

# ESRC

ESRC Seminar Series

Mapping the public policy landscape

Faith-based voluntary action





## Foreword

Policymakers today seem increasingly keen to engage faith groups in community development, local governance and delivery of services. So it is important for us to understand the influence of faith on the type and level of voluntary activity people choose to get involved in.

This booklet aims to help. It is based on presentations by Professor Vivien Lowndes of De Montfort University, and Greg Smith, until recently at the University of East London, and now working with the Salvation Army in Preston.

Their insights are the basis for the first in a series of special seminars entitled *Engaging Citizens*, organised by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in collaboration with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO).

This series aims to provide an opportunity for practitioners, academics and policymakers to shed new light on how citizens are helping build a society that is both inclusive and cohesive, and identify ways in which they are making positive differences in their communities.

Individual seminars will explore different aspects of participation, and look at the impact of institutional and technological change, as well as other factors which lie behind individual choices, behaviour and attitudes. And they will review what the implications might be for Government and the voluntary and community sector when developing and encouraging this engagement.

Experts in the field will focus on how and why individuals get involved over time, whether existing community participation in local governance has improved public services, and the impacts on all this of information and communication technology (ICT), globalisation and the Human Rights Act.

Faith-based voluntary action is just the latest topic to be looked at in the ESRC's Public Policy Seminar Series, in which we present independent research in key policy areas to potential users in Government, politics, the media, and the private and voluntary sectors. We see such events as an opportunity to establish further dialogue with the users of our research, and we welcome any subsequent contact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ian Diamond'. The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Professor Ian Diamond  
Chief Executive  
Economic and Social Research Council

## Faith-based voluntary action

### The researchers

**VIVIEN LOWNDES** BSc MPhil PhD is Professor of Local Government Studies in the Local Governance Research Unit of De Montfort University, Leicester. Previously she was at the Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham, and the Department of Government, University of Essex. Her main areas of expertise concern public participation, community engagement, and local governance and democracy. Recently, she completed a major project for the Home Office's Civil Renewal Research Programme on the contribution of faith groups.

**GREG SMITH** BA MPhil, formerly a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Institutional Studies, University of East London, has 30 years' experience as a 'reflective practitioner' in Christian urban ministry, faith linked community development and urban regeneration, in Newham, East London and Preston. Now community co-ordinator with the Salvation Army Open Door Project, Preston, he is also involved in capacity building for churches and voluntary groups, inter-faith networking and church-based children's work.



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Government has pointed out that faith groups can play an important role in working towards the three goals of civil renewal – active citizenship, strengthened communities, and participation in meeting public needs.

Research and consultations have shown consistently that a broader agenda for civil renewal is needed which recognises the value of citizen participation in its own right, and highlights the importance of building connections within and between communities as well as with Government.

If citizen participation is to be promoted, then understanding the motivations and practices of engaged citizens on which civil society depends must be a priority.

It is accepted that individuals are more likely to get involved and act collectively when they have something in common. They may, for instance, live in the same area or have similar interests, or be motivated by shared identities, values and beliefs.

According to the Home Office Citizenship Survey of 2003, religion is the fourth most important arena for civic and social participation and formal volunteering in Britain, and its importance appears to be growing.

However, the rationale for faith group involvement is not always clear: For instance, who in the faith sector is expected to do what – and why? How does the role of faith groups differ from that of other community bodies? As well as considering such questions, this booklet looks at how and to what extent faith motivates people to get involved in the first place, and what sort of support they might need.

It describes how there are many 'great gulfs or chasms' in this area of faith and social policy, and considers whether and how some of them might be, or are being bridged.

And alongside an analysis of the current policy context, its challenges and issues, the booklet identifies the roles in civil renewal that those in faith groups might play.

