



Fiona Usher, Team Convenor of Northumbrian Industrial Mission writes,

The Northumbrian Industrial Mission (NIM) includes an ecumenical team of lay and ordained Chaplains working with employers, employees, the unemployed and others in specific economic sectors.

Background

What NIM does

The origins of Industrial Mission lie in a concern for mission and a belief that to follow Christ means being with people where they are. The economy touches everyone's life - many of the local issues, which concern people, have economic roots, which they often feel inadequate to address. The Church needs to equip people for ministry and mission within this economic context. **Industrial Mission is in a unique position for such work, its strength coming from direct engagement with people on their own ground.** Industrial Mission is therefore very Christ-centred in its theology. Believing that God is active in the world, we look for signs of God's activity in unaccustomed places, wrestling with the nature of Christian faith and with the nature of our society. NIM is one of approximately 30 Industrial Mission teams working ecumenically across the U.K.

NIM has witnessed increases in stress, temporary employment, short-term contracts, restructuring (all of which can lead to job insecurity) and other changes in employment practice. Even the newer, high technology industries of the region are subject to changes in the global economy that can lead to contraction and closure, as well as expansion and inward investment.

It is within this changing, complex, and contradictory economic order that the Church must speak of God, being engaged with the pain and the possibilities, which both individuals and institutions experience. God is already present and working in the world, so to be serving the kingdom means being a Christian in the world – living out the gospel through the structures and mechanisms of our society.

What Chaplains Do

Through regular workplace visiting Chaplains meet large numbers of people, some of whom have no other contact with the Church. Through pastoral involvement and engagement with issues they learn about people's hopes and concerns earning for the Church the right to formulate comment on wider prophetic themes. Chaplains are actively involved in a large number of workplaces ranging from Newcastle International Airport to Nissan, Fire Services to Port of Tyne, Tyne Tees Television Centre to Call Centres, MetroCentre and ASDA stores.



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Part of an Industrial Chaplain's task is to help individual Christians make a connection between their faith and their everyday lives and to encourage local churches to engage with the economic life of their area. ***At the heart of all this activity is the belief that God is at work throughout the world and throughout the week.***

The issue

Through the work of its Chaplains, NIM became increasingly aware of the unprecedented changes within the economy and the impact this is having on many workplaces and the way that it is affecting ordinary people.

To enable Christian reflection and action on the effects of the current economic situation we got in touch with a number of key economic partners in the region (One North East, North East Chamber of Commerce, Regional TUC, Jobcentre Plus, and VONNE) asking for their own perspective on the specific impact on the North East, over the next couple of years. As a result of these conversations an economic briefing paper for the Church Leaders and the Churches was produced and circulated.

The report provided a 'snapshot' of the economic situation in the North East. The situation continues to change and it seems no-one quite knows what to expect or how long this recession will last. It is hoped that the report will provide a springboard for further action from the Churches.

The following summary paper was subsequently requested by the Church Leaders. (A full copy of the report is available from Fiona Usher, email: fiona-nim@btconnect.com).



Economic Briefing paper (a summary)

Economic Context

At the risk of stating the obvious, we're facing a global economic slowdown. It's not just the North East of England. Despite various reports that the region will be left relatively unscathed in the slowdown, we need to have a realistic assessment of the potential impact of a national and international economic slowdown. We aren't immune despite the major progress our economy has seen over recent years.

In the North East, the first effects of the current economic difficulties were felt in the financial services sector witnessed by the problems at Northern Rock in Autumn 2007. Working people watched in disbelief as the Northern Rock Bank, once thought to be the bedrock of a thriving financial services industry, collapsed. This was the first real sign that worse was yet to come. Difficulties in the wider financial sector soon adversely affected the availability of credit and the housing market nationwide and hit businesses hard, as they struggled to access funds to invest and to keep their businesses ticking over.

Business and consumer confidence has fallen dramatically over the past few months. Evidence points to a sharp slowdown in the regional economy with business output and new orders falling fast as the economic slowdown affects our firms' markets. The slowdown is now spreading across a much wider range of sectors (eg. see the new report launched on 20th May by VONNE "Surviving Not Thriving" assessing its effect upon the Third Sector as a whole www.vonne.org.uk/survey). The credit squeeze is beginning to bite with many firms starting to respond to the downturn by cutting staff or shifting to short time working. This is set to hit the labour market hard in the coming months.

But what started as a crisis of confidence in the banking sector is now threatening the living standards and future security of millions of ordinary working people putting jobs, homes, savings, pensions and essential public services at risk. Even those in relatively secure employment are voicing concerns about rising living costs and how they will manage to make ends meet.

