

William Hague becomes the first party political leader to address Spring Harvest

April 2000

by William Hague MP

given at Spring Harvest, Minehead

In a landmark speech to the Spring Harvest festival of evangelicals in April 2000, William Hague explains his Conservative philosophy of linking social justice to personal responsibility. He also invites Christians to make a difference by joining Britain's mainstream political parties.

Thank you very much for inviting me to be with you today.

Always thoughtful, Rob Parsons, here, suggested to me that I might need a break amidst all the hectic activity of campaigning for next month's local elections.

Come to Minehead he said.

To the seaside.

It'll be sunny and warm.

A good break.

I'll invite a few friends to join us, he said.

When Rob says a few friends he means 10,000 people!

So here I am!

And it's a great honour to be invited to address Spring Harvest - the biggest Christian conference in Europe.

The church in Britain today

My main reason for coming here is to say thank you.

Thank you for the work that churches and Christian people like you are doing throughout Britain.

Over the last eighteen months I have witnessed at first hand the work of churches in dealing with social problems ranging from family breakdown to unemployment and from homelessness to loneliness.

Because it was eighteen months ago that I launched the Conservative Party's Listening to Britain's Churches consultation.

At the beginning, some people dismissed the consultation as a grand public relations exercise.

Others welcomed my initiative but warned that it must be genuine.

Rob Parsons told me that I would have to listen with teeth!

Today I can tell you that over 250 meetings have been held with church people of every denomination in every part of the country.

The Baptist Union, Care, Catholic Marriage Care, the Christian Institute, Elim, the Order of Christian Unity, Pioneer Churches, the Bishop of Liverpool, the New Testament Church of God,

SPUC, and Tear Fund are the names of just some of the groups that have been involved.

And more meetings are planned.

The impression that people often get from the media is that the church is dying.

The evidence I have gained from Listening to Britain's Churches is that the church is very much alive and advancing in many parts of this land.

Churches are special to this nation because of where they are and who they include.

Many disadvantaged urban and rural areas have been visited as part of Listening to Britain's Churches.

In these areas it is often only the church that remains.

The banks, local shop, pub and police station may have all closed but the church is still there.

In the evening and weekends when professionals have departed - the church and its representatives are still there.

The church is also important because of the range of people it includes.

A vicar told this story to us.

He was visiting a zoo with his family and watched a group of people pass by the caged animals ahead of him.

The group was very mixed.

Young and old.

Men and women.

Black and white.

Some appeared wealthy whilst some looked like they had seen better times.

But they were together and they were enjoying their day out.

The vicar speculated that they were a church outing.

What other organisation in society brings different people together so successfully, he wondered.

And on asking he discovered that they were a church group.

The fact is that churches are very unusual in today's society in bringing diverse people together.

Knitting together generations and races and income groups in common cause.

Of course churches could be more diverse and better represented in some parts of our country but let us not underestimate the continuing power of faith to cross barriers that too often divide society at large.

This is just one of the reasons why I am optimistic about the future of our country.

Last month, I suspect that many of you will have been moved by the terrible television

pictures of flood-stricken Mozambique.

One image has stuck in my mind.

A woman was shown gathering together a few belongings into a blanket as a helicopter hovered ahead.

She clutched the blanket and her few worldly goods close to her body as she was slowly winched towards safety and away from the floodwater that had swamped her home.

Just as she reached the helicopter door the blanket fell from her grip and into the floodwaters.

Unlike many others she, at least, was safe but she had lost everything.

Her home, her possessions and, most probably, her livelihood.

Why am I optimistic after such a tragedy?

Because of how people responded.

Hundreds of thousands of British people gave to the Mozambique appeal - often through charities that are inspired or still run by Christians.

At times of great tragedy it is such generosity that gives me hope in the continuing possibility of goodness in people.

And stories like that other woman who gave birth to a baby daughter in a tree testifies to the courage and resilience of the human character in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Christian people should never be pessimistic people.

We must be active and courageous people who will always go that extra mile for the love of our neighbour.

Conservative values

So, in terms of policy, what have I learnt from listening to Christian people across Britain?

In a moment I would like to mention a few key issues that I believe are vitally important.

But I want to begin by examining the tendency to regard some kinds of issues as more morally significant than others.

For some the big moral issue is marriage and family life.

For others it is religious freedom and democracy.

