

Building Community....

Within and without the walls of the Church

Greg Smith..

Over the last 20 years I with my family have lived in two different cities and been in membership of three different churches. Each of the churches has been strongly committed to building community but each has struggled in different ways to make this a reality within and outside the walls of the church.

Church Number 1...was a newly planted basically charismatic fellowship with no building of its own. At the heart of its leadership was a core of like minded committed Christian activists, who saw mission as evangelism married with social transformation. They had a vision for evangelistic outreach centred on a council housing estate on the fringe of London Docklands, and social involvement in the wider life of the borough. There was considerable achievement in both areas and over a decade there was a strong sense of community belonging both within the church membership and neighbourhood. However there were struggles to bridge the cultural and educational gap between the social classes, and recurrent tensions over church discipline in cases where individuals failed to keep traditional Christian standards of marital morality. At one point about ten years ago there was a shaking out of core membership when about a dozen key families, for their own various reasons and without great conflict or broken relationships decided to move on to various other churches and ministries.

Church Number 2 was a more traditional Baptist church with a partially restored Victorian building set opposite a mosque on a main road in one of the most multi-cultural areas in London. Over 30 years the white pastor had seen a church membership moving from majority white to 80% Afro Caribbean (traditional Baptists) and then to a more diverse fellowship in which zealous African and South Asian Christians were playing an increasingly significant role in leadership and ministry. Over the years various models of community service had been used, with an earlier focus on youth work in partnership with the Council replaced in recent years with a concentration on family support and work with homeless people. Within the church the small miracle of fellowship between different ethnic groups was never simple, and often disrupted by people moving out of the area. Work in the neighbourhood community was an increasing challenge as the church became more of a gathered congregation which sought to maintain an evangelical witness in an area whose population became majority Muslim.

Church Number 3 was an evangelical Anglican parish with a superb new building in a deprived neighbourhood in a city in the North of England. The congregation was lively and fairly well mixed in terms of social class and age group, with a small minority of people from ethnic minorities. Some of the members who travelled in from more affluent areas, and students from the university found it difficult to relate to local working class residents. Yet the local white population had a strong and conservative sense of local belonging which included for many a sense of Christian identity, perceived in contrast to the large (but minority) Hindu and Muslim communities. The ministry of the parish was strong among elders and children, with good links with the local primary school. However there was much unrealised potential for community development work and the challenge of building bridges into the Asian communities in the neighbourhood.

The experience of these three churches suggests that the search for community is an important but not straightforward one. In Zygmunt Bauman's words it is in part at least human beings "seeking safety in an insecure world". Or as Elizabeth Bounds puts it the role of the church has elements both of "coming together" and "coming apart", noting the glorious ambiguities in the latter phrase. The tendency is to use "community" as a spray can word to be painted on all our public walls, or to give a sweet smelling fragrance to the immediate environment, forgetting that aerosols can also damage our social "ozone layer". There are according to George Hillery at least 96 definitions of community and although we all like the sound of the word we can mean very different things when we use it. We cannot forget that the definitions and boundaries of community are always contested, that communities build walls as well as affirm and support members and only sometimes welcome strangers. Despite the teaching of the Law

and the Prophets, the example of Jesus and the "Koinonia" experience of the NT church, the church so often fails to live up to its own community ideals.

A church is in danger when it becomes an inward facing circle, a holy huddle with its back to the world. A church focussed on mission can still be a circle of people with arms which at times are supportively linked, but needs to be facing outwards, with faces smiling in welcome, and hands willing to stretch out to draw others in. Recognising the reality of rapid social change at local and global levels our prayer, worship and action should be fundamentally outward looking. In ministry, social analysis, community service and community development are basic tools of outreach.

In both the UK and the USA the current political climate offers many opportunities for partnership in social welfare and community work. Government has recently rediscovered the role of "faith communities" especially in reaching the parts that other services find hard to reach. However, the understanding of this notion of faith community leaves much to be desired, and the practical policies are poorly developed and damaged by secular prejudice and religious illiteracy of many officials.

There is also a strong emphasis in government thinking on building up stocks of **social capital**, the networks and social trust that make for a community which may be more healthy and even more wealthy. Although social capital theory has many problems, and it is certainly not easy to measure by the statistical indicators that governments love, it is an important concept. Supportive networks are undoubtedly to be found as the result of the daily life and work of churches and other religious groups in inner city areas, where other associations are weak or absent. Tactically at least, and for funding purposes not least, churches have much to gain by stressing their contribution to social capital.

More important perhaps is our potential contribution to **social cohesion**. Although this emphasis has deep roots in the sociology of Durkheim and his followers, the recent emphasis on the idea by the UK government is more of a panic response. In the context of continuing urban deprivation, conflict and crime and in the wake of rioting in highly segregated cities in the North of England in 2001 and the global events that rocked the world in September the same year, local authorities were ordered to develop community cohesion strategies, which would bring together all sections of the local population in co-operative and active participation for the common good. Here is a real opportunity for influence and ministry for the churches of our inner cities... For three reasons..

1. The church at its best is one of the few places where people from different sections of the community do meet together in fellowship and action. We have an experience to share.
2. In urban neighbourhoods where conflicts abound, governance is in chaos, people are alienated from the power structures and every group is out to promote its own interests, the church at its best is still around, aware and involved and can play a key role as an honest broker in the wider debates
3. The church has the Biblical vision of Shalom as the realm where peace, justice and community health are in perfect. This vision can both transcend and inform the imperfect attempts of human institutions to create the cohesive and harmonious community which we all desire.

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