



**BNP Briefing Paper
- A Church Response -
Revised for the June 2009
Local & European Elections**

Introduction

Many churches and faiths groups have been very concerned by the growing presence of extremist parties in local elections and their threat to community cohesion. However, lessons learnt living and working on the Isle of Dogs when the BNP were active in the early 1990s show that communities can come together and people can work together to promote peace and harmony. More recently, communities such as Beeston in Leeds have continued to promote interfaith relations and partnership working for the shared good of all residents. This is despite attempts through 'smash and grab' media tactics, and opportunistic political extremists, to incite racial and religious division. Since this briefing paper was first published for the local elections in spring 2004, the need for churches and the faith sector to take an active role in their communities to respond to political extremism has become more apparent. The BNP received unprecedented election success gaining many seats in local elections, and polled well in the European elections although there were no seats won. The BNP currently has 47 local councillors across England, and wants to focus on areas where it has polled well including Yorkshire and the Humber. A seat has recently been won in Sevenoaks, Kent from Labour – Peter Hain MP warns Labour of complacency: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7903551.stm.

In 2006 the BNP's aim was to "Defend Christian Values" whilst stirring up fear of Islam. The BNP's growing success feeds on the fears of many who feel threatened by changes in our communities, such as the visible rise in the presence of diverse faith communities and migrant populations, as exemplified by the experience in Clitheroe (see page 5). As the population of this region increases, by about a quarter of a million by 2021, there will be an even greater ethnic faith and cultural diversity, and those newcomers will include asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers. While many of us welcome this, there are those who feel threatened by it, and this can be seen by the increasing popularity of political parties like the BNP. Prejudice and discrimination is increasingly about religion and religious identity as well as about race and racial identity. Christian values are summed up in the words: love God and love your neighbour as yourself. The Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian faiths all uphold the golden rule: "treat others as you want them to treat you".

How can churches and faith communities actively reduce the impact of extremist groups? A skilled and co-ordinated response is necessary to offset the impact of political extremism and the easy and destructive answers to complex questions that they offer. This paper has been published by the **Churches Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber (CRC)** as part of their commitment to equip the diverse faith communities to respond to the needs of their local communities. It outlines the latest issues relevant to the 2009 campaign, provides information on planning an effective response and tries to provide some context on the issues.

Liz Carnelley
Chief Executive
Churches Regional Commission
For Yorkshire and the Humber

"The BNP may present its election message as 'Christian', but as it is based on the divisive and racist agenda inherent to that party, it is clearly out of step with the message of freedom and belonging that is central to the Christian faith."
Revd Katei Kirby, African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance

What does the BNP stand for?

In recent years the BNP has tried to present itself as a "respectable" alternative to the mainstream parties, yet its manifesto is openly based on racism. For example, if elected, BNP Councillors are committed to removing halal and kosher food from school dinner menus. The BNP justifies this proposed victimisation of Muslim and Jewish children by saying it is opposed to animal cruelty. The BNP is also committed to introducing quota systems on the issuing of licences to private hire firms and off-licences. This would deprive thousands of Asian people in Yorkshire of their livelihoods. The BNP's declared policy is "an immediate halt to all non-white immigration" and "the voluntary resettlement" of non-whites to "their lands of native origin." BNP leader Nick Griffin has described the Holocaust as the "holohoax," denying the deaths of millions of Jewish people in Nazi gas chambers. Recently (April 2009) Nick Griffin has called immigration a "bloodless genocide" and defended the BNP view that Black and Asian British people should be classed as "racial foreigners" – just because they are born in Britain "they are not a Briton". The Bishop of York John Sentamu (who was a refugee from Idi Amin's Uganda) has described these claims as "beyond belief".

