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Response to Stephen Timms, MP

Christopher M. Hays

Governments tend to get something of a drubbing in academic conferences. This may happen because academics have a keen awareness of the shortcomings of the state (and, perhaps, especially the political parties with which they do not identify), although at times one uncharitably suspects these critiques may have something to do with the scholarly self-importance! That notwithstanding, the tenor of the exchange following Stephen Timms's presentation was notably (and refreshingly) constructive, no doubt in good measure because of the tone Mr Timms himself set.

I am encouraged by Mr Timms's illustrations of how, in *word* and *deed*, the church can and has beneficially engaged with the government in order to ameliorate poverty. In *word*, the church communicates with the government (affirmatively and critically). Mr Timms explains how the intimate community knowledge of local congregations renders them uniquely capable of providing feedback to the government about which new policies and programmes are having a positive impact, and which measures require revision. He also affirms the critical role that churches and faith-based organizations can play in response to government failings; a case in point is the Trussell Trust's publication of the fact that the largest single reason people recur to their services is benefit delays.¹

In *deed*, the Church acts where the government falls short, and even pioneers new paths. Mr Timms celebrates the fact that when hunger afflicts people in Britain, Christian organizations do more than just rail against the state; they also take matters into their own hands, creating food banks and providing financial counselling and career services (e.g. the Christians Against Poverty debt centres and job clubs). But the church is not just the maid which picks up after the government; she also innovates and pioneers. Thus, Mr Timms rightly highlights initiatives like the *Jubilee 2000* campaign, Traidcraft and Street Pastors. Perhaps Mr Timms is especially attuned to the diverse ways in which the church and state can cooperate to heal poverty because of his role as chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society. But his testimony makes it clear that, in nations like the United Kingdom, the church most robustly

¹ The Trussell Trust, 'Primary Referral Causes in 2014–2015 to Trussell Trust Foodbanks' (<https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/>, accessed May 2016).

serves the poor when she cooperates with the state, in both critical and constructive capacities.

There is, naturally, more that could be said, beyond the themes Mr Timms had space to explore, although perhaps one theme is particularly noteworthy. During our days together in London, conference participants repeatedly affirmed the potency, personal resources and insights of the marginalized themselves, cautioning against the dangers of primarily viewing the poor as passive recipients of the church's and government's aid. The model of Asset-Based Community Development popped up time and again, since that approach recognizes the assets and skills possessed by members of low-income communities and fosters the mobilization of those community members in response to local challenges.² These same commitments are integral to the Umoja model practised around the world in Tearfund's 'Church and Community Mobilisation' programmes.³ These are exciting strategies, and the adoption of such approaches could help the church to continue to recover her identity as a community of the marginalized, a community in which the blessed poor bless the world. As my closing query for Mr Timms, I would be curious to hear about whether the UK government has mechanisms in place not only to seek out the regular feedback of low-income and even homeless citizens but also to engage them as constructive agents who can contribute to solving some of the nation's social problems.

² For more information, see the seminal book by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research, 1993).

³ See, e.g., Francis Njoroge, Tulo Raistrick, Bill Crooks and Jackie Mouradian, *Umoja: Co-ordinator's Guide* (Teddington: Tearfund, 2009).