

## Hansard Report – House of Lords, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2015

4.15 pm

**The Lord Bishop of Southwark (Maiden Speech):** My Lords, I address your Lordships' House on this first occasion with some trepidation. As I was advised not to drift into preaching mode, I will resist the temptation to expound on the interesting passage from scripture that the noble Lord has just quoted.

As a student of history, I am conscious of the dignity and importance of this House in the life of our nation, and I am acutely aware of the privilege of sharing in your Lordships' deliberations. Throughout my life I have been inspired by the model of service found in the life of Jesus Christ, and I am humbled when I reflect on where that service has led me—not least, now, to your Lordships' House. I will seek to serve to the best of my ability, using the gifts that God has given me.

I am most grateful for the welcome I have received from noble Lords, not least in the course of this debate, and in particular for the kindness of the members of staff who have helped me by way of induction, as well as assisting me in navigating the labyrinthine corridors of the Palace. One phrase that I have often been glad to hear is, "Head towards the river"—not, I trust, because there is any hope that the new prelate might jump in. Rather, I take great consolation that, whenever noble Lords take their libations on the terrace, they gaze across the river and into the diocese that I have the joy of serving as bishop.

The diocese of Southwark, with the notable exception of the home of the most Reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury, comprises all that part of London to the south of the river, from Kingston upon Thames and Richmond in the west through central London to well beyond the Thames Barrier at Woolwich. The fast-flowing northern boundary of the diocese is rich with the history of this great city. The diocese is of course more than that, extending down through Croydon into east Surrey, well beyond the M25.

It is a diocese of some 317 square miles, with some 2.7 million people served by nearly 300 parishes and some 700 clergy and 450 lay ministers. Many thousands of young people are educated in more than 100 church schools. Our parish churches reflect the huge diversity of the capital as they are enlivened by Christian witness from every part of the world. Our communities include some of the richest in London and some of the poorest, and range from the inner city to the rural. It is a world in a diocese with all the challenges and opportunities that arise in very diverse communities. I believe that our city is greatly enriched by the diversity that immigration brings, and I look forward to playing a part in debates on such issues. The diocese is further enriched by its companion links with the church in Zimbabwe, in which I also take a strong interest, as well as in the affairs of the Holy Land and the church in Syria.

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There are 16 local authorities and London boroughs in the diocese, which will see cuts of up to 15.5% in their funding as a result of the settlement that we are debating. This is in common with much of the rest of the country, and I note this with much regret. It is increasingly difficult to see how these cuts can be made effectively, given the huge savings that have already been visited upon local services.

I am acutely aware of the experience of a charity that is important to the life of my diocese and of which I have the honour of being president. Welcare, founded some 120 years ago by Edith Davidson and her husband Randall, who went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury, has always sought to work in partnership with churches, community groups and other voluntary agencies to support families and young people who are at risk. Welcare receives ongoing funding support from a variety of sources, including the diocese and many of our parishes. Since 2011, though, it has seen income from local authorities fall from £1.5 million to £500,000 and, as a consequence, much excellent work and the expertise of trained workers has disappeared, putting great pressure on a falling number of willing volunteers. This has meant that over the same period the number of families that the charity has been able to support has fallen from 5,400 to 1,050. By any reckoning this is a matter of grave concern, particularly as there is no evidence to suggest that the need is decreasing.

Indeed, the charity heard only yesterday that one local authority would continue to fund a service for a further year but without any increase in funding. So Welcare is expected to deliver the service at the same level of funding as was first awarded four years ago. This means absorbing all increases in costs, which amounts to providing a subsidy for the local authority. This is a common story in the voluntary sector, which continues to address very real need. The remarkable resources of voluntary endeavour are finite and it is morally wrong to push them to breaking point.

My concern is that, as yet, we do not pay enough attention to the very human needs that lie behind our financial decisions. In strategic terms, it would be better to continue to encourage early intervention and preventative work rather than storing up problems further down the road. That makes fiscal sense to me. However, far more importantly, it attends to another imperative that at times it is easy to lose sight of in financial discussions: namely, that of ensuring human flourishing.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/150122-0002.htm#15012270000379>