Unemployment has risen since January 2008 with signs that some parts of the region are being hit harder by job losses: the rise in Job Seekers Allowance claimants in Durham over the past year has been around twice that in the region as a whole. There has also been a significant increase in unemployed people from management and executive level jobs and the inevitable social impact is now covering all sectors of the community.



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Large scale redundancies have been announced at Nissan and throughout the automotive and construction supply chains. Nissan employs 5,000 people, but was forced to cut production after a global slump in sales. Before Christmas 400 temporary staff learned their contracts would not be renewed and the company has since declared a further 1,200 jobs will go, making 1 in 4 workers at the car plant redundant. The viability of the company supply chain, which provides 2,500 jobs, was in doubt when Unipres axed 96 full time posts after already letting 200 temporary staff go. However 16 firms in the supply chain have since met with development chiefs to discuss public sector support and put in place a plan of action.

Although there is a noticeable downturn in the construction, manufacturing and retail sectors, Jobcentre Plus forecasts show that care, security, hospitality and contact centres will continue to recruit in the New Year.

A bad spell for some in the economy leads to rising fortunes for others. As house repossessions increase and businesses close down, recruitment agencies anticipate employment growth in debt collection businesses. The Listening Company, Student Loans Company and Phillips Bailiffs are all recruiting.

Concerns for the Region

Some of the main concerns in our region are that:

- Lower bank lending could threaten recent progress in boosting our business base;
- A vicious cycle in which weak business and consumer confidence, falling business investment and rising unemployment feed off each other;
- We've a number of big employers with a large regional footprint e.g. Nissan with a significant number of supply chain companies in the region;
- Weakening export markets matter to the region because we are traditionally one of the few net goods exporting regions in the UK;
- Despite a lot of progress in recent years, we still lag behind in the region on a lot of indicators of multiple deprivation, so some communities are quite exposed to the impact of an economic slowdown.

What is happening in the workplace?

Average hours are being cut and bonus payments scaled back, cuts are being made in other areas such as graduate recruitment and the use of Agency staff. As the recession deepens however, a growing proportion of employers are contemplating redundancies. Reports of planned wage and recruitment freezes have become more widespread.



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Trade unions have expressed profound concerns that temporary and agency workers are often the first to be let go during a recession, and because they are not being made redundant, often fail to qualify for emergency support and retraining packages. Furthermore the TUC believes vulnerable employment will continue because some employers, particularly in low paid sectors, will cut staff terms and conditions and move staff onto casual contracts to achieve perceived savings. During a recession the risk of vulnerable employment is greater as job security fears may lead people to tolerate exploitative treatment and employers use an insecure economic climate to justify poor workforce strategies. Inequality and the threat of poverty can act as divisive forces in the workplace and wider community, demanding collective resolve to prevent intolerance, prejudice and abuse from spreading.

Recently the ETUC declared this crisis “must mark an end to casino capitalism”.¹ It is time to radically rethink how the economy operates and the foundations upon which our prosperity is built. We have a shared responsibility to ensure wealth serves the interests of the many hard working people who help to create it and is not squandered by a privileged few. Trade union leaders are calling for an alternative economic settlement founded on the principles of inclusive economic growth, social justice and equality. Future economic growth should be underpinned by good quality, well paid employment, effective regulation, a system of fair taxation and investment in public services as drivers of sustainable development.

Public Finances

A major hole is opening up in the public finances with the economic slowdown reducing the amount of money coming into government through taxation raised on earnings (income tax), profits (corporation tax) or spending (VAT, Stamp duty). At the same time, unexpected demands on public finances, such as the part nationalisation of the banking industry and further calls on the social security budget as unemployment rises, serve to widen this hole. Long term there will be less money in the bank for public services than previously expected.

Regional Response

A number of public agencies across the region are working to tackle the effects of the recession on firms and people. This cuts across business support activities to help firms survive and grow. It also focuses on the direct human impact from job loss through activities to help people facing redundancy and the associated impact on their income, families and communities. However, it's not just about the public sector: supporting

¹ Unison Financial and Economic Crisis Statement agreed by Unison National Executive Committee 8 October 2008



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those at risk in the face of an economic downturn and promoting the recovery which will come, is a job for public and private sector as well as civil society.