The BNP is making direct attempts to win over Christians. It has established a "front" organisation, the "Christian Council of Britain". Supporters during Nick Griffin's trial brandished placards stating "Defending Christian Values". One wore a clerical dog collar, though he refused to say which church he represented. In response to the activities of the Christian Council of Britain, **Anthea Cox, former Methodist Coordinating Secretary for Public Life and Social Justice**, said, *"I am outraged that the BNP and its allies are using Christianity to further their agenda of segregation and division. We are deeply concerned that some people are now appropriating Christian language and symbols for policies that are the very opposite of Christian values"*. (See: <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr3306a.html>)

CHURCH OF ENGLAND BANS CLERGY FROM BNP

On 10th February 2009 the General Synod, more than 300 of the 418 members gathered in Westminster endorsed a **motion asking the house of Bishops to keep the BNP members out of the church**. The House of Bishops is now obliged to draw up and implement the policy, and needs to decide whether any change in the church's present laws is necessary or desirable. In a 90-minute debate, Vasantha Gnanadoss, who proposed the motion and is one of a handful of ethnic minority synod members, said: *"Passing this motion is a push that is seriously necessary. Without it, the day may come when the BNP will have gained significant power and the church will stand accused of having been feeble when it could have been resolute."* The motion received support from the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/feb/10/general-synod-bnp-vote>

The BNP are also developing "front" organisations to develop support, gain credibility and even to raise funds. The Christian Council of Britain led by 'Revd' Robert West has addressed BNP meetings and was the subject of TV reports during the 2006 campaign. A former Conservative councillor, doubt over his status as a clergyman was cast when their head office denied his ordination in the Apostolic Church last

year. He has set up his own church, based in a house in Holbeach, to preach "traditional bible beliefs".

(See: http://www.ekkllesia.co.uk/content/news_syndication/article_060316bnp.shtml)

Members of the British National party have set up other "front" organisations in an attempt to gain credibility and also raise money from far right sympathisers in this country and abroad. The BNP has established 'Civil Liberty' a lawyers association, and 'Solidarity' a trade union led by Clive Potter, a long-time BNP activist. An investigation by the Guardian in February 2007 has revealed that the fundraising group Civil Liberty, which claims to be independent of any political party, is run by key BNP activists with all the money donated through its website going to the BNP's regional headquarters in the north-east. The investigation raised concerns that the party appears to be attempting to profit from anti-Islamic sentiment in the United States since the attacks of September 11 2001, by presenting itself as being at the forefront of a campaign to save the UK from being "overwhelmed" by Muslims. Since 2001 it has been illegal for any political party to accept overseas donations of more than £200, and party officials breaking the law face a year's imprisonment or a £5,000 fine. Both Civil Liberty and the BNP deny they are trying to bypass UK election law, insisting they are entirely separate organisations. However, the Guardian has established a series of links, including an audio tape of the BNP chairman, Nick Griffin, speaking at a US conference organised by a former member of the Ku Klux Klan, in which he calls on sympathisers to support BNP members by giving money to Civil Liberty.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/feb/03/partyfunding.thefarright>

"As leaders of different churches in West Yorkshire we affirm the values of unity, tolerance, hospitality and mutual respect, which have always helped people from different backgrounds to live together. We are deeply concerned at the views and activities of the British National Party which is using people's fears to stir up racial and religious hate. We assert that all human beings are created equally in the image of God, that racism is a sin and that such extremist groups do not speak for Christians".

West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council April 2009

What kind of people vote BNP?

We need to be careful not to demonise people – many people vote as a protest – that they are not being heard. They are often those who resent others apparently receiving more. Research has been done to look at the sources of resentment in disadvantaged white communities.

See: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/sourcesresentment>

We will find these people with a vague sympathy or support for the BNP in our churches, and it is a myth they are always in traditionally disadvantaged white working class areas, or in very mixed areas. We need to understand why they feel they are not being heard. They feel let down by the mainstream parties and that they are losing some of their safety, their culture, their identity.

