, it does help to remember that not every local church will fulfil all five marks of mission. No local church can be a full expression of the body of Christ – rather its only as churches work together in a town, a city, a diocese, a national church and internationally, that they express the fulness of the body of Christ.

Which mark of mission, I wonder, are you focusing on at this moment in your ministry? And how might other churches within your Minster Community, or more widely, partner with you in that area of mission, or offer something to you in the areas where you are weaker?

For me, as I say, in this season of my ministry, the third, fourth and fifth mark of mission have come to the fore – not because I have radically changed my theology – far from it. Rather it’s what my role demands, and I have increasingly sensed God calling me to focus my ministry in this way.

So a question for you – and a moment to stop and think about it? Please answer honestly – don’t just give the answer you think you’re supposed to give!

How are you feeling about the state of our country?

Straw poll: 1. Hopeful – future is bright? 2. Pessimistic – future is bleak? 3. Confused – future is getting more and more uncertain?

When the think tank More in Common polled 20,000 people, in May 2025, and asked them to describe Britain in one or two words, the most popular answer was ‘broken’.¹ ‘Divided’, ‘struggling’ and ‘mess’ were next on the list. It’s a sad description.

And I would want to argue that if England feels ‘broken’ to so many, it is not just wholly the fault of successive governments (though their policies have had a significant impact). Nor is it just the fault of global businesses or social media or any other single group. Rather, it is a complex mix of many different factors.

One factor is the general mistrust of leaders & institutions – including clergy and the church.

More in Common’s research also highlighted the extremely high levels of distrust in almost all British institutions. 87 per cent of Britons say that they have little to no faith in politicians.² This distrust goes beyond healthy scepticism and extends to suspicion about their motives –

¹More in Common. (2025, July 17). Shattered Britain.

https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/cjfnk34a/shattered-britain-17072025_compressed.pdf

² Ibid, p.31

most people wouldn't trust Kier Starmer, Kemi Badenoch or Nigel Farage to watch their bag.³ And each pillar of our democracy, including MPs, Councillors, the House of Lords, and the news media, are more likely to be distrusted than trusted by the public - More in Common identified a widespread sense that the political and economic status quo is no longer working for people "like them".

So it's worth remembering when you hear the press being negative about the church or seeming to delight in every scandal concerning a vicar – this is part of a much bigger picture. All those who exercise leadership in society face extreme challenges at this moment in time – it's not just the church, it's every institution from the monarchy, to the BBC, the police to civil servants. We could spend a lot of time exploring why this is the case – there are a lot of books out there which attempt to diagnose the problem.

But I'm pleased that one of seminars is going to explore the way one charity – Citizens UK – is seeking to find a new way to get people involved in their communities and in decision making. Similarly, another one of our seminars is going to explore more about safeguarding – you may wonder what's that got to do with politics – but we're including it because it is probably the one issue above all others which explains why people have lost trust in the church and church leaders. And the question of how we earn back the trust of our nation, is not in itself the reason we take safeguarding seriously, but it is one of the potential by-products.

Of particular concern in this general state of distrust is the scape-goating of certain minority groups. Many Global Majority Heritage people speak of growing increasingly fearful in a society where politicians and others openly blame immigrants for every ill. And certain religious groups have also been targeted – most notably Jews and Muslims. And there is clear evidence that global events and the politics of other nations have a direct impact on local communities in the UK.

Our society, it would seem, is becoming more and more polarised. We're not quite at the point of our outright civil war – though friends in America are using that language to describe the way that Democrats and Republicans will have nothing to do with each other, and are increasingly resorting to violence. But the warning flags are flying in our own country.

Some of you will know, that alongside my role in House of Lords, I've also been asked by the Archbishops to chair a Bishops' Working Group on "Promoting Unity in our Nation" i.e. a group to look at how the CofE responds to increasing polarisation in society. And we're doing this because the Church of England has always had a deep commitment to the flourishing of every person who calls this nation home. And individuals can only flourish

³ Ibid, p.31

when society as a whole is at peace. Hence the prayer of 2 Timothy 2: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” 1 Timothy 2:1

But today, we have a seminar on social cohesion, and in particular the work that the St Philip’s Centre is doing to help develop a movement called Intercultural City – applying some of the lessons that we’ve been learning in the diocese about intercultural worshipping communities, to the life of our city. I’m pleased to say that the movement is gathering momentum, so if you want to hear more about it, and explore how your church could get involved, do go along to that seminar.

And then finally, an important factor in Britain’s increasing divisions is rising levels of poverty and inequality.

In 2018, a 57-year-old man from Nottingham called Errol Graham starved to death after the DWP stopped his benefits because he missed an appointment. He was only found when bailiffs knocked down the door because he hadn’t paid his rent. He weighed four and a half stone when he died.

