

## Our toxic culture

### A letter to our members concerning the recent riots in the UK, 18 August 2011

Although it seems that everything that can be shaken is being shaken, there is a danger that within a few weeks life will have moved on, the images will have faded, we'll be back to 'business as usual' and nothing will have changed.

But we have to change. It is now obvious that our society is just not working and our national culture is toxic. Our house is built on sand - we have no place for God, no space for values or virtues, and a social environment in which it's really hard to talk about right and wrong.

In the wake of some of the worst and most widespread social disorder that this country has experienced, the analysis is already taking an obvious focus. Things like family breakdown, the loss of fatherhood, lack of discipline in schools, the collapse of a sense of common good, the rise of individualism and human rights culture have long been highlighted by many Christian commentators - but have largely fallen on deaf ears. However, what has been described by one commentator as "the all-too-predictable outcome of a three-decade liberal experiment which tore up virtually every basic social value" may now provide Christians with a renewed voice and a more attentive audience.

The truth is that, as a nation, we have created new gods, with materialism and consumerism now defining our social relations. The 'stuff' we acquire - designer clothes, the latest flat screen TV, car or mobile phone - shouts out 'this is who I am'. We worship at the temple of our shopping centres, our credit cards paying homage to consumer gods. So why, in a society that tells its young to 'get rich quick or die trying', were we surprised when some of our number went shopping without cash or a card? Anesthetised by an over-reaching welfare state and incentivised by an insatiable free-market, many of our young people are spiritually impoverished. Drugs, cheap booze and celebrity culture fuel this. Lacking respect for others and for themselves, some have simply opted out, seeing society as something that happens for other people, but not for them.

Where was the voice making it clear that these attitudes were 'wrong'? It seems that the institutional shaking has exposed a crisis of public leadership. Complicit through a lack of moral leadership, and ill-equipped by the unworkable ideals of secularism, our politicians are now struggling for answers.

We need genuine social cohesion, a willingness to invest in the small and trust in community, allowing faith communities and those who act like them to do what they know best, build relationships, support and care. But how do we get past the liberal elitism and political correctness which has all too often suffocated living communities.

First, we need to vocally reject the economic liberalism of the right and the cultural liberalism of the left, and affirm the need for a renewal of Christian principles in public life. As the fallen idols of the state and market continue to wreak havoc in materially and spiritually impoverished communities across the UK, it is vitally important that Christians turn up the volume in the national debate.

In his recent address to the 2011 National Prayer Breakfast in the Palace of Westminster, director of the Message Trust Andy Hawthorne OBE gave numerous examples of young lives transformed by the gospel. Stating that "The Bible works ... and Jesus really is the solution to our countries problems", he challenged our leaders to understand the truth that 'as the Church goes, so the nation goes'. This is our challenge.

With calm having returned to our streets (if only for the present), as the analysis and reflection begins, Christians need to play their part in finding ways of helping families to prosper. It's the building block of a stable society. The 21<sup>st</sup> century family comes in all kinds of shapes and sizes, but we all know that a committed relationship for life between a man and a woman has to be the best place for children to prosper. Let's call for government to look again at employment, tax and education. As a nation, how can we support the family and make it a bit easier to be a parent? If we don't, the gang will take its place, providing support, respect and a place for belonging.

And we have to look again at education. We are all thankful that there are some great schools out there, with wonderful teachers doing brilliant work. But sadly there are still failing schools, and in our larger inner city education centres where discipline is almost impossible, we have seen expectations crash and the prospects for employment diminish.

Our toxic culture of failed families, failed education and failed employment, has created a significant underclass in all of our major cities.

As Christians we need to be reminding ourselves and our neighbours that those we saw on the streets are *our* young people, *our* young adults. Although they were a minority, they are still part of *our* communities and we have a responsibility to see change - for them but also for the wellbeing of our communities as a whole.

Throughout the unrest, we saw both the worst and the best of how we are living together. It was great on Tuesday morning to wake up and see that alongside images of burning buildings, wrecked cars and exhausted police officers, there were an army of broom carrying local residents refusing to give up their streets to the rioters. This was an image of hope, and it gave an insight into the often untold story of the Church at work in the UK. We were among the street cleaners, and we were also opening up our buildings, providing refreshments for emergency services, collecting clothes, basic supplies, offering advice on insurance claims and re-housing those who have lost everything. Many church leaders provided genuine local leadership in the crisis, and Christians across the country visited neighbours, the elderly and vulnerable - and Street Pastors have been out every night of the last week. And of course there's the secret weapon - the Church was praying, and how they were praying; with so many large meetings, small meetings and public vigils. I'm convinced we saw God answering prayer. Who knows what would have occurred if God's people had not been asking?

So where to from here? In the vacuum of ideas, this is a time of unprecedented opportunities. We have to see change and the Church. God's people - rightly positioned - are the catalyst for such change in our nation. This is not a time for fear but for hope. Here are a few practical steps we can take immediately to detoxify our culture with salt and light...

- Take action - get involved in (or start) church projects for renewing our battered and neglected communities
- Continue to pray for healing in our communities - for peace and security. And pray for wisdom for our local and national political leaders

- Contact your local MP or councillor, and graciously express the need for a renewal of biblical principles in social policy decisions – citing examples of Christian action
- Contact the local and national media, and graciously express the need for a renewal of biblical principles in public life – citing examples of Christian action
- Look at how you and your church can get involved in shaping politics and government by visiting [www.susa.info](http://www.susa.info)



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