The BNP can have strong support in places which are largely white but near areas which are predominantly Asian like Queensbury near Bradford, Clitheroe near Blackburn, and Heanor near Derby. These areas are associated with “white flight”, the retreat of the white middle class from inner city areas, which Trevor Phillips of the Equality and Human Rights Commission said in January 2008 is getting worse. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1575660/White-flight-increasing-race-chief-says.html>

“We must look instead for political leadership that is committed to healing divisions, bridging differences and creating truly inclusive community.”
The Catholic Bishops’ Conference

The recent release online of the BNP membership list provides a glimpse into the membership make-up. There are 12,801 individuals named in this list, who seem at least to have expressed an interest in becoming members of the British National Party.

The geographical statistics are significant. **Yorkshire as a whole has more than 1,600 BNP supporters**, including **263 in Leeds, 164 in Kirklees, 190 in Bradford** and more than **100 each in Barnsley, Sheffield and Wakefield**. Essex is up there with 670 plus members and the West Midlands has more than 580, including 187 in Birmingham.

Exploiting Divisions

The Medina Islamic Education Centre has recently received planning permission for a mosque in Clitheroe after a 30-year campaign. It will include a multi-faith education centre. BNP and England First candidates are standing in 2 wards in the town. A local set to vote for the BNP was quoted in the Guardian. “I am not racist but I don’t think they should have given permission. It will lead to more Muslims coming to live here and we’ll end up like Blackburn.”

See: <http://www.society.guardian.co.uk/communities/story/0,,2059097,00.html>

What does this tell us? Well it looks as if it's a myth that the BNP fares best in areas of high immigration. According to one report that cross-matched the list with data from the Office for National Statistics, only 5% of BNP members live in areas classified as having high Asian populations, and 2% in areas with big African-Caribbean communities. Some 18% of the party's support comes from traditionally

working-class white areas. Twenty-two percent of BNP members may live in deprived parts of England and Wales, **but 16% live in the wealthiest.**

Several proclaim Christian faith: "Committed evangelical Christian, attends Bible studies/prayer meetings". Elsewhere is "Devout Christian, lay preacher (non-conformist churches: Baptist, United Reformed, Presbyterian etc). Member of the Assemblies of God Pentecostal Church". This should be a serious cause for concern.

Professor Roger Eatwell of the University of Bath, who has written extensively on the BNP, warns of another worrying new element that doesn't show up on the list at all. Eatwell warns: *"Young people are coming in who had no political commitment before. They don't see themselves as racist, and they're not thuggish. They're there for what they see as moral reasons: maybe because their granddad was let down by the NHS. And remember, by far the biggest issue among BNP voters, besides immigration, is simply pessimism. Pessimism's rocketing right now. They're the ones to watch."*

Peter Lazenby is a reporter for the **Yorkshire Evening Post** and an anti-fascist activist comments:

"Wherever the British National Party surfaces, decent people come together to oppose its racism and extremism. This is the case across our region. Many local antiracism and anti-facism groups involve Christians who are prepared to unite with Muslims and people of other faiths, and people of no faith, to oppose the BNP in a simple way – by telling the truth about the BNP and what it stands for. They do this through door to door leafleting, holding public meetings, producing publicity material. Days of action in areas where the BNP is standing candidates involve mass leafleting of areas targeted by the BNP."

A recent television programme entitled "BNP Wives" provides an insight into the mind-set of some of their members. **See:**

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6145793487676011977>

The BNP feeds off a sense of alienation and exploits any policy vacuum. Their appeal is strongest whenever there is a sense of a scramble around limited resources. There is a real fear the credit crunch will bear down on jobs and pay, push up unemployment and intensify competition for scarce resources, and that that will create a more fertile ground for the BNP to operate in. Faith communities need to provide forums for people to express their views, for accurate information to be shared and myths to be busted.