Public sector agencies are ploughing significant resources into driving the region out of recession. A Skills and Employment Response Group has been formed by government agencies region-wide to advise Ministers how they will respond to challenges posed by the recession. The response is based on four principles:

- **Resilience** – supporting employers to retain as much of their workforce as possible during the downturn and cope with a hostile economic environment;
- **Redundancy/Redeployment** – minimise the number of people who become unemployed. If and when they do, move as many people as possible from a job to another job;
- **Recruitment/Retention** – Ensure re-entry to the world of work is as swift as possible for people who are unemployed and that they are appropriately supported, once in employment, to retain their jobs;
- **Readiness for the Upturn** – Look beyond the downturn and continue investing in upskilling the workforce to prepare for a more prosperous economic future.

Jobcentre Plus will provide information about other jobs within the labour market, match redundant workers to vacancies, improve their job search skills, help draft CVs, work on interview technique and provide general information about benefits and process claims. The emphasis is on keeping aspirations high, supporting the upskilling of individuals, work-focussed interviewing for all unemployed people and post employment support when people return to work.

It is essential that we do everything to keep people close to the employment market so that, when we do begin to get to the other side of the recession, people are immediately ready to pick up the work opportunities that arise. It is hard to tell how long the recession will last and unemployment is expected to rise further. Nonetheless, job vacancies continue to be notified to Jobcentres, although there is still a concern about potential mismatches between the skills of those seeking work and the jobs on offer.

On a more positive note the region also has a big strategic investment which it is hoped will help towards recovery. The North East Process Industry Cluster which represents 500 Pharmaceutical, Biotechnology, Speciality, Polymer and Rubber, Petrochemical and Commodity Chemical companies, is currently investing £7bn into the region by 2015.

The recession is undoubtedly providing the region with difficult challenges but the regional economy is still moving and there is a view that its relatively diverse nature (as compared to the early 1980s) will enable it to take advantage of the economic upturn when recovery does come around. Chaplains are well placed to assist in the workplace by providing support and informing worried employees about the help which is available and by signposting them to the various agencies involved. VONNE (the



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regional infrastructure body for the voluntary and community sector), believes that there are some opportunities as well as threats in the current situation.

There are skills gaps at managerial level in some voluntary organisations and for the first time in a number of years there are people with such skills in the labour market. Volunteering is also recognised as a prime route to employment and people can be encouraged to take this route in order to increase confidence, maintain motivation, and develop new skills. *VONNE welcomes the help of Workplace Chaplains in getting this message across to people who are under threat of redundancy and in signposting them to the various agencies involved.* Workplace Chaplains in their day to day contacts stand alongside those at the sharp end of the financial crisis within a wide variety of businesses across the region and see at first hand how these facts and statistics translate into real situations with real individuals.

The Churches' Contribution in the workplace

The following reports are from workplace chaplains who were asked by NIM to gather evidence '**on the ground**', from their day to day contacts as they **stand alongside those at the sharp end of the financial crisis** within a wide variety of businesses across the region. This information is intended to complement the economic overviews by highlighting how these facts and statistics translate into real situations with real individuals – the human face behind the statistics!

It also helps to highlight one of the positive responses the Church in the region (which ecumenically sponsors the work of NIM) is **already making** to support ordinary people, in their daily lives, at what is for many a very worrying time.

Nissan

Revd Stephen Hazlett has been interviewed recently by Metro Radio and BBC Radio Newcastle. The statement below was sent to the local media on behalf of Bishop Tom Wright and Revd Stephen Hazlett.

“I was horrified to hear of the Nissan redundancies’, said Bishop Tom Wright. ‘The global recession really comes home to roost when a well-run, highly productive plant with workers of great skill and dedication has to take action like this. We will need that skill and dedication again, and I hope the whole community can pull together to support the families immediately affected, and the wider circles where their sudden unemployment will be felt. I and others are working and praying for national policies that will address the underlying causes of the present crisis. Meanwhile, we will do all we can to help.’

The Revd Stephen Hazlett, Industrial Chaplain at the Nissan plant, has been working closely with the management offering support to the workers. ‘This situation has been feared for some time now and all the workforce have been



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notified of my availability for pastoral support over the past few weeks,' he said. 'We can't give people back their jobs but we can offer a listening ear when people are afraid for their futures.' Although Nissan are looking to make further cuts in the permanent workforce, Stephen also wanted to emphasise that the management are very keen to work with the Works' Council and the unions in negotiating further job cuts. We continue to hope that the global economy will recover in time".

