On Friday 5 June, the Rt Revd Martyn Snow, Lord Bishop of Leicester spoke in a House of Lords debate on AI (artificial intelligence), led by the Archbishop of Canterbury:

AI and Social Cohesion

My Lords, in the past, if you wanted to persuade people to think badly of others, you were limited by two things: the number of people you personally knew, and the number of conversations you could physically have. Social media removed the second of those limits, letting one person reach millions at once. Artificial intelligence is now loosening the first. It allows one person to produce vast quantities of content, of increasingly high quality. The frictions that once limited the spread of contempt have disappeared.

We should not then be surprised that the fabric of our society is being torn. For society to function, we need a broadly common understanding of the world and what is happening in it. Democracy is about disagreement over what to do about the opportunities and challenges we face — but for that disagreement to be constructive, we must all be able to access the bare facts: what is happening, who is involved, who is affected.

Generative AI throws all this into question. Anyone, anywhere can now produce an image of an event that never occurred, or a video of a public figure saying something they never said. And I really do mean anyone, anywhere - the BBC recently reported that accounts producing AI-generated anti-immigration content, which appeared to be British, were in fact run from East Asia, the Gulf, and the United States.

So even as the number and reach of deepfakes continues to grow, there is also the fact that AI allows people, for the first time, to visualise abstractions on demand. A fear or suspicion that once lived only in the imagination can now be rendered as an apparent photograph in seconds, and shared to incite or confirm the same fear in others.

This matters because human beings have always been moved more powerfully by images than by arguments. And, importantly, what people see shapes how they act — in the encounters of ordinary life, and at the ballot box.

Now, we know from Allport's contact theory that what most helps people let go of prejudicial abstractions is interpersonal encounter, particularly with a common purpose in mind. And here AI poses a further threat as a growing number of people are turning to AI companions for friendship, for romantic intimacy, for therapy, for spiritual guidance. These systems are always there, ready to listen. They never have a bad day. They have no ego or agenda of their own. They are, in a sense, the perfect partner — and that, my Lords, is the problem.

Real human relationships are difficult. They require us to tolerate frustration, to forgive, to be forgiven, to encounter a mind that is genuinely not our own. These are the muscles of social life.

If I may, then, two specific proposals, to help ensure we are intentional in the way AI develops and works for the good of relationships and our shared life in this nation.

First, we must require social media platforms to change their structural incentives, so that they algorithmically deprioritise content damaging to public debate. As Frances Haugen, the former Facebook product manager, put it, "anger and hate is the easiest way to grow on Facebook." This should not be so.

Second, following the EU, we should mandate a crisis protocol — a set of obligations that come into force when a platform's content begins to threaten public order or social cohesion in a measurable way, as it did in Leicester in 2022 when false claims about attacks on Muslims and Hindus fuelled unrest.

We have in this parliamentary session two bills before us concerning AI, and others on extremism and state threats. But they barely scratch the surface of what I have described. They do not touch the structural incentives behind inflammatory content, nor do they support positive connection across difference.

This is what the Church of England, like so many civil society organisations want to work towards. But we need the legislative and regulatory frameworks to be able to have the maximum impact.