

THOSE WHO SHOW UP

It is not the critic who counts; not the person who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends themselves in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if they fail, at least fail while daring greatly, so that their place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

From a speech given by the former President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, on 23 April 1910

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*To Jen and Jesse
I am so very glad that you showed up.*

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FOREWORD

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby

Upon entering politics, Charles de Gaulle is reported to have remarked: ‘I have come to the conclusion that politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.’ This is the sentiment that can be found in this book. It is a robust call for us – all of us – to re-engage, or in some cases participate for the first time, in the political world. This is not a book about supporting any one party, but about encouraging people to engage with politics deeply and critically, as a means of shaping our life together.

There are many reasons why people, particularly amongst the younger generations, choose not to engage with politics. Disaffection with those who have been elected to represent us, pessimism about the prospects of anything changing, the complexities of life simply taking priority over getting to the ballot box or the local council meeting. These are all valid reasons for scepticism, but not for apathy.

Andy Flannagan’s call to action, in tandem with the important work of Christians in Politics and the ‘Show Up’ campaign in the run up to the General Election, is challenging and encouraging in equal measure. It is built on a deeply Biblical understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ – the tour through what the Bible has to say about engaging in what we today call politics is impressive. Andy is reaching out, inspiring and equipping us to become engaged with a system that affects us deeply, and through which we in turn can effect radical and transformational change across our society.

This is not to say that we will all agree with everything Andy writes in *Those Who Show Up*. Politics would be extremely dull if we all agreed on everything. There is joy in diversity, and we should not be afraid to disagree with one another, but in a way that models the reconciling love of Jesus. Good disagreement is a gift that the church can offer the world around it – and our political system could certainly do with a healthy dose of it.

The stories that Andy tells in *Those Who Show Up* are testament to his experience of political activism, particularly the work done in partnership with his co-Directors at Christians in Politics, who between them represent the Christian groups affiliated to the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties.

The growth of this organisation is good news – not least because it is drawing people in from across the political and theological spectrum. The ‘kingdom first’ approach that is front and centre of the organisation’s approach to politics, and which Andy articulates most persuasively in this book, is where political engagement should start – casting our ballot in an election or standing for election only make sense in a context of thoughtful reflection.

There are many aspects of modern life that seem to pull us away from a concern for each other’s well-being. Christians must be actively concerned with the pursuit of the common good and the flourishing of all in our society – be it local, national or global. The most practical way of doing this is through the political process in its broadest sense. Church people are better placed to do this than they often realise. We are usually very involved in the community, have good relationships with a wide range of people and institutions and can mobilise people on important issues. We have what they call in the business, leverage.

We must go into the political arena with our eyes open, because it can be a difficult place to live within. Andy fully recognises the traps and pitfalls that we may encounter, but also offers encouragement and support for how we can live authentic and politically-engaged lives.

I do hope that you will *show up*.

Justin Welby, London, 2015.

INTRODUCTION

In the second series of the animated TV show *The Simpsons* there is a fascinating episode called 'Lisa's Substitute'. It includes an amusing subplot set in her brother Bart's classroom in which he and his classmates must elect a class president. Their teacher, Mrs. Krabappel, nominates the outstanding pupil Martin Prince, while Sherri and Terri nominate the less-than-outstanding Bart. During a 'presidential debate' Bart tells a series of infantile jokes which win the support of his classmates, much to the disgust of Martin who wants to focus on 'the issues'. Bart is buoyed by the frenzied adulation like a teenage pop sensation. The groundswell is so overwhelming that Bart is obviously going to win by a landslide. He is, in fact, so confident of his victory that he does not even bother to vote. However his huge confidence has spread to his wide-eyed followers, who similarly do not feel the need to turn up at the ballot box. In fact the only kids who do vote are Martin (who votes for himself) and Wendell Borton (who also votes for Martin). Nobody had predicted that the kid famed for his nerdiness and nausea would be the kingmaker!

The point here is not whether Bart should have been elected class president. This is not Florida and the year is not 2000. The point is also not whether Bart would have made a better class president than Martin (I think we all know the answer to that one). The point is that the firmly held opinions of Bart's classmates counted for nothing because they did not show up.

There is a difference between holding an opinion and actually expressing it. Then there is a further difference between just expressing that opinion out into the ether, and formally standing by it in something like an election. You can wish me ‘Happy Birthday’ on Facebook all you like, but it will mean an awful lot more to me if you actually show up at my party in person. One action takes three tenths of a second and the other takes considerably longer. Much of our modern-day campaigning is effectively cost free. We click and share a good cause and that’s that. This book is about the intriguing discipleship and adventure that happens when what we believe starts to cost us something in terms of time, effort or reputation. Sorry – I hope you weren’t expecting a slick sales pitch.

