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New world - new partners?

■ by Phil Jump

Well, Ed Miliband has finally admitted it, and hot on his heels has come Ed Balls announcing that any future Labour Government is highly unlikely to envisage a reverse in the current climate of significant public spending cuts. In a speech at London's OXO Tower in January, the Labour leader spoke of the need to develop a vision of "fairness in tough times." With all three major parties now committed to policies which acknowledge a significantly reduced public purse, this is perhaps now less of a political issue and more a matter of fact for us all.

And as politicians begin to ask how their particular values and priorities can prevail in this new economic climate, I wonder the degree to which the Church needs to ask this question too. The faith community has become an impressive deliverer of effective community services, but in doing so, is often reliant on statutory grants and commissioners; we are already seeing significant signs which question the sustainability of this approach.

Many eyes are on the business world, and there is largely an acknowledgement that the private sector may well need to take a greater share of social responsibility in the years ahead. In such a climate, the kind of relationships that many congregations have learned to foster with their local authorities, may now need to be forged with industry and commerce. Yet we often speak of one another as alien races who have yet to visit each other's planet, overlooking the reality that there are thousands of people in our cathedrals and chapels on a Sunday who will be found in the boardroom and workshop on a Monday.

If there was ever any doubt of the importance of seeking to bridge the gap between these two worlds, there are so many aspects of the present economic situation that can dispel them. Some of the more forward-thinking are even beginning to explore the role of the local church in initiating and developing new community enterprises – in such times, 'Good News to the poor' is the opportunity to find meaningful, accessible employment, something which a generation of young people are now sensing they have lost. Business leaders point out that many churches have an enviable understanding of their local community, and the potential markets and skills bases that exist there. We may be uncomfortable with such language, yet a re-discovery of our spirit of enterprise might well be the key to re-invigorating our evangelism too.

The Church can easily add her voice to the popular rhetoric which condemns all things corporate and profitable, and some deep-seated instincts may need to be re-examined before we can even countenance a different approach. Yet it seems that the truly prophetic are not those who simply add their own to the voices of the disaffected, but who in the Name of God and His Kingdom are willing to imagine the unimaginable and consider the unthinkable.

Few would dare to predict what kind of world will emerge from the present uncertainties, but the relationship between faith and business is likely to become increasingly important in the decades ahead. What is seen by many as often a largely academic and personal matter, looks set to become a key driver in mission. ■