

To integrate the spiritual and the material

An interview with the Rt Hon Paul Boateng MP



From left-right: Sir Bob Geldof, Rt Hon Paul Boateng MP, Dr Jemba (a local community/project leader).

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Brent South in North West London has a greater diversity of cultures than any other constituency in the UK and no one could be better suited to understanding and representing the people than Paul Boateng. Born in Hackney, East London of a British mother and a Ghanaian father he spent his childhood in Ghana where his father, a lawyer, served in Dr Nkrumah's government. Following the coup d'etat in 1966 when his father was thrown into prison without a trial, his mother packed two suitcases and brought 15 year old Paul and his sister back to Hertfordshire, England where he attended the local state grammar school and then Bristol University. Following in father's footsteps he became a lawyer and in 1987 entered Parliament and now serves as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. From his parents he learned how the material and spiritual could work together.

"Both my parents were politically active and had a spiritual life so the two things have always been present in my life," he told me. "I was christened in my father's village in Ghana in a Scottish Presbyterian church founded with my grandfather's help by Scottish Presbyterian missionaries. Later as a young lawyer I was brought to Methodism by the Revd Vic Watson, the superintendent minister of Fernhead Road Methodist Church and I began preaching very early on."

The beautiful Hindu Temple at Neasden is within Brent South and Paul was instrumental in its foundation and often visits there. "I am very fortunate that I represent a constituency with a very rich spiritual life of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jewish people." He smiles. "I think we gain a lot not only from our ethnic diversity but also from the multifaith

community we have. The places of worship are always full and while the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are stronger than the established ones we don't stand too much on denomination, so at Easter, when the churches unite behind the cross, they really work together."

He sees the role of the state not to support any one faith but create a context in which all faiths are recognised and respected "I am a great supporter of the work of the Revd Steve Chalke, the Baptist Minister who has produced *Faithworks*. We launched that at No 10, recognising the role of churches in community development and regeneration. And with the recent passing of the Christmas Bill we hope we have made it clear that Christmas has to be protected."

His busy life means that he is not able to preach as much as he would like but he said, "While there is a need to replenish oneself spiritually it can happen in all sorts of situations. You don't necessarily have to be preaching or praying or even in a church to find evidence of the work of the spirit. I met an Ethiopian woman in Addis a few weeks ago who is working on an holistic approach to the needs of people living in appalling conditions. It embraces their material needs, spiritual needs, their need to work and for healthcare and just to meet such a woman and to see her work and the difference it makes is a source of spiritual upliftment. There are many pinpoints of light like that and at times when one is low and the situation desperate and one reflects on ones own weakness such people can give one great strength."

He feels privileged to be one of the 17 members of the new Commission for Africa

initiated by the Prime Minister in February 2004 which aims to generate new ideas to make a difference for Africa while supporting existing work. He is only too aware of the difficulties facing the continent but is heartened by the fact that Jubilee 2000 has woken the world up to the importance of reducing debt and that churches are focusing much more on development and trade and that additional funding from the UK is easing the AIDS problem.

"In countries like Uganda we are seeing the tide of the HIV/AIDS pandemic being slowed. Africa is not a hopeless case," he assured me.

He reminded me too that the Christian church was in Ethiopia before it was in Britain. That Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus fled to Egypt to escape from Herod. And Egypt is in Africa.

"I think it is a time we need to be coming together across denominations, across faiths to ensure that we meet the central challenges of these times which I think is to integrate the spiritual and material to realise we can't be whole unless we do that. That we cannot find true happiness simply in the material world but at the same time we cannot respond to the challenges laid down by our Lord unless we recognise that the continuing material deprivation of two thirds of the world is a terrible scar on the face of humanity. It is a gaping wound in the body of Christ. Through our faith we have to be instruments of healing and see love not just as a sentiment but as a strategy."

KATY HOUNSELL-ROBERT