

“Social Exclusion”

My task now is briefly to introduce the term “Social Exclusion”.

This term has been rapidly adopted in political and academic circles to replace traditional terms such as ‘poverty’ and ‘inequality’. Why should that be? Because some will say, “There’s no such thing as poverty today – everyone can afford a TV so there cannot be a poverty problem. It’s all relative.”

The answer comes back, “Social Exclusion is the problem” And by that is meant - “Even if they have the basics of food and shelter, some people are just not allowed to play their full part in society. They are socially excluded, and that is both demeaning and unjust.”

The term “Social Exclusion” comes from primarily French usage used to describe this ‘new poverty’ in terms of alienation.

First, because of the inadequacy of the welfare system. That’s Exclusion from social protection. And Second: Denial of access to the benefits of belonging to society. Being pushed further out of the mainstream.

British usage – at first narrowed the French definition.

1. It initially concentrated on exclusion from the world of paid employment, and
2. It saw problems as stemming from over-dependence on welfare (too much social protection makes people lazy and they exclude themselves!)

American usage – moved even further from its French origins.

In the US the term Social Exclusion covers issues as diverse as gender, ethnicity, physical and mental handicap, sexual preference, age, and so on. Any group or individual which does not feel fully integrated and accepted into society – that’s termed “social exclusion”.

This American wide definition offers solidarity for those who feel unfairly treated, but it blurs the original focus upon those who do not even have the wherewithal to feed and clothe the kids. For despite its good intentions, the term ‘Social Exclusion’ must not be used to evade what remains a very real problem – Poverty.

Very recently: On 3rd November David Blunkett produced a booklet which takes the best of these developing definitions whilst moving them back again to something of their origins.

So Tony Blair says this: “Social Exclusion is about income but it’s about much more. It’s about prospects and networks and life chances.” [*Stockwell Park School, Lambeth, Dec 97*]

The Prime Minister has set up a Social Exclusion Unit with a direct line to himself. He has thereby given this issue top priority.

Because of the multiple nature of deprivation, it is agreed that an holistic approach being needed. “Joined-up answers” say the pundits:- - meaning that various government departments and voluntary organisations and groups such as ourselves must all address the issues together. The government ‘Policy Action Team #9’ have just stated that the

Government should specifically target the Faith Communities as crucial and effective partners in this whole issue. Their research tells them they must.

We will have our critique to make as partners, and our positive contributions too. We will bring our theology to bear upon the question – and I could talk at length about Trinitarian inclusion and Koinonia etc. (but I'll spare you that) And we can tell the stories of where things are being done – And that is now our intention to tell the stories. And for that I will now hand over to Bishop Roger to take us forward with stories of action and to introduce our Motion to Synod.