## Key insights and implications

- Professor Lowndes distinguishes between three core rationales for encouraging involvement of faith groups in civil renewal: normative, resources and governance.
- **Normative** stresses the role of these groups in relation to community values and identities, linked to their beliefs and their enduring presence, and is mostly about *motivation* for involvement.
- **Resources** focuses on the capacity of faith groups in developing their members' skills, mobilising volunteers, and providing staff and venues, as well as their role in reaching socially excluded groups. It relates particularly to their *capacity* to engage.
- **Governance** highlights the representative and leadership role of faith groups and the potential *outcome* of such involvement. This means leaders representing their group, developing the skills and confidence of members to play an active role in society, and promoting understanding between different communities.
- The three rationales can be seen as complementary elements in a process of change. They can be linked as a series of stages in the process of involvement (see chart – *A model for faith group involvement in civil renewal*).
- In harnessing the potential of participation, says Professor Lowndes, there is scope for Government and local authority support at each stage.

- Research at De Montfort University found some cynicism among faith groups about attempts by policymakers or practitioners to hijack the normative agenda – for instance, claiming ‘grass roots legitimacy’ on the basis of people’s involvement, without actually engaging with their values and practices.
- There is a need for capacity building within the faith sector to develop representative structures and governance skills, including leadership. And specific strategies may be required to seek the views and interests of some groups, such as Muslim women.
- Based upon the De Montfort research evidence, a ‘diagnostic tool’ has been devised to help policymakers, which can also be used to initiate a structured debate among a wider group of community leaders, representatives and partners about the actual and potential role of faith groups in civil renewal. It identifies the part faith groups can play in achieving the goals of civil renewal at four levels – communities, organisations, networks and leadership (see chart – *Mapping faith involvement in civil renewal: a diagnostic tool*).
- Greg Smith, researching in Preston for the Centre for Institutional Studies, University of East London, found that many Christians actively involved in social concern talked in terms of their own church, congregation and local neighbourhood community rather than about big policy issues.
- They often expressed anxiety that Government seems to prefer or even demand multi-faith or inter-faith work, and have an impression that authorities think all religions are the same, which they contest.
- He found little evidence, either, to suggest that the majority of members or leaders of local mosques, gurdwaras, temples or synagogues are any more outwardly focused or engaged than Christians.
- ‘Faith community’ is in any case, he says, an ill-defined concept, and many diverse forms of religious group can be gathered under this umbrella term.
- Many faith groups naturally want to promote their beliefs to outsiders, while statutory funders demand religion is kept strictly separate from social and community work.
- It was widely recognised, however, that there were many positive elements in the desire of Government agencies, nationally, regionally and locally, to engage in partnership with faith-based organisations, and to work for social cohesion across faith communities.
- Despite problems, the need for learning on all sides and for improved policies to address important issues, practitioners perceive plenty of opportunities for partnerships to progress. They believe this will happen if all parties are willing to engage in honest open dialogue, work at building trust, and establish and keep under review clear protocols and guidelines for each project.
- One bridging point is that faith-based organisations have common issues with the rest of the voluntary and community sector and could learn from each other. However, currently it appears unusual for faith groups to be plugged into structures such as local councils for voluntary service.
- A second potential bridge is the role of people of faith working within the public sector. Research suggests a lack of understanding and low level of religious literacy among many statutory agency staff, in some cases amounting to prejudice against faith groups. The minority with an in-depth understanding of religion, often as an insider in one faith community, may be a real asset for developing partnerships, but can also be taken for granted and exploited as the token expert.
- Setting up relevant guidelines, religious literacy training, and maybe accreditation of competences for staff, is suggested.



## Faith, hope and clarity

### Vivien Lowndes on key aspects of her recent major report for the Home Office

According to the Home Office Citizenship Survey of 2003, religion is the fourth most important arena for civic and social participation and formal volunteering in Britain, and its importance appears to be growing.

Various Government statements point to the role of faith groups in working towards the three goals of civil renewal: active citizenship, strengthened communities, and partnership in meeting public needs.

This means involvement in areas such as education and housing, local strategic partnerships and regional government, and consultation about services such as health and the police.

Three years ago, former Home Secretary David Blunkett set up the Faith Communities Unit (FCU) to promote engagement with faith groups and local leaders, and in 2005, its work became part of the remit of a new Race, Equality, Cohesion and Faith Directorate.

However, the relationship between faith and ethnicity is complex: different faiths are practiced within the same ethnic group, and specific faiths have followers of many different ethnicities. People from minority ethnic groups may not see faith as primary to their identity, as is the case for many white British people.