Amongst his possessions was a handwritten note he was going to take to his Work Capability Assessment, in which he wrote:

“I get up as late as I can so that the day doesn’t seem too long. On a good day, I open my curtains but mostly they stay shut. I find it hard to leave the house on bad days. I don’t want to see anyone or talk to anyone.

I’m afraid to put my heating on and sit with a quilt around me to keep me warm. I dread any mail coming, frightened of what it might be because I don’t have the means to pay and this is very distressing. Most days I go to bed hungry and I feel I’m not even surviving how I should be.

I have come on my own today because I have been unable to share how I feel with anyone because I don't think they would understand. It has made me ill having to come here today. It's a very big ordeal for me.”

For Errol, the world was not a gift to be received, but something to be feared. Other people were not a source of connection and belonging, but of shame. And the social security system did not act as a safety net but a means of punishment and even humiliation.

Poverty and shame mutually reinforce one another – if you are shamed because of your poverty, then you’re likely to withdraw to avoid further pain and rejection. But that also makes it harder to seek help.

So having a benefit system that treats everyone with suspicion, and public debate that divides people into taxpayers and scroungers does not make people “pull themselves up by their bootstraps”. It exacerbates the problem – Universal Credit’s system of sanctions, for example, makes people **less** not more likely to find sustained employment.

What churches can offer, then, is not just charity or material help, but a community where people living in poverty can learn to recognise themselves as a gift in and of themselves, and discover what gifts they have to offer to others.

A priest at St Mary’s Workington – a post-industrial town in Cumbria with high unemployment – put this well on a BBC 4 programme, when she described the breakfast club the church run.

“To feel welcomed, valued and safe” Revd Sharon Murphy said, “I think you have to feel like you’re wanted, you’re needed. With each person who comes in, we think about what gift has God given in them that they can offer to the rest of us here – not just to the church but to the rest of the community. So, I think it’s about both sides, a warm welcome and realising people are a gift from God – God sends them to us and he gives them gifts they can use [...] if people feel wanted, that’s a big step into belonging”.

The seminar by Trussell Trust will take you much deeper into this territory — into what poverty actually looks like on the ground, and how the church can respond. And Trussell have just produced a new resource called *Walking Humbly* – it’s all about how we move from serving others, to seeing them as a gift to us and as having gifts to offer us – including them in our community life so they know they are valued and loved.

So finally, I return to where I started, but with a wider question:

Should Christians be involved in politics?

The theologian Luke Bretherton describes politics like this: politics embodies the recognition that some kind of common life with others must be cultivated and sustained over time if life is to go on.

He says: when I meet someone I disagree with, dislike, find strange or threatening, I can do one of four things. I can kill them. I can create a structure of domination so I can control them. I can make life so difficult that they run away. Or I can do politics. That is to say, I can form, norm, and sustain some kind of common life — amid asymmetries of power, competing visions of the good, and my own feelings of fear or aversion — without killing, dominating, or causing them to flee.

Politics, then, is the art of building a common life with people you didn't choose and might not like. Which is, to say, politics is not something the church does as a separate activity – but what we find ourselves doing simply by being church.

Now, I suspect that for many of you — and honestly, for many people in your congregations — the temptation right now is to withdraw from politics with a capital P. To focus on what's happening inside the walls of the church and leave the mess out there to sort itself out.

I understand that temptation. I really do.

We're living through a moment of quite unusual political ugliness. Trust in institutions has collapsed. The public square feels toxic. Social media has made it feel like every contribution to public conversation is an invitation to be shouted down – or worse. The news cycle is relentless and demoralising. And many of you are exhausted — not just from the demands of your own congregations, but from the sheer weight of the world pressing in.

But I want to gently push back on the temptation to wash our hands of capital P politics.

Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish exiles in Babylon — people who had every reason to withdraw, to huddle together, to wait it out. They were living in a foreign city under a foreign empire – torn from everything they knew. And God's word to them, through Jeremiah, was not: keep yourselves to yourselves, avoid associating with the Babylonians.

It was this: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Seek the welfare of the city. Not your home city. The actual city where you live. The one you're in.

Because your welfare and the city's welfare are not separable. You don't flourish in isolation from your neighbours. You flourish together, or not at all.

That is a deeply countercultural claim in a society that has made individualism its operating logic. And it is, I think, one of the most important things the church has to say right now — by practising it week in, week out.

So there we are – an update on my own sense of vocation, a perspective on the state of our country – but hopefully an encouragement to you. Even if you feel like your church is small and fragile, I want to suggest that you are part of the solution to our country's ills. And we do this best when the church is the church. When we embody the five marks of mission, in partnership with other churches. We don't have to do lots of extra activities – we just need

to be what we are called to be – witnesses to the resurrection life of our Lord Jesus Christ – people who live his mission.