Many faiths are already active at grassroots level, working alongside their neighbours to heal divisions and offer an alternative to the politics of blame and hatred, which racist parties offer. Such organisations often exploit people who feel alienated and undervalued by mainstream politicians, especially in a climate of uncertainty. To love and care for people who might otherwise turn to parties such as the BNP, acknowledge what is positive about their cultural identity and tackle the real problems which communities face can do much to undermine the far right. By intensifying such efforts, as well as making it clear that racism is unacceptable, the faith community can help to bring hope to troubled neighbourhoods, and offer a positive alternative to the poison peddled by the BNP.

Ian Drummond, Baptist Minister and CRC Board member

2009 Local and European Elections and the BNP Threat

This year's European Elections could potentially provide the opportunity for a major break through into mainstream politics by the British National Party. The BNP could win a European seat in our region with as little as 12% of the vote. This would be seen as a massive step by the BNP in its key short-term goal of becoming a legitimate national party. This is because the European Elections are conducted on a proportional representation model.

The fundamental reason for the growth of the BNP continues to be racism. Every issue raised by them is infused with racism and 'white supremacist' ideology, either overtly or in code. At its public meetings the BNP openly proclaims on its banner its belief in 'Race & Nation'.

A coalition of faith groups, political parties, trade unions, Black and Asian communities, as well as all those who want to defeat those who espouse racism, could stand in the face of this threat, and change the tide of opinion to isolate the BNP and other far-right extremists.

Summary of the local elections results 2008 for the BNP in the Yorkshire & the Humber Region

Council	Wards	Votes	%	Top 5	New Seats	Total Seats
Rotherham	5	4522	28.4%	28.4%	2	2
Leeds	33	22094	11.5%	27.7%		1
Bradford	8	7519	24.1%	27.2%		2
Barnsley	20	9959	18.2%	26.6%		
Kirklees	20	15,090	14.4%	24.5%		1
Calderdale	9	4355	16.1%	21.2%		1
Wakefield	12	6567	15.2%	20.0%		
Sheffield	8	5489	14.9%	18.2%		
Doncaster	6	1181	12.5%			
Harrogate	3	353	5.5%	5.8%		
Hull	0					
North East Lincolnshire	0					
Craven	0					

Overall the BNP polled over 1,000 votes in 12 West Yorkshire wards and in 2 in South Yorkshire. For the first time, the BNP gained seats in South Yorkshire. They polled highly in Rotherham and Barnsley, but maintained their strong position in West Yorkshire councils including Leeds, Kirklees and Bradford. In a recent bye-election (April 09) in Temple Newsome Ward, Leeds, the Conservatives took the seat from Labour but the BNP were a close second – Conservatives 1785, BNP 1502.

The BNP remains very weak in Humberside, including Hull, and to date has made no headway in York. However, UKIP did well in Humberside, and at the moment UKIP doesn't look strong – voters may turn from them to the BNP. The BNP have said they are targeting the North Yorkshire County Council elections this year and have been leafleting in Malton, Richmond and Northallerton.

"In any kind of economic downturn, it is incumbent on us all to be putting across exactly the same message about the value and importance of having... diversity in communities; about the value and benefit of people from different countries coming and creating wealth.

"There are reasons we have to support that and not to get trapped into what the extremists would like, which would be to take their simplistic approach and fit it into a very complicated situation. So I hope that people will just reject as nonsense the idea that the solution lies in some kind of xenophobic attitude to people who live, work, study or travel in our country, because they bring to the economy far more than they take out"

*"The extremists have always relied on economic downturns ... as a way of recruiting people to what can be seen as a simple message, **but actually it is just hatred**"*

Lady Ashton – EU Trade Commissioner

All of us in our region must also be alert to some crucial factors. The BNP's vote in local elections was over 100,000 in 2007 (when the whole region last had elections). This is not far behind their 2004 European vote, even though the BNP did not stand in the majority of Yorkshire & Humber seats. The possible collapse of the UKIP vote will also have an impact. In last year's London Assembly elections, the BNP's vote increased by the equivalent of around one third of UKIP's lost vote. Furthermore, in 2004, unlike next June 2009, there was an all-postal ballot, which boosted the turnout. In the London elections a slightly higher turnout there would have stopped the BNP winning a Greater London assembly seat.

