

engaging the public square

Philippa Taylor considers the public dimension of a student's faith



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Arriving at university you will become aware, if you aren't already, of a vast number of ethical issues: drug policies, mental health, abortion, reproductive technologies, genetic engineering, slavery, gender dysphoria, freedom of conscience, end of life decisions and organ donation, to name but a few.

My question is: 'Should we engage with ethical issues?' But it also asks: 'Should we

engage with ethical issues? (ie as individual students and as CMF?)

Let me answer both questions by suggesting just four reasons that I believe should drive us as Christians, individually and as a fellowship, to engage with ethical issues in the public square:

- for self-defence
- for the sake of others
- for moral reasons
- for stewardship and citizenship reasons

for self-defence

Much of society in the UK is growing increasingly hostile to the Christian message and its values. There seems to be increasing pressure on Christians to go against their consciences. For example, when talking about faith or praying with patients, considering abortion referral requests or perhaps even gender reassignment. When faced with such challenges, what should our reaction be? Do we escape or assimilate, or is there another option?

it is important that Christian health professionals speak up for others

for the sake of others

Being created in God's image means that we are all wonderful, mysterious, precious and unique beings, from conception through to death. But in God's creation plan it seems we are also designed to be fragile, frail, vulnerable and dependent. Because healthcare acts as one way through which human communities care for vulnerable people, it is important that Christian health professionals speak up for others.¹

We do this 'not with judgment in our voices but with tears in our eyes. We treat with respect the malformed baby, the person in a persistent vegetative state, the profoundly demented individual, the destitute homeless heroin addict'.²

The wider need for care clearly goes well beyond the vulnerable at the beginning and end of life and those with immediate medical needs. It needs to reach those being trafficked, abused, tortured, people who are homeless, lonely, in debt, in prison, hungry, struggling with pornography, alcohol abuse or poverty.

There is no lack of opportunity to help others, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

for moral reasons

We are engaged because we recognise that universal standards of right and wrong exist. Morality matters and when we fail to uphold what is right (as a society and individually), harm often follows. It is not always easy to uphold Christian moral views. But when challenged, rather than escaping or assimilating, John Stott gives another option: 'The calling of Christians is to be morally distinct without being socially segregated'.³

What might this mean for actual engagement? The lifestyle choices people make affect their lives and usually affect those around them too. Hence the involvement of many Christians in policy-making. Some are involved in restricting access to pornography, harmful drugs, online gambling and prostitution or, more positively, encouraging marriage, family life, health and wellbeing.

This is not to say people cannot make choices – people do not become moral simply through a change in law. But law and policies can encourage behaviour that is good and restrain immoral behaviour, and its impact on others.

for stewardship and citizenship reasons

We engage because we have been entrusted by God to care for his world. We are responsible to manage his world well and according to his desires and purposes.

Our role as stewards in the public square derives from our understanding that God instituted and designed government⁴ and we are to respect and be subject to governing authorities.⁵ Owners have rights, but stewards

biblical teaching, relevant issues

have responsibilities. We engage because we are responsible stewards, with respect, care and humility, and within the confines of the law.

We are citizens because we are created to be in community. We are not only individuals doing our own thing; we are individuals in community, bound by duties of care, responsibility and compassion to others.

What might this mean for engagement as students? This should drive concern for justice and a willingness to speak out against anything that leads to unjust treatment of colleagues or patients. It should encourage Christians to (continue to) promote a culture of care for others and to love and care for our beautiful world.

But, undoubtedly, our most powerful citizenship tool is prayer.

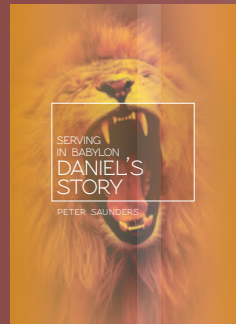
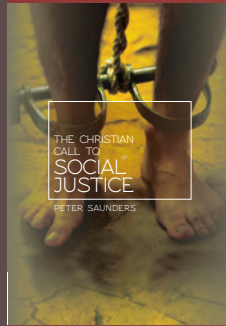
promote a culture of care for others and to love and care for our beautiful world

'Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper'.⁶

Lastly, *how* can we engage with ethical issues in the public square?

Being informed is a good place to start! Be aware of what is going on around you, of local and national debates, of resources that can help – *CMF blogs*, *CMF Ethics and Public Policy Newsletter* or *CARE's Impact Direct*. For more in-depth reading, look at *CMF's* submissions to policy consultations, *The Human Journey* course or *CARE's Finishing Line* study on the end of life.

To engage practically, we encourage members to respond to public consultations (see the *CMF website*), to email or write to



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decision-makers,⁷ to visit local MPs, to join medical organisations and/or stand for election on key committees and the BMA, to write articles and engage with social media and, of course, to pray.

The better informed you are, the better you will know how to engage and what to pray for. ■

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4. Romans 13:1
5. 1 Peter 2:13-17
6. Jeremiah 29:4-7
7. www.writetothem.com