‘Hang on, is this another book telling me how important it is to vote?’ I can already hear you saying, ‘But there isn’t anyone I want to vote for – I am not impressed by any of the parties.’

Tell me about it. No, this isn’t another book trying to convince you to do that. It isn’t trying to get you to vote. It’s going to suggest that you could be voted for. It’s going to suggest that it could be your name on the ballot paper. Or that you could be helping someone whose name is. It’s going to suggest that, in one small way, Martin Prince could be your role model for life.

People are hugely unimpressed with politics and politicians. This book will delve into some of the reasons for this, but will also point in the direction of some remedies. The passion expressed in the Scottish referendum campaign in 2014 showed that people do care about how their countries and communities are run. The question is, will we allow those thoughts to recline as mere opinions, or will we let them take a stand? All of us know the frustration of harbouring an opinion while feeling unable to express it meaningfully. In home or work contexts it usually leads to a lot of bitterness and resentment. As a nation, and especially as the church, we are in danger of sliding in that direction, unless we break out of the mindset that we will always be commentators, and never participants.

Don't just send. Be sent

A few years ago we developed a campaign based around a postcard. Written boldly at the top were the words 'Do not send this postcard'. It was aimed at a generation of Christians who had spent the last decade sending postcards. Many postcards. I was one of them. Those postcards were about all manner of important issues – like third world debt, trade rules, abortion, trafficking and climate change. They were sent to those in positions of power who we hoped would note the strength of opinion of a large number of people on the given subject. But our new postcard had no address and no space for a stamp. It simply said 'Have you ever sent a campaigning postcard? Did you hope that the person who read it had the passion to make change happen? We think YOU could be that person. Don't just send. Be sent.'

This call to apostleship was an attempt to flip our assumptions as Christians. We can be led by church culture to believe that any leadership gifting we may have is primarily designated for leading within the four walls of the church, rather than in society at large. We may pay lip service to the idea of Christians leading 'out there', but our church culture often screams the opposite. I grew up wanting to be a worship leader partly because I saw lots of worship leaders heralded. I also grew up wanting to work for Christian organisations because it was their leaders and work that were held up to me as examples. I wasn't exposed to too many Christian businessmen or journalists.

You don't need me to remind you that the church hasn't always been successful in influencing society with its firmly held beliefs in recent years. One reason is this lack of showing up in public leadership. We declare our opinions loudly to our own kind or on the internet, but fight shy of working with or building relationships with those who may not agree with us. Perhaps we also just don't want the responsibility of public office.

So showing up is not just about voting. Although that is obviously a good start. It's not just about making a mark on a ballot paper, but leaving your mark on society. This is about representing

yourself and potentially many others. I am suggesting that your vote could just be the start of you making significant decisions, rather than the end. Will we just follow, or, in the pattern of Jesus, might we serve and lead?

Those who show up

So to the title. No one seems to be certain who first coined the famous phrase, 'Decisions are made by those who show up'. Its potential authors include a range of people from former US Presidents to movie-maker Woody Allen, and it had something of a renaissance when it was used in the American TV show *The West Wing*.

But whoever first uttered the phrase, it is hard to argue with. History is made by those who show up. It always has been. (It is also written by those who win the wars, but that's the subject for another book entirely.) Decisions are made by those who *show up*. Not necessarily the smartest, not necessarily the most qualified, not necessarily those of the best character, not necessarily those who may have gleaned some divine wisdom, but by those who, like Wendell Borton, simply show up. It is sobering, but perhaps also empowering. You don't need outrageous gifting to show up. You just need a body.

The same is true throughout the stories of Scripture. Yes, at times God moves in miraculous ways without human agency, but much more frequently he moves through one or more of his unremarkable people who seem to be in the right ordinary place at the right time. The CVs of Gideon, Moses or Rahab were not exactly screaming out for their respective jobs. They just showed up in obedience.

'Where do people show up?' I hear you cry. They show up in a variety of places which may not always be obvious. They show up at local residents' meetings. They show up at parents' associations. They show up at safer neighbourhood groups. They show up at town council meetings. They show up at political party branch meetings. You may well be one of them.

At our local Tenants' and Residents' Association, when we come to vote on, say, where to develop a new garden project, it might seem obvious that it would be best to place it in front of Tricia's flat, because there are lots of passionate gardeners nearby. But if Tricia and her friends don't turn up to the meeting, their votes cannot be counted. They can complain all they want afterwards, but the bottom line is that they weren't there. Gardens – and history – are made by those who show up.

You see, the places that these people show up are not the fun places. These places generally involve chairpersons, secretaries, treasurers and minutes. These places are generally dusty old halls. These places don't have welcome teams with Fairtrade coffee, doughnuts and biscuits, and if they do manage a biccie, it'll probably just be a Rich Tea.