Over the coming weeks we must campaign to warn all those who oppose the BNP's message of race hate of the importance of the European election, and the consequences of a victory for the far right. We have to constantly remind people, in the wake of the recent Austrian elections that the lesson of Europe is that it is much easier to stop the BNP making a breakthrough than it is to reverse it.

What can we do?

A skilled and co-ordinated response is necessary:

- We need to give out facts and figures to contradict the myths and rumours: For example, the myth that migrants are “flooding” the UK. The recent immigration figures published on February 2009 show that the flow of Polish and other economic migrants from eastern Europe has fallen by more than 40% as the recession in Britain takes hold. The Office for National Statistics has said the number of work applications from the EU's former communist countries dropped to 29,000 in the last three months of 2008, down from 53,000 in the same period in 2007. Many have returned home. Since 2000 around 30,000 asylum seekers have been dispersed into our region of around 5 million people – this is 0.6% of the region's population. (Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Yorkshire and the Humber, 1999-2008, Yorkshire Futures, the University of Hull and the Regional Migration Partnership).
- Working with the media and local press is vital to have a co-ordinated response.
- Events need to bring people together – organising events for people who otherwise wouldn't visit a mosque, encouraging walks of friendship, events by faith forums, vigils, and celebrations in local community venues.
- There need to be spaces to raise hard issues and to let the diverse voices of communities be heard. There can be Forums where local people can meet with councillors and other representatives of the statutory authorities with a neutral chair to voice their concerns, and also to indicate potential solutions to local issues.
- People need to turn out and vote – a higher vote means less chance of a BNP victory. The potential for a BNP win in the European Elections in June 2009 is very high and this can only be stopped if voter turn out is high.

In the end the BNP is only going to be defeated at the ballot box, not by banning them. I will encourage everybody to exercise their democratic right to vote.”
Archbishop Sentamu

- Other Political parties need to be encouraged not to “play the race card”;
- The Church needs to say that it does not support the BNP since some BNP members often claim that they are of Christian faith;

The Church of England today voted overwhelmingly in favour of banning clergy from belonging to the British National Party. On the second day of the General Synod, the legislative body that meets twice a year, more than 300 of the 418 members gathered in Westminster endorsed a motion asking the House of Bishops to keep BNP members out of the church.
The Guardian Tuesday 10 February 2009 – “The Church of England Votes To Ban BNP Clergy”

- Statements from faith leaders promoting racial/religious harmony can be useful

- Local events can change the mood – prayers for peace, school events, walks, vigils etc.

“In a divided world we need to be seen as united in our desire for all communities to live in peace and harmony. This is a walk of witness to our hope”
Bishop Jack who walked with local faith leaders to areas in Sheffield where the BNP are trying to gain a foothold.

- Many Christian denominations and groups produce useful resources and statements. The Methodist Church has a comprehensive web presence on political extremism. There is information about hustings, and guidelines of what churches can do to respond when political extremist candidates win seats in local elections.
See: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=openworld.content&cmid=1828> or from the website follow the links to news, campaigns, political extremism.

- In terms of the European Elections in June 2009 we must all seek to develop links with MEP candidates to secure their support for the marginalisation of the far right candidates. Faith communities must develop closer working links with MEPs in the region, with a view to determining what pan regional strategies and messages might be effective in combating the far right.

Useful Information

Resources for countering Political Extremism

From the Methodist church working with the URC and Baptist Union

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=openworld.content&cmid=1828>

Practical resources including organising an election forum.

www.makethecrosscount.com

The Commission for Equality and Human Rights Commission have published a document called 'Defeating Organised Racial Hatred'. It provides myth busting briefings and helpful information. Details and a download are at:

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/search.aspx?k=defeating%20organised%20hatred>

Support and advice on working with faiths

<http://www.faithmatters.co.uk/>

<http://www.touchstone-bradford.org.uk/>

<http://www.interfaith.org.uk/>

for local Yorkshire and Humber interfaith organisations see

<http://www.interfaith.org.uk/local/diryh.htm>

Political websites:

<http://www.christiansinpolitics.co.uk/>

<http://www.conservatives.com/>

<http://www.labour.org.uk/>

<http://www.libdems.org.uk/>

<http://www.obv.org.uk/> (Operation Black Vote)

Other:

BBC Politics homepage with links to election information and current stories

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/default.stm

The Guardian Website – specific section dedicated to the BNP and the Far Right.