Others focus on the sanctity of life.

And some on unemployment or poverty.

People often divide into two camps - those who focus on so-called personal moral issues and others who campaign on so-called social morality.

I think that distinction is artificial.

I do not believe that it is a distinction that can be found in the teachings of any of the great world religions.

Jesus called us to serve the lonely as well as the hungry; the prisoner as well as the homeless; and the orphan and widow as well as the sick.

Our moral responsibilities are learnt in the way we behave to our nearest and dearest.

The family is the best place to start - the subject, of course, which you are addressing this week.

The issue of family life and marriage was recently tackled by the Director of the Network of Sikh Organisations on Radio 4's Thought for the Day.

Why am I about to quote a Sikh at Spring Harvest?

Because we must never forget that other faith communities and millions of parents and people - who do not profess the Christian faith - share many of our concerns.

Whenever possible we must be uniters - not dividers.

It was during National Marriage Week that Indarjit Singh told this powerful story on Radio 4.

Two very young boys were fighting in a school playground.

After a teacher had separated the boys they were asked to explain their behaviour.

Looking at the teacher through eyes filled with tears one of the children said that it was because his mum had been stolen by the other child's dad.

It's a story that really affects me every time I think about it.

And it's a true story because it reflects the pain and hurt of hundreds of thousands of children in our country every year.

Some people say that the family is changing.

I don't believe that.

I fear it's breaking down.

The strength of the family is crucial to the nation's future.

In the family we learn moral responsibilities which we then apply to every aspect of community, national and international life.

So 'what about some specifics?' you might be saying to yourself.

Key Conservative policies

Well, in the next Conservative Party manifesto there will be policies to promote marriage.

It is unacceptable that Britain has the most anti-marriage tax system in Europe.

I want to change that.

Conservatives believe that parenting - motherhood, in particular - is not valued enough.

Mothers and fathers who choose to prioritise time with their children should not feel that government is pushing them into the workplace when their children are still young.

Again the tax system must be fairer towards those who sacrifice earnings in order to care for children or an elderly or infirm relative.

It is also vital that parents can have confidence in the values taught in schools.

That is why last November - before the issue became so newsworthy - I made it clear that Section 28 should stay.

I want to help churches and Christian charities to do more work in tackling social problems that have persisted despite the best efforts of governments.

In December I visited Yeldall drug rehabilitation centre.

Young men - many of whom had had little love in their lives - were being rescued from serious addictions by the care and witness of some very dedicated Christian people.

At the heart of the Christian message is forgiveness and these men were being told that whatever they might have done in their past they could make a fresh start.

This wasn't the first rehab centre that they had been part of but it was the first one that was making a difference.

It is unacceptable that religious charities that do good work - of a kind that is often unmatched by government programmes - are denied a fair share of public funds because of their religious basis.

If the religious basis is the key to their success then that basis should be protected and never eliminated.

It is also unacceptable that a glass ceiling has been placed over the vision of Christian broadcasters like Premier in London and United Christian Broadcasters.

With so much material on television that no parent would want their children to see we must give a full opportunity for Christians to put forward exciting and wholesome alternatives.

The next Conservative government will ensure that Christians have the same right to national and digital licenses as anyone else.

And our policy agenda must not stop at these shores.

Many of the world's leading development charities are based in Britain.

I want to help those charities to do more and we will make them full partners in the deployment of our international aid budget as we tackle poverty and poor education.

We must also start to recognise that the west does not have all the answers.

There is something in the strength of family and community life in many developing countries that we are in danger of losing.

We need to be more culturally sensitive in our development policy and we will eliminate the political correctness that represents a new form of imperialism.

A challenge for Christians and people of all faiths

So thank you for listening to me today.

Our country is a great country which is built on Judaeo-Christian foundations.

In many walks of national life, however, those foundations are under threat.

I want to see those foundations renewed - as do many people in other political parties.

So I want to leave you with a challenge.

If you want to do something about the way government works for parents and families and communities in every part of our country then get involved.

Don't stand on the sidelines but roll up your sleeves and get involved inside political parties.

If you are a natural Labour supporter write to Tony Blair and tell him I told you to!

If you are a Conservative don't limit your involvement to voting every few years or writing occasional letters on specific campaigns.

This is an important time with major constitutional and cultural issues at stake.

Come and make a difference to a country that still needs you.