#### **Britain's unique situation**

Most research into faith groups and civic participation comes from the USA, and is concerned only with Christian churches. In Britain, however, the intersection of secularism and multiculturalism is unique. Christianity is the main religion here (72 per cent); people with no religion make up 15 per cent of the population; and five per cent belong to a non-Christian denomination (half of them Muslims). Just ten per cent of us go to church regularly, and attendance is more common among women and middle class people. That said, attendance is actually growing in some urban areas, particularly among black Christians. Despite small congregations, the Church of England also remains a focus for community activity in many places.

The religious make-up of some British cities varies considerably from the national picture. In Leicester, for instance, 45 per cent of people identified themselves as Christian; 15 per cent as Hindu; 11 per cent as Muslim; and 17 per cent as having no religion. A recent survey there found 250 faith groups supporting 450 different social projects. In terms of ethnic groups, 26 per cent of the population described themselves as Indian in the 2001 Census, but there are also other significant black and ethnic minority communities (Pakistani, Caribbean and African, including recently arrived Somali refugees).

The 'Indian' community has Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain elements, while the 'Muslim' community includes people from countries in Asia, Africa and East/Central Europe.

In Greater London, a survey identified more than 2,000 faith-based social action projects, employing 3,000 people, supported by 13,500 volunteers, with 120,000 beneficiaries. Total figures are likely to be far higher, given that the response rate from worshipping communities was just under 30 per cent (*ONS 2004, Leicester City Council, 2004, Home Office, 2003, London Churches Group 2002, Census 2001*).

## So what's the rationale for this involvement?

The rationale for faith group involvement in civil renewal is not always clear. Who in the faith sector is expected to do what – and why? Is it likely that faith groups will wish to be involved and what sort of support might they need? How does their role differ from that of other community bodies?

In the research I carried out for the Home Office recently, with my colleague Rachael Chapman at De Montfort University – *Faith, hope and clarity: Developing a model of faith group involvement in civil renewal* – we distinguished between three core rationales: normative, resources and governance.

### Rationale I – normative

This stresses the role of faith groups in relation to community values and identities, linked both to their beliefs and their enduring presence within communities. The normative rationale was emphasised most by faith groups themselves, although there is evidence that policymakers appreciate that faith-based values and identities can motivate people to become active in civil renewal.

Faith leaders and policymakers alike stress the importance of identifying and articulating common values as a basis for promoting community cohesion and a sense of citizenship and shared 'Britishness'. Faith groups are seen to offer a distinctive 'ethical and cultural dimension' in comparison with other civil bodies.

Normative values and principles shape and motivate faith group action and involvement. The most commonly mentioned values are peace and harmony, humanity, equality, justice, solidarity, trust and understanding, forgiveness, and a positive vision for the future. Compared with other organisations, faith groups exhibit at least three characteristics of particular significance.

- They speak of a holistic commitment to communities, rather than a concern with a specific issue or segment of the population. This stems from the importance of the 'faith mission' of demonstrating and sharing 'God's love' (or a wider spirituality) within the community, through service to local people and meeting needs through volunteering and social action.
- Faith groups express embedded identities within communities, and are associated with long-term local commitment, perspective and presence. They have potential to make community ownership of civil renewal programmes easier, and to complement, if not challenge, shorter-term initiatives.
- And they are an expression of diversity, representing distinctive identities and with the potential to help validate – even celebrate – the diverse nature of communities.



Whilst faith group values and principles play a role in civil renewal, tensions can arise between them and policymakers or practitioners. These groups may see an important role for 'prayer' or 'grace', to take Christian examples, in their community work – these are not cultural 'add-ons' but practices aimed at achieving specific ends. It is easy, in this context, to see how communication problems can arise between these people and secular policymakers on the ground.

Indeed, we found some cynicism among faith groups about attempts by policymakers or practitioners to hijack the normative agenda – for instance, claiming 'grass roots legitimacy' on the basis of people's involvement, without actually engaging with their values and practices. A yet more hostile reaction argued that: 'The Government doesn't want to hear about what makes us faithful people. They'll fund us if we don't do anything religious with the money'. The London Churches Group (LCG), in 2002, observed that local government officers were often cautious about engaging with faith groups due to concerns that they would use funding for evangelism or proselytising.

And some faith group representatives were concerned that involvement with funded community projects could 'corrupt' their members, distracting them from more fundamental goals. Indeed, the LCG acknowledges that some may not regard community work as within their 'calling'. A report looking at the contribution of the Diocese of Birmingham to urban regeneration commented on the tension encountered at parish level between 'business decisions and Jesus decisions' (Cairns and others 2005).

## Rationale 2 – resources

This focuses on the capacity of faith groups in developing their members' skills, mobilising volunteers, and providing staff and venues, as well as their role in reaching socially excluded groups. There is a 'top-down' perspective on this rationale, which emphasises mobilising faith group resources in the pursuit of civil renewal objectives. These may be 'human capital' (staff, volunteers, and members), 'social capital' (networks of trust and reciprocity) and 'physical capital' (community buildings and venues). They can be drawn on to build capacity for collective action, and are particularly relevant to Government strategies to engage with those disadvantaged communities which are traditionally 'hard to reach'.

A 'bottom-up' perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the extent to which faith groups are able to access state resources through their engagement in civil renewal. In this case, resources may include Government funding, new buildings and training.

Again, tensions can arise.

Many faith groups feel that they are discriminated against when applying for public funding on the grounds of their religion, but are also seen by policymakers as a 'cheap way into anywhere'.

Like all community bodies, faith groups experience difficulties in recruiting volunteers due to constraints of time, skills and confidence. Donations and subscriptions can also be hard to maintain for those faiths with dwindling congregations, and in disadvantaged communities. Buildings can become as much of a burden as an asset, given the costs involved in renovation and adaptation.

The flow of resources needs to be mapped in order to establish what faith groups are already contributing towards civil renewal, and what additional resources they require to maintain, expand or redirect their work.

### Rationale 3 – governance

This highlights the representative and leadership role of faith groups in communities and in broader networks and partnerships. In this context, leadership entails the role of faith leaders in representing their group, developing the skills and confidence of members to play an active role in society, and promoting understanding between different communities. Faith organisations and inter-faith networks offer a source of community representation and are involved in the co-production of services, in policy consultations, and in decision-making partnerships. In these ways faith group involvement helps to plug the 'governance deficit', especially in disadvantaged areas.

However, various issues arise.

- A need for capacity building within the faith sector to develop representative structures and governance skills, including leadership.
- Questions over the nature and effectiveness of representation and engagement within faith communities. Specific strategies may be needed to seek the views and interests of some groups, such as Muslim women.
- Diversity in governance structures and resources between and within faith communities, which can affect the relative ease with which policymakers and practitioners can engage with different groups, and vice versa.
- Given the diverse nature of the 'faith sector', difficulties may also occur where an individual is asked to represent and report back to a variety of communities.
- Perceptions of hostility or lack of understanding among officials involved at local level, and in some elements of the 'mainstream' voluntary and community sector.

### Integration: a fourth rationale?

Our report to the Home Office raised the possibility of an additional rationale for faith group involvement, with two linked elements within it.

The first relates to policies to promote community cohesion, trying to catalyse inter-faith activity at the local level as part of a strategy to enhance dialogue and understanding and reduce the distance between the 'parallel lives' lived by different communities.

The potential contribution of faith groups builds on the three rationales already discussed, but we should avoid any simplistic association between faith and community cohesion. Some groups may, for example, oppose secular values and other religions.

The second element focuses on the potential role in developing a new and more inclusive sense of British citizenship that generates and articulates shared values while respecting diversity of belief and identity. This is a controversial debate: 'integration' and 'cohesion' are seen by some as a dangerous challenge to established principles of multiculturalism.



## A model of faith group involvement

Faith groups and policymakers confirmed the importance of each of the three rationales, but attached different degrees of significance. The normative rationale is emphasised most keenly by faith groups, the resources rationale by the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), and governance by the Home Office. The three can be seen as complementary elements in a process of change, which can be linked as a series of stages in the process of involving faith groups in civil renewal (see Table 1).

The normative rationale relates most pertinently to *motivation* for involvement; the resources rationale particularly to the *capacity* of groups to engage; and the governance rationale to the potential *outcome*.

In harnessing the potential of participation by faith groups, there is scope for Government and local authority support at each of the different stages, with varying implications for the institutions involved.

Support to faith groups can entail, for instance:

- recognising and supporting faith-based motivations for engagement
- adopting approaches that take greater account of diversity among faith groups
- assessing and building the resource capacity and governance skills of faith groups, for instance, by providing funding, training and brokerage.

## Mapping faith involvement in civil renewal: a diagnostic tool

Based upon our research evidence, we devised a 'diagnostic tool' to help policymakers, which can also be used to initiate a structured debate among a wider group of community leaders, representatives and partners about the actual and potential role of faith groups in civil renewal (see Table 2).

It identifies the roles in civil renewal that can be played by those involved in faith groups at four different levels:

### Faith communities

- Communities are made up of individual citizens and their families who have a religious identification or affiliation, and provide a basis for active citizenship: the first goal of civil renewal.

### Faith organisations

- These include places of worship, religious associations and federations, and can provide a channel for collective action by their members. As such, they can be important building blocks for strengthened communities: the second goal of civil renewal.

### Faith networks

- Networks provide formal and informal arenas for dialogue and action, and can act as intermediaries between leaders and members of faith communities. They can help identify members' needs and views, whilst also playing a role in framing and mediating debate and providing accountability.

### Faith leadership

- Through formal bodies and informal inter-faith networks, faith leadership provides representation through which groups can engage in partnership in meeting public needs: the third goal of civil renewal.

For further information on the DeMontfort University research, and a link to the full report, visit <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/lgru>

**Table 1: A model for faith group involvement in civil renewal**

<b>Rationale for faith group involvement</b>	<b>Normative</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Governance</b>
Elements of rationale in practice	Holistic commitments Embedded identities Expression of diversity	Physical capital Human capital Social capital	Participation Representation Leadership
Contribution to civil renewal objectives	Motivation 'Active citizenship'	Capacity 'Strengthened communities'	Outcome 'Partnership in meeting needs'
Substantive goal	Re-moralising public life	Building social capital	Community cohesion, 'Britishness'
Challenges for policymakers	Religious literacy Intersection with secularism Respecting difference Managing conflict	Mapping diverse endowments Flexible funding Specialist capacity building Avoiding exploitation	Identifying leaders Assessing mandates Multi-channel representation Incentivising involvement
Challenges for faith communities	Policy literacy Respecting difference Balancing commitments Clarifying values for faith sector	Stewardship of resources Valuing intangible resources Marketing renewing resource base	Supporting leaders Building a constituency Establishing accountability Developing inter-faith perspectives
Institutional design	Faith awareness training Informal dialogue/brokerage Symbol and ceremony Conflict resolution	Capacity building not draining Innovative funding frameworks Community value formula Resource sharing/exchange	Leadership training Internal governance support Inter-faith infrastructure Partnerships and informal dialogue

**Table 2: Mapping faith involvement in civil renewal: a diagnostic tool**

<b>Actors in the faith sector</b>	<b>Leicester experience</b>	<b>Role in civil renewal</b>
Faith communities	Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others	Citizens
Faith organisations	(a) Places of worship (b) Religious associations (c) Federations of groups	Members
Faith networks	(a) Sector networks: faith regeneration network; regional faith forum (b) Topic networks: dialogue groups, including Muslim-Christian women's group; Muslim-Hindu group	Intermediaries
Faith leadership	(a) Formally constituted: Council of Faiths (b) Informally convened: Faith Leaders' Forum; Multicultural Advisory Group	Leaders
Faith representation	(a) Service-based: advisory groups for police, health, education, etc. (b) Governance-based: strategic partnerships (LSP and regional)	Partners

## Great gulfs or chasms

### Greg Smith on the Bridge Builders Project in Preston

I want to begin by sharing a passage from the New Testament, a story told by Jesus Christ. Some of you – if you are Christian, or have heard some of the speeches of Martin Luther King – may be familiar with it.

#### **Dives and Lazarus...Luke 16 22-26**

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, *between us and you a great chasm has been fixed*, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

It is a good story but an uncomfortable one. Maybe you find it uncomfortable just to have a Bible passage before you in this booklet. Some may find the language of heaven and hell uncomfortable, even if they do not read it in a fundamentalist way, and do not take it literally. But just as a serious metaphor; it still speaks of eternal judgment on people like you and me who are affluent, but not sufficiently compassionate.

I use it to make the point that in this area of faith and social policy there are many great gulfs or chasms – I want to highlight about half a dozen or so, though I will not have time or space to develop them all beyond the level of asserting that these were common findings or issues raised across several studies, which resonate with my own experience as a practitioner. Finally, I hope to discuss whether and how some of them might be, or are being, bridged.





## The gulf in the value of money

I start with economics because for people of faith, money and inequality are fundamentally moral or theological issues.

- A social services director for a small unitary local authority post comes with a salary of between £80,000 and £90,000.
- A chief executive's salary in a medium-sized charity is around £50,000.
- A vicars' stipend (Blackburn diocese 2005) was £19,550 plus housing worth approx £7,300. With pension and National Insurance etc., this costs the Church £34,000.
- The budget for a small but thriving urban parish with a congregation of around 100, with a vicar and a grant-funded youth worker (salary £12,000) is £60,000.
- Income support or job seekers' allowance for a single person over 25 is £2,922 per annum (£56 per week).
- Total weekly income from sales for a team of seven active *Big Issue* sellers in Preston in Spring, 2006 was £435.60.

**High reimbursements for 'expert' consultants or academics commenting on human situations of poverty and deprivation can present a moral and ethical dilemma for a person who takes any faith seriously, and particularly for Christians with an understanding of God's option for the poor.**

## This gulf extends to funding the sector

Preston City Council has an overall net budget requirement for 2006/7 of £25,418,070. About £400,000 of this is available to the voluntary sector as grants - enough to support about a dozen full time posts. Almost none of this goes to faith groups.

Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding to the public sector in Preston has totalled £20million over eight years. Three or four faith groups, of some 100 in the city, have had significant benefit from this.

Recently, the town centre forum presented a large cheque (2m x 1m) publicly, and before Press cameras, to a women's counselling centre set up and managed by Christian volunteers. The amount payable was £250. The cost of setting up the meeting, hiring the hall, paying staff for the evening and even of printing the cheque must have been at least twice that.

Despite this, research suggests that many in the faith sector are reluctant to apply for or take public money, out of fear that the strings that come with funding may overwhelm its priorities, subvert the charitable ethos, and silence any critical voice. And the size and complexity of application forms and high risk of disappointment are further disincentives to apply.

## The gulf in language and concepts

There is often a gulf between the categories and concepts used by policymakers, and the language I hear in churches, mosques and temples, either in research settings or in everyday conversations among ordinary people of faith.

If they have any involvement or concern for the local society or environment, it is usually expressed at the level of "What can we/they do to make things better for our neighbourhood/community?" One experienced Christian activist (he describes himself as the vicar's wife...well he is married to her) asked in one of our research workshops: "What is capacity building then?"

Even the concept of 'faith community' may seem alien, though it has been taken up by activists who are willing to play the funding game. Many Christians involved in my research talked in terms of their local church congregation and local community rather than of big policy issues or city wide strategic regeneration. They often expressed anxiety that Government seems to prefer or even demand multi-faith or inter-faith work. They have picked up an impression that the authorities think all religions are the same, and they contest this. There is little evidence to suggest that the majority of members or congregations of local mosques, gurdwaras, temples or synagogues are any more outwardly focused. 'Faith community' is in any case an ill-defined concept, and many diverse forms of religious group can be gathered under this umbrella term.

## The gulf in information, power and skill

The gap between faith communities and the authorities in terms of information and skills may be based on difference rather than superiority/inferiority, though we cannot ignore that with this difference there is a hierarchy of power ultimately linked to the inequality of financial and legal coercive power:

For example, in terms of skills, officers in public bodies are likely to have managerial, technical and information handling abilities associated with a codified body of knowledge recognised by paper qualifications, and rewarded by relatively high salaries. In contrast, members of urban faith communities are more likely to be 'street-wise' – that is, to have skills for coping and surviving in tough urban environments, to understand, relate to and empathise with their neighbours who come from minority cultures or impoverished home backgrounds, and a body of informal knowledge passed on through long experience in a particular locality.

In terms of information, members of local faith communities will often have privileged access to a rich seam of qualitative data, as well as a method of theological interpretation that draws on stories from everyday life and the wider faith tradition or scriptures.

In contrast, public bodies will also have an evidence base, but usually in the form of 'hard facts' – generally, statistics thought to be objective and incontrovertible.

As a researcher who has spent many months working on census and survey data on religion, and many years on directory and mapping exercises trying to quantify and document the contribution of faith groups to community work, social welfare and urban renewal, I am almost painfully aware of the weaknesses and limitations of the quantitative approach.

On the mapping of faith organisations' contribution, the biggest problem in collecting evidence is non-response, and undocumented, untraceable groups. The official world can only see the tip of the iceberg – that is, those groups who choose to engage with the statutory sector in partnerships and funding relationships.

In a forthcoming paper, I will report on the experience and the issues it raises. Among them is that the imbalance of information and legal power is linked with a lack of trust between many urban people (of various and no faiths) and the authorities.

This is not surprising if you are an undocumented migrant, or a congregation meeting in a shop front, without planning permission, or if you believe God expects you to maintain firm discipline over your children while the Social Services department could close down your religious instruction class, or even take your children into care.

To a greater or lesser degree, cynicism and lack of trust in the authorities can be absorbed by leaders of religious groups working in deprived and excluded communities. In our Preston research, for example, we encountered a fair degree of cynicism about the tokenism and tick box mentality of the statutory world when they seek to consult 'the faith sector'. There was also a fairly wide belief that cost cutting is the main agenda in policies promoting 'faith-based welfare'.

There is also suspicion that Government policies, especially when implemented at the local level by officers and councillors with a strongly secular world view, or even a 'risk averse' mentality, is biased against particular faith groups – notably Christianity, and to some extent Islam.



## The gulf of faith

Faith groups share a world view that God is at work, that prayers are answered and the spiritual life is central. A recent report from the William Temple Foundation, Chris Baker and Hannah Skinner, helpfully describe this as 'spiritual capital' – the motivations, beliefs hopes and prayers people of faith bring with them to the wider world.

They distinguish this from religious capital – the organisational, network and material resources brought by a congregation, and far closer to the recognised forms of social capital with which we are familiar.

The statutory world finds it hard to talk about and evaluate claims of divine intervention or spiritual power; let alone accept that religious organisations can draw on these resources in their community and social work, where projects are evaluated conventionally in terms of outputs, outcomes and impacts.

Many faith groups naturally want to promote their beliefs to outsiders, while statutory funders demand religion is kept strictly separate from social and community work. Rarely are clear criteria set out, though designating specific parts of a building as religious and others as for community use, or establishing an independent voluntary association for community work, have been advised.

Such separation fundamentally contradicts the theological understanding of some religious groups who regard God as holistically involved in the whole universe and social order. Incidents cited as problematic included negative reaction from council officials to the singing of Christian songs in a church holiday club, followed by removal of funding the next year.

Inclusion and exclusion in faith communities is one area in which the gulf of faith becomes apparent. In the Preston study, statutory agency staff expressed some understandable frustrations that faith-based groups do not understand their constraints, language and priorities, and some genuine concerns over the practice of equal opportunities and social inclusion by religious groups.

There are detailed requirements of anti-discrimination law and expectations about formal equal opportunities policies which some faith groups find difficult to set up and operate, given limited resources and competing priorities.

But there are also substantial, distinctive and sometimes exclusionary beliefs and practices within and across the faith traditions – for example, the separation of male and female activities (while including a female senior council officer guest as an honorary male). It could be argued that separation does not necessarily imply inequality, or that this was a cultural norm rather than a religiously sanctioned practice.

In contrast, some faith groups have strict doctrinal and moral standards for eligibility for membership and/or leadership, and believe these have a divinely sanctioned basis. This 'matter of conscience' could prevent them from signing up for an equal opportunities policy that applied to openly gay and lesbian people, so indirectly excluding the organisation from funding opportunities.

