



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND AND WALES

Spring 2011 Plenary: Social Action

9-12 MAY 2011, HINSLEY HALL, LEEDS

Deepening Social Engagement: Next Steps

At our meeting in November 2010 we reflected on the hardship and stress felt by many families and individuals at the present time. We committed ourselves to a programme of work to enable the Catholic community to contribute as fully as possible to a new culture of social responsibility.

We are grateful for the initial research undertaken by Caritas Social Action Network, an agency of the Bishops' Conference, and to all those who have participated in the events in Liverpool and London in February and April, which have marked the first stage of this programme.

In reflecting together on the outcomes from these events, we were conscious of the myriad ways in which Catholics contribute to civil society. Both in the Church and in society many of the most effective initiatives are the result of local or individual enterprise, fired by compassion and imagination. Alongside the excellent work of charities and religious orders with longstanding commitment to dedicated service, parishes contribute to the building up of community through attending to need with love and care.

There is a strong desire from many who are involved in Catholic social action to find ways of enabling this shared mission to become more visible without obscuring the distinctive identity of parish and diocesan initiatives, or of Catholic charities, religious orders or lay initiatives inspired by the Gospel.

Caritas Internationalis, and the global network of "Caritas" organisations across the world mandated by local Churches, offer a range of models through which the Church's social action can effectively manifest its common identity whilst respecting proper local autonomy. In England and Wales, CAFOD and Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) together are members of Caritas Internationalis. CAFOD rightly has a high profile in our community and a strong reputation through its excellent work in the field of international development and humanitarian aid. But the equally important and vital work in England and Wales done in the social action field, both within our own dioceses and by the many Catholic charities and religious orders, is much less visible.

We are determined to work together to develop the shared identity and common witness of Catholic social action in England and Wales with the aim of deepening the Church's social engagement at the service of the Gospel. We seek to bring about a better coordination of social action in England and Wales and to further promote a sharing of good practice. We have therefore decided to explore how best to bring together this work under the auspices of Caritas, whilst fully respecting the proper autonomy of local dioceses, groups and agencies involved in Catholic social action.

We ask Caritas Social Action Network, as our agency, to consult widely in coming months, with dioceses, CAFOD, and with others, to formulate practical recommendations for our next meeting in November 2011. This will lead to a Bishops' Charter together with recommendations for the development of Caritas social action at diocesan level, and for the national agency itself. A necessary dimension to this process will be the more detailed professional audit of social action already underway. This is a strategic step which will take some time to come to fruition, and it will properly require detailed consultation in all dioceses.

Alongside this development we will be seeking, within our dioceses, to strengthen links with local authorities. We will also continue to promote the contribution of Catholic social teaching to the development of public policy and the renewal of civil society through seminars and conferences.