But these people run the world, in the macro and the micro. There are some seriously hard yards to do. There is a lot of tiresome, repetitive work that is non-negotiable. And to get to elevated positions these people have been showing up at some pretty dull meetings for a long time. But we rarely think about that because we usually only hear about them once they've got to the top.

When we reflect on history we do try to remember those who showed up, but our focus tends to be on the endpoints rather than the starting points. We forget that in between someone forming an opinion, and the transformation of society occurring, a lot of hard work happened. The activists in the Civil Rights Movement didn't just believe racism was wrong. They showed up. The Suffragettes didn't just believe women should have the right to vote. They showed up. And it cost them. We don't often read about all the meetings that paved the way for those mass movements. And there were many of them. But they don't make great movies.

To give you an example, here is a summary of the minutes of the very first meeting of a campaign group. (Even the word 'minutes' has you dropping off, doesn't it?)

Those who show up

- They decided that the current law was bad and that the committee's main aim was to persuade other people of that fact, mostly by producing publications.
- They decided who could be on the committee and that the quorum would be three members – i.e. the minimum number who had to be present for a meeting to count.
- They chose one of the group to be Treasurer but then said he couldn't spend any money unless the whole committee said he could.
- They agreed to announce what they had decided, then ask other people to join and send money.

Then they adjourned and went for a drink. In fact I could still take you to that very pub. It didn't exactly feel like a dramatic start. But these were the minutes of the first meeting on 22nd May 1787 of what would become the London Abolition Committee whose aim was to make the slave trade illegal. You can sit in the British Library holding those minutes, reading the original record book. There is no getting away from the fact that the meetings sounded quite dull. But, year by year, through the leadership of folks like William Wilberforce, Olaudah Equiano, Elizabeth Heyrick and Thomas Clarkson, the campaign gathered steam, until eventually on 1st May 1807 the Bill outlawing the slave trade took effect. I think we can agree that even though it took twenty years, it was worth showing up at that first meeting.

My hope and prayer is that this book will encourage you to show up, as they did.

1

SHOWING UP: LUTON

I am proud to say that I lived, for seven-and-a-half years, in Luton. It doesn't have the best reputation in the world. A quick drop into Luton airport before heading on to London or somewhere more exotic is the extent of most folks' interaction with the place. This inevitably reinforces its image. Think quite a lot of concrete, a town centre built around a 1960s shopping precinct, and Lorraine Chase's accent, and you are getting the picture. Not exactly the Cotswolds. But I loved the place and its people.

Among the folks I knew best in Luton were some incredible youth workers. These guys had a huge heart for the town and especially its young people. Week by week I would hear about, and at times experience up close, story after story of the very beautiful but very broken young people of Luton. The level of investment my friends made into these young lives was inspiring. Like Charlie's investment into a kid called Matt. So many nights in casualty, so many false starts as the drug habit kicked in again, so much pain as he stole from the homes who took him in.

Many of these kids had what I could only describe as a reverse head start. They had been left with huge psychological scars caused by acts of omission or commission. By abusive or alcoholic parents, or by parents simply not being around. You could see all too plainly the difference this made to their interaction with others and their reactions to stressful circumstances. In their actions they called loudly for attention, having been given little in their own families. Lies planted deep in their souls about rejection or ugliness needed rewriting. These young people were impressive in their desire to

persevere in the midst of these challenges, and it was a privilege to watch some beautiful transformations happen. On recognising that they were unconditionally loved, and on finding an accepting community, beautiful green shoots grew up through the concrete.

During this time I met a young guy called Gavin Shuker. Gavin was born and bred in Luton. He attended his local comprehensive school and sixth form college, and then won a scholarship to Cambridge University. There he joined a vibrant student-focused church, but felt a strong call to return home to Luton to plant a new church. He convinced a group of fellow Cambridge graduates to follow him to Luton – not the most traditional next step after Cambridge! They started a church and began to serve their community in Luton, slowly growing as a body of believers and seeking to bring the kingdom in every sphere of local life.

They got alongside homeless people, students, and those involved in the sex trade. However, before long, some of them began to realise that the individuals they were helping were in many cases the victims of dysfunctional systems and structures. Their problems were not only personal. The abuse they suffered was allowed – enabled even – because of loopholes in regulations, or lack of focus and resources in applying them. Things like regulations forcing trafficked workers into self-employment, so that they had no legal recourse to an employer. The church were waking up to the web of factors that affect a life, and they were not content to just be the ones applying the sticking plaster. Many of the decisions that were needed were made at council or national level and were therefore political decisions, so it made perfect sense for the church members to get involved politically.

As part of this, some of them joined the local Labour party. Their youthful enthusiasm and proficiency was noticed quickly, and before long Gavin was organising the website and database of the local party. Gavin was then also given a part-time job working with the sitting MP for Luton South. His leadership and communication skills were being noticed, but he had no ambitions beyond leading the church and being present in the midst of the local political world.