Retail

"**M**any folk, whether in their own business or working for someone else, are trying to be very stoic.....'a lot of this is out of my hands, I'm just doing my job as best as I can', people are fearful because they don't know who's going to be the next one to close, because they say 'who does know?'. Also at this time of the year there is a natural slump and some retailers are waiting to see what happens after the slump to see if it picks up for them. They are anxious for members of their families too:

Impact on workers

- increased uncertainty re: own jobs - stress - impact on families etc;
- having to face customers who are angry e.g. where a company cannot fulfil orders due to going into administration;
- contractual conditions being watered down e.g. losing premium pay rates for Sunday working ("But at least we still have a job" - so this is accepted);
- speed of change – e.g. one of my stores where it was only about two weeks between the message from head office that they were in trouble, to the store closing;
- cutting back on extra hours, overtime, temporary staff for busy periods, student employment - all resulting in even more strain on core staff;
- middle managers particularly (as ever) getting pressure both ways - from head office and staff;
- even more driven target setting.

Issues for Churches

- more than ever churches need to be seen as a presence and heard as a voice, to show concern and solidarity;
- pastoral care role;
- the Church's role in maintaining / building spiritual health & social capital especially in the North East.

"**T**he closure of stores in the shopping centre I chaplain at was devastating. It really brought home to me the meaning of the words 'grief stricken'. There was a genuine sense of loss of friendship and of course uncertainty for those left



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behind. If the government is serious about 'social cohesion' then this economic situation needs to be a priority because it is fracturing communities.

Shopping centres are places of community, shared spaces, and very important - especially in poorer areas of the country, where people cannot drive or do not own cars to just drive across to another town to buy things. The impact of stores such as Woolworths closing is another blow because they are the sort of stores that keep shopping centres in poorer areas going. Apparently they get some sort of financial incentive to open in places, because their presence is (or was) important to bring other stores to open in shopping centres, but the situation is so bad that even that obviously didn't work anymore. However, other stores have said that they have always run on a shoestring of staff and very rarely meet their targets - staff in such stores have said so far they are ok because of this, but this doesn't mean conditions of employment are going to get any better either. The pound shops are thriving - and as shop owners have said 'it is the people with money this economic situation is affecting' while the poor have always struggled. Interesting perspective but one that doesn't include those who have just lost their jobs! ”

“I can fully share my own workplace situation quite freely, which echoes that of the chaplaincy visits too. The staff were asked if they would consider voluntary redundancies in the face of change. The impact on staff at both places has been the same – quite dramatic stress: fear of the future and its financial impact on the family situation – this on top of normal financial stress, impact of the credit crunch, etc. People have real concerns about mortgages and debt, unemployment and the recent amendments to the benefit system. Having to wait too long to hear or being ‘kept in the dark’ which brings delays to life planning – looking for new work, down to planning holidays etc. A lack of understanding by management, and seemingly ineffectual trade union input. There is considerable strain on relationships with fellow colleagues, much more sickness and stress related illness.

Our congregations are filled with members and adherents from all of society, I wonder if we are aware of their feelings and do we preach or pastorally care with sufficient understanding. My church is about to urge members to take on extra responsibilities for worship etc., and this surely would only increase pressure on a congregation needing to rest and find some peace. This is being construed as self-interest for the Church, not care of the congregation. The prophetic voice of the church needs to be heard strongly in this time of crisis. The only time they make headlines is regarding internal or synod matters and the comments from the people I visit are usually very negative regarding the church – although I know individual chaplains are regarded highly in many cases. Sorry for the rant, but as you can tell the pressure is getting to me too! I am pleased to see some action by the wider church.”



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The following prayer has been published by the Church of England to show its concern for those who have been made redundant:

Prayers for the credit crunch

'Redundant' – the word says it all – useless, unnecessary, without purpose, surplus to requirements.

Thank you, Heavenly Father, that in the middle of the sadness, the anger, the uncertainty, the pain, I can talk to you.

Hear me as I cry out in confusion, help me to think clearly, and calm my soul.

As life carries on, may I know your presence with me each and every day.

And as I look to the future, help me to look for fresh opportunities, for new directions.

Guide me by your Spirit, and show me your path, through Jesus, the way, the truth and the life.

Amen."

Lord God, we live in disturbing times:

Across the world,

Prices rise,

Debts increase,

Banks collapse,

Jobs are taken away,

And fragile security is under threat.

Lord God, meet us in our fear and

Hear our prayer, be a tower of strength amid the shifting sands, and a light in the darkness.

Help us receive your gift of peace, and fix our hearts where true joys are to be found,

In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

Peter Moger,

C of E National Worship Development Officer

The Vision of God

Lord my vision is dull, Lord my heart is weary, my will is weak;

Open my eyes to Your glory, Renew my heart with Your love,

Strengthen my will with Your purpose and make me aware of You.

You indwelling, You abiding, You are in this city,

All things reside in You.

David Adam

Summary produced by Fiona Usher (NIM), May 2009 (fiona-nim@btconnect.com)