This includes interactive maps and all the latest news and views.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/bnp-far-right>

The BNP's Christian Council of Britain

<http://www.ccob.co.uk/>

The BNP

<http://bnp.org.uk/>

Visit websites for information on local anti-racism groups in your area including the 'Hope Not Hate' campaign and battle bus currently touring vulnerable areas:

www.searchlightmagazine.com and <http://www.uaf.org.uk/>

Information on Local Campaigning

<http://www.stopthebnp.org.uk/>

Please let us know of other information, resources and websites so that this section can be updated:

Contact: info@crc-online.org.uk

Appendix

On 28 March 2009 the Diocese of Hallam Justice and Peace Commission held a meeting of its Parish Contacts in Wickersley near Rotherham. During the meeting Fr Shaun Smith, Chair of the Commission, spoke about the forthcoming European Elections on 4 June 2009 in which the British National Party (BNP) can have an elected Euro MP for Yorkshire and the Humber with as little as 9% of the vote. This would provide them with unheard of credibility and resources. The traditional low turnout at such elections could enable the BNP to gain seats. You might imagine that the BNP would never gain a hold in your locality and this might indeed be the case. However in this election of 6 MEPs in the whole region, your vote could stop the BNP claiming to represent you in Europe. If the BNP wins an MEP position they will try to spread their racist position across the region. All that is necessary for the triumph of such evil is that good people do nothing.

The Commission then asked Philip Jakob, Director of Music for the Cathedral and Diocese of Hallam, to provide a Christian response to this threat. His talk was greeted with a request that it be made more widely available. Its inclusion here responds to that request.

The British National Party has suggested that it espouses Christian values. Archbishop Rowan Williams' exploration of the common ground between Christians and Muslims was ridiculed by the BNP as being instrumental in the 'islamification of Britain.'

In the face of this and other views widely held by political extremists how does the Christian respond?

In 1992 the composer Bernadette Farrell set to music a wonderful text by Shirley Erena Murray. Written for Racial Justice Sunday it is entitled 'Community of Christ' and we sang it at the end of this year's Chrism Mass.

The first verse is a powerful invitation to be Christ in the world.

**Community of Christ, who make the cross your own,
live out your creed and risk your life for God alone:
the God who wears your face, to whom all worlds belong,
whose children are of every race and every song.**

© 1992 Shirley Erena Murray

The strong suggestion in the song that God wears my face and yours is mind-blowing.

Look around you, as you go about your daily business, at the variety in the face that God chooses to wear!

Scripture reminds us that we are all 'made in the image of God'. The human race enfleshes God, and in the same way all things are created in God.

'Emmanuel' means what it says on the tin - God is with us!

This is why we have respect for all created things, as well as for all humanity.

The BNP declaration of support only for indigenous British is to deny the indwelling of God in all regardless of skin colour, nationality, gender, or status.

It was not for nationalistic reasons that a Scottish friend of mine once declared

'God's favourite colour is tartan!' God designs and embraces difference as the scene at Pentecost with all nations understanding each other confirms.

In Mark 7:24-30 we read that Jesus is pursued by a Syro-Phoenecian woman seeking help for her child who suffers some mental disorder. Such is the depth of her faith that she harangues Jesus for a cure. However she is not Jewish and Jesus explains that he came only for the Jews. The woman will not take that lying down and lays into him with all manner of arguments. Under her persistence Jesus grows in his understanding that his mission, primarily to the Jews, must be all-embracing, that he has come for all peoples.