Then, out of nowhere, the expenses scandal of 2009 struck Westminster. One of those who had to resign was the MP for Luton South, and, after some prayer and discussion, Gavin surprised many by deciding to stand for selection to replace her. There was no dramatic call. Having been content to serve as a normal member, an opportunity had presented itself and he calculated he was in as good a position as anyone to serve his town. So he put his name forward. He was prepared to show up. There were a large number of contenders for the position and everyone was sick of the endless fliers. But no one in Luton had ever received a DVD through their door encouraging them to vote. And he was a dynamic young candidate. After an extraordinarily tight, and at times difficult battle, Gavin was selected to be Luton South's Labour parliamentary candidate.

However, that was just the start of the hard work. The antics of the departing MP had left local people angry at the Labour party, and nationally people were migrating away from Labour in sizeable numbers. But Gavin's fresh passion began to attract many folks who had previously not been involved in politics. Diehard local Labour party members were enthused by a movement of people campaigning for Gavin, some of whom weren't even party members.

To cut a long story short, the end result was that in May 2010, a 28-year-old church leader became the Member of Parliament for Luton South. Stop for a moment and take that in. The obstacles that we imagine lie in wait for us because we are Christians often just aren't there. There is no glass ceiling. The key to Gavin's success was not simply his winsome engagement, but the fact that this was an adventure that a community of people went on together. As I spent time with them during the campaign, I was continually amazed by how others joined in the adventure, and these folks were drawn from all manner of backgrounds. They were drawn to something of the kingdom. Relationships between Christians, Muslims, political, and non-political folks were forged in a way that simply would not have been possible otherwise.

But the truth is that what we are celebrating here goes much wider than just Gavin. He is what you might call the firstfruits of a generation passionate about justice – those who cried 'Jubilee!' for

cancelling global debt, who marched to make poverty history, and raged against people trafficking. Now that generation are realising the importance of not just shouting from the sidelines, but getting on the pitch. The influx of passionate young people into Luton's local party changed the face of their campaign with their energy, optimism and faith.

The impact of Gavin's election has continued to cause ripples. A number of those young people who helped Gavin to get elected were inspired by his example. They could see the positive influence of his role in the town and began to realise the importance of political engagement. They have since stepped forward and been elected. People like Fiona Green (a church leader) and Andrew Malcolm (a teacher and church musician) are now also local councillors serving the town they love.

I can't say this strongly enough. They are normal church people just like you and me. There was no dramatic call to politics. There was no special preparation. They just showed up. And it has not always been easy for them, as youthful enthusiasm, creativity and energy inevitably collide with 'the way things have always been done around here'. Long established traditions – principalities and powers even – are being engaged.

I was back in Luton meeting some friends recently and it was wonderful to learn something unexpected. I chatted to some young people who talked with real pride about Gavin being their MP. For a young person to be positive about or even discuss politics is worthy of a newspaper article in itself, but this went deeper. They described how important it was that they had someone to look up to who was one of them. A youth worker explained to me that these people, who had little expectation, who were depressed about the future, now had hope. It was as if heads that had been drooping, permanently tilted downwards, were gradually being lifted up. Obviously it's not all down to one man, but something was changing in the town. A new-found confidence was emerging, and rather than the traditional one-way exodus of twenty-somethings leaving for other places, some were being drawn back to Luton and also attracting others.

There are so many things to draw from this story and we will explore some of them in subsequent chapters. But it is worth noting that a group of people chose to live somewhere that many of their peers would have dismissed as a bad option. How do we refuse this wisdom of the world? How do we hold true to the reality that every piece of God's earth is equally loved and significant? Those truths are chipped away at when we start to believe that some areas or towns should be avoided. For too many, 'getting involved in politics' means 'moving to London to rub shoulders with power' rather than taking the less shiny, but much more available option of serving on your own patch.

The funny thing is that if you speak to the folks involved in Gavin's church, they don't regard what has happened as anything strange or startling. They see it as a natural outflow of what church should be. They see it as a natural expression of the mission that they are called to – to be a blessing to the town of Luton. It seems to make total sense that that mission would involve the way Luton is governed and represented politically. They believe in a gospel that brings transformation to every sphere of society. To close their eyes to politics would seem irrational.

It's also worth noting that this wasn't their plan. They did not arrive with a grand scheme to change politics in Luton. As they would say, they 'just kept putting one foot in front of another', trying to follow where God was leading. Before they knew it, doors had been opened for many of them into the civic life and fabric of the town. The most important lesson to learn is the lesson of obedience.

I should note that as well as having a great impact on Luton, Gavin has also made an impressive mark at Westminster in a short space of time, with his passion, political nous and willingness to stand up for what he believes. He has now been made a Shadow Minister for International Development.

This salt and light thing works, you know. But only if we let it.

