Paper 2   Theological reflections
for Christians working in Partnership

In this short paper I attempt to set out some theological reflections on the issues raised by the Bridge Builders Preston pilot project, about the nature of partnership in community development, urban regeneration and welfare services, between faith based groups and statutory agencies. It is written by a Christian, from a Christian perspective, but in the light of some knowledge, experience, discussion and friendships within other faith communities, particularly among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs.

This is contextually rooted theological reflection, emerging out of the practical everyday involvement of working in local deprived, multi-faith inner city neighbourhoods, where regeneration programmes come and go, where exciting innovative voluntary and community projects emerge, flourish and disappear when funds run out, and where churches, mosques, temples, and gurudwaras offer a long term presence and means of building and sustaining community. It is written at a time when UK government policy for a range of reasons I have discussed elsewhere, is taking a keen interest in the role of faith communities and even providing some funding to help build their capacity. It is also a time when religion is increasingly high on the international public agenda, especially in the context of global conflicts in which religious identity and motivations are portrayed as playing a key role. The Bridge Builders Preston pilot project was one attempt to test whether religion at the local level could play a more constructive role in working in the public realm for the common good, and if so what were the conditions in which such a role might develop and flourish. Other papers in this collection report on the achievements of the project, the processes involved and the implications for public policy. Here we concentrate on the issues that arise for Christians and the churches, and by extension for other people of faith and their religious institutions. It is a paper that raises many questions and provides few clear answers, yet hopefully enables people to begin a journey of theological reflection on their community work.

Relationships between Religion and the public realm

It is helpful to begin by considering different positions that religious groups may take in terms of their relationship with wider society and the state. One dimension of this is mainly about the collective or social relationship and goes along a continuum with four positions that can be marked as:

Sectarian Separatist	Communal/ Church Establishment	Institutional Denominations congregations	Post modern individualistic consumers

At the sectarian end the religious group sees itself as a pure, exclusive and alternative society. If recruitment takes place the cost of conversion to an individual is likely to be high. The communal or church type sees itself as embracing everyone in the community and if possible establishing a government and legal system and culture that is based on the faith. Membership retention and transmission of the faith and culture to the next generation is likely to be more important than recruitment from outside. The Institutional model accepts the reality of pluralism and will seek to position itself at a distinctive competitive point in the religious marketplace, tolerating and sometimes finding common cause with other religious groups. From the post modern position all options for believing are open and belonging and brand loyalty are scarcely relevant in the spiritual supermarket. The last two models are likely to rely on evangelism, outreach, or marketing in order to boost membership or sales and will be tempted to lower the cost or adapt the product to the consumer.

A second dimension is more to do with the philosophy, or priority concerns in terms of engagement with society and the state. The three easily marked positions are:

Spiritual	Pragmatic	Prophetic /political

At the spiritual end the clear priority is heavenly, believers are concerned with pleasing God, saving souls and ensuring blessing in the after life. The Pragmatic position is one where everyday needs on this earth are more

important, and meeting those needs with practical compassion is seen as obedience or witness to the faith, as a way of revealing God and winning others to the cause. The Prophetic position is more about transformation of society, often based on a vision of the perfect society desired by God, and contrasted with the unjust current state of the world. It is about bringing the world more into line with the rule of God and the divine purposes for all creation.

Clearly the territory in which Government is interesting in working with faith communities is the pragmatic one, since the spiritual position is one on which governments should not take a view and find irrelevant, while the prophetic position is one which the state is always bound to find challenging and problematic. For the state to work pragmatically with religion, sectarian groups or individual consumers are not much use, and since the communal church or establishment position is no longer dominant in British society it usually needs to work with denominational style plural religious institutions. While many believers will be happy to work within this space for much of the time, some will all the time, and most for some of the time, see themselves as in a different position which makes working with the state theologically problematical.

The Biblical tradition on the relationship between believers and the state has a number of diverse strands all of which can be explored and drawn on.

There are for example

    Separatism (flee out of Babylon, Revelation)
    Judgement (Prophets such as Jonah, Jeremiah, Elijah)
    Liberation from oppression (Moses, Judges)
    Godly Rulers (David, Josiah)
    Collaboration in government (Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah)
    Passive Obedience (Romans 13, My Kingdom is not of this world)
    Hidden influence / key people used by God   (Esther, Cyrus)

The theological task for a local group of believers in this area is to understand and fulfil their vocation, or in other words to discern and do what God wants in the particular context. They can do this by reflecting prayerfully (and as Christians would put it under the guidance of the Spirit)

on the sources of their faith in Scripture and tradition, in the context of local community needs and opportunities. Scripture and tradition may offer general principles, specific laws, rules and ethical precepts, stories, examples and models of action to follow. But it is only in dialogue with the local and current situation that specific directions for action and ministry can be discerned and priorities set. Different groups will place different weights on the different elements on which they draw according to their location on the two dimensions of our typology. Yet for all the task is essentially the same and involves catching a vision, discerning a vocation and deciding what they must, should or might do out of all the possible things they could do, in the context in which God has placed them. For Christians this process of moving to practical action in society may be talked about as holistic mission, on the model of the incarnation of Christ, of making the word flesh, of the intervention of God in history at a specific point in time and space.