## Beyond the gulf...bridging the chasms

It was widely recognised in all of our studies that there were many positive elements in the desire of Government agencies, nationally, regionally and locally, to engage in partnership with faith-based organisations, and to work for social cohesion across faith communities. Despite the problems, the need for learning on all sides, and for improved policies to address important issues, practitioners perceive there are plenty of opportunities for partnerships to progress. They believe this will happen if all parties are willing to engage in honest open dialogue, to work at building trust, and to establish and keep under review clear protocols and guidelines for each project.

One of the bridging points is that faith-based organisations have common issues with the rest of the voluntary and community sector and could learn from each other. However, at the moment it appears unusual for faith groups to be plugged into voluntary sector structures such as local councils for voluntary service.

The issues include:

- Frustration with funding regimes which are short term, always changing, time consuming, have tight deadlines, and are difficult to understand, and exceedingly bureaucratic.
- The tasks involved in fundraising, monitoring, and complying with health and safety regulations are often resented as using up time and skills which could better be devoted to front line work with people.
- Rarely do small and medium voluntary, community and faith sector groups have resources to employ administrative staff, and the burden therefore falls on volunteers or the single staff member recruited on the basis of other skills. It does not help to be blamed for lack of capacity in these areas and dragged away from work for capacity building or training workshops.

A second potential bridge is the role of people of faith working within the public sector. Our research suggests there is a lack of understanding and low level of religious literacy among many statutory agency staff, which in some cases amounts to prejudice against faith groups. The minority of officers who do have an in-depth understanding of religion, often as an insider in one faith community, may be a real asset for developing partnerships. However they can also be taken for granted, exploited as the token expert on the subject, and work in a context where defining the boundaries of the personal and the professional can be difficult.

Setting up relevant guidelines, religious literacy training and maybe accreditation of competences for such staff would seem a fruitful area for policy development.



## Specific local cultures of faith and politics

It is apparent from my research and practitioner experience in two contrasting urban areas (Newham and Preston) that local ethno-religious dynamics, religious and political cultures, and to some extent the key individuals involved, shape the development of the relationship between faith groups and the local state and voluntary sector. Briefly, I would set out this comparison:

Newham	Preston
Extremely religiously and ethnically diverse	Moderately religiously and ethnically diverse
Historically weak, mainly protestant churches in uniformly deprived borough Recent mushrooming of (black) Pentecostal and Islamic groups	Historically strong RC dominated churches, continued competitiveness in context of steep numerical decline (especially in inner city areas). Well established range of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh places of worship
Strong involvement of faith communities (especially mainline churches and their leaders) in local politics in an overwhelmingly Labour Party context	Limited involvement of faith communities in politics mainly through individuals lay people from Catholic and Muslim communities, in a hung council situation
Strong connections between faith sector, voluntary sector and civil society	Weaker involvement of faith groups in voluntary sector
Networking (bridging social capital) can be difficult because of rapid turnover/mobility in metropolitan global city	Potential for bridging networks high because of smaller city with 'village' ethos





In both places there are numerous examples of projects and partnerships, some of which have become nationally promoted as models of good practice. Typically, the responses on all sides are very pragmatic (sometimes fudging difficult issues). Often the crucial factor has been the presence of a dynamic social entrepreneur, and sometimes a group of such people. A number of case studies from Preston can be found on the Bridge Builders Preston website:

<http://mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk/bridgebuilderpreston/index.htm>

Another source is *Communities in Transition* (co-ordinated by the Centre for Public Theology at the University of Manchester, linked with the Commission on Urban Life and Faith, and funded by the Church Urban Fund). Its website is due to be launched on the University of Manchester website in May 2006.

### **Further information**

The full papers presented at the Faith-based Voluntary Action seminar held at the NCVO in London on 15 June, 2006, including full details of academic references, are available on the ESRC Society Today website at:

[www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk)

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The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the umbrella body for the voluntary sector in England. It works to support the voluntary sector and to create an environment in which voluntary organisations can flourish. It represents the views of the voluntary sector to policymakers and Government and consults with the sector to inform our policy positions on issues generic to the sector. It also carries out in-depth research to promote a better understanding of the sector and its activities. NCVO has a growing membership of over 4,500 voluntary organisations, ranging from large national charities to small local community groups.

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