This is a critical moment of realisation for Christ as he moves from one perspective to a wider vision: Jesus, Son of God, changes his mind!

Human beings hold opinions which are formed by their experience. When these opinions are challenged we can choose either to cling to our initial position or to allow this to be modified by the challenge.

Unless we are very unfortunate or blinkered we will readily encounter difference in other people. Sometimes the difference causes a gut reaction which might amount to fear. This may be a natural consequence but the more we examine this reaction and the more we come to know the person of difference the more positively we will change in our attitude towards her.

Part of what makes Christ both fully human and divine in the story is that he transcends the ordinarily human and changes his mind. We can all move to a change of mind if our hearts are not hardened and if we refuse to allow fear to dominate.

So what do we pray for those who advocate and represent such views as those espoused by the BNP, those who have betrayed the image of God in which they are made? We cannot believe that they are intrinsically evil for God, who saw all creation as good, does not create evil. However what comes out of them might be considered evil. We pray that their hearts too may be open to change, and that they might, in the words of St Augustine, 'give themselves back to God, the God who made them.'

All political extremists work on fear of the other. Hitler did this with the Jews in times of economic depression in the 1930s and we are seeing similarly despicable attitudes in the present times of financial insecurity.

Fear stops you moving, stops you taking risks, narrows your outlook, directs you towards entrenchment and self-interest and thus makes you less human. We are communal beings and it is not good to be alone. No wonder that the most common saying of Christ and the angels of God is 'Do not be afraid.'

A dominant characteristic of the Christian is hospitality. 'See how these Christians love one another' is not a soppy sentimental observation but one drawn from witnessing those who show love for all, an all-encompassing, unconditional love.

Thirty-seven times in the Bible we are reminded to welcome the stranger. And all the miracles of Jesus reflect his intention to bring the outsider into the heart of the community. Jesus realises that it is sometimes necessary to transform the outsider, to give sight to the blind, to cure the leper, to give life to Lazarus,

to set prisoners free and to relate to and energise the woman at the well, but the return of these persons to a community which had previously regarded them as different, challenges fixed opinions and transforms not only the healed individual but also the community itself.

There is a ludicrously comical scene in Monty Python's film, 'Life of Brian', in which Brian proclaims, '*We are all individuals*' to which the crowd of thousands in one voice shouts, 'Yes. We are all individuals'. Then Brian adds, '*We are not the same*' And the crowd again as one replies, 'No, we are not the same.'

Despite the humour there is great truth in the statement. We are not the same, as another of Bernadette Farrell's songs indicates:

**God made me as I am, part of creation's plan.
No one else can ever be the part of God's plan that's me.**

© 1995, 1999, Bernadette Farrell. OCP

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, writes that there is no such thing as Jew or Greek, no such thing as slave or free, no such thing as male and female, for you are all one in Christ.

Recently at an interfaith gathering in Sheffield a friend put it differently: he said, "There *are* people from different nations and cultures, there *are* people who are imprisoned whilst others are free, there *are* differences of gender, BUT all are one in Christ."

I found that useful, more or less saying the same thing, but with different nuance.

And this Jesus Christ, in whom all are one, is Son of the God who created, and continues to create, glorious diversity through which, with which and in which the limitless breadth of God might be glimpsed.

Continuing with Paul's letter ... 'And if you belong to Christ, then you are the seed of Abraham,' (*you are Christ,*) 'heirs to God's promise.'

And God's promise to be with us that we may all have abundant life, the common good, this is what prompts us to use our vote to bring about, not the pitting of community against community, but the reigning of God.

Amen. Alleluia!

Philip Jakob, 27 March 2009 for Hallam Justice & Peace Contacts 28 March 2009

Sent to HALLAM NEWS and CORACLE (magazine of the Iona Community) 5 April 2009
Churches Regional Commission and Church Action on Poverty 21 April 2009