Other faith traditions will need to find their own thought forms and language, and may find this Christian terminology incomprehensible or even offensive. However they would all seem to agree that faith cannot be kept in a compartment separate from the rest of life, that there are social implications of religion, and that there are needs and opportunities where faith based groups are uniquely well placed to engage in community work and social service.

From Motivation to Management

Faith groups thinking of local social action usually begin from a compassionate response to needs they encounter in their daily lives. They may also be motivated by an awareness of God's perfect justice and a sense that particular unjust situations they have encountered are an affront to this. Additionally, or sometimes primarily, they see social action as a way of contacting new people in a manner which will ease the way for evangelism and recruitment. Finally it is not unknown for a church which is in decline of turning to social action projects simply because all else failed, at least it will keep the building in use, give the clergy something worthwhile to do with their time and generate enough income to keep the roof intact.

Of course there are a variety of ways of identifying, locating, interpreting and evaluating local social needs and prioritising the ones to be addressed. Some of the questions to be answered in the light of theological positions and value positions include:

Which groups of people are in priority need or suffering major injustices?
- Are they within the membership of the faith group or at least broadly identified with the religion it represents?
- Are they within the ordinary residential community living in the neighbourhood?
- Are they among the most marginalised groups who use the area (perhaps the type of people among whom Jesus concentrated his ministry) such as homeless people, substance abusers, sex workers?

What evidence is there about the extent of the needs identified and the numbers of people involved?

Has the faith group any resources, skills or experience in addressing the needs of particular groups that have been identified?

Are there any other local agencies or groups that have made significant and effective interventions in these areas of need? Do they cater for the full extent and range of the need? If a new initiative is appropriate (i.e. not duplicating their work) what can be learned from their experience?

What is your analysis of the causes of the needs identified, and what is the evidence or theological basis for this?

In the light of the group's analysis, theology and values what is most likely to offer a solution to the identified needs?
- Gifts of money, food, clothing, shelter,?
- Advice, counselling or education?
- A self help project which will empower people to take control of their lives?
- A change in the structures, systems or laws which create the problem?
- A miracle, through prayer and/or conversion?

Has someone got a vision or idea for a new initiative which could be turned into a viable plan?

What resources would be needed to put such a plan into effect and how can these be put together from internal resources, or from outside funding that is reasonably accessible?

The above sequence is a rational, socially and theologically informed process of moving from a faith based motivation to do something in community action to the management of an initiative or project. In this sequence the faith group initiates and remains in control of activities. Of course it is possible in the real world for things to take place in a different sequence. Some groups may identify a clear sense of a word or vision direct from God, or a transcendent moment that inspired them in a way which made a project inevitable in consequence. Nor is it unknown for a public body to approach a faith group saying, "we have £xxxk to spend on crime prevention / men's health / under fives work in your neighbourhood before next March can you help us spend it by being a partner, making your building available, providing contacts as clients or volunteers......?"

In such a situation there is still theological work to be done. It is good if some thinking about the parameters and theology of social involvement has been done in advance. It is possible to do theological reflection, "on the fly" by asking relevant questions and reflecting on the answers given before entering into commitments with insistent partners. Finally it is worthwhile reflecting theologically on the experience after the event, seeking to evaluate not just the pragmatic outputs and outcomes that have been achieved, but on the process and impact of the initiative in terms of one's faith.

Partnerships and Power

Faith groups have a tendency to be autonomous and independent, indeed some of them have made it into a fine art, and do most things without reference to outsiders, being answerable as they see it only to God, whose authority can be discerned in Scripture, through hierarchical or charismatic leadership, or even through the vote of the church meeting or management

board. When entering into a partnership with the statutory realm, or working together with other groups of the same or different faiths, power and control are distributed more widely although there may be overall gains as new resources are added. When working in a community development mode with local people, who are being empowered, power and control is also likely to be partially given up. This sometimes leads to painful situations and difficult dilemmas. They may be very practical issues such as rules for the use of building by outside groups who would like to hold fundraising raffles, or parties with alcohol, when the faith tradition and church trust deed forbid gambling and strong drink. Or they may be highly charged emotional and political issues which are seen as great matters of principle by some believers such as whether Christians should donate money to the Pakistani earthquake via the local mosque's collection for Islamic relief, or whether the vicar should share a platform in a public meeting with the chair of the local Gay Pride group.

In Christian theology there is a fairly well rehearsed doctrine that is a useful model here in the self emptying of God who in Christ humbled himself and took the form of a servant, even going as far as death on a cross (Phil 2). Working out the implications of this in day to day community work contexts is challenging, but far from simple.

Partnership of course is a matter of relationships but then relationships (with God and with other people) are at the heart of all religion. Indeed the etymology of the word religion comes from a Latin verb meaning to "bind together". The Christian conception of God as Trinity, or mystic union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit places harmonious and complementary relationships at the heart of the divine nature. The notions of communion and community are also linked in the language and symbolism of sharing the bread and wine as representing the body and blood of Christ, and in the concept of the church or congregation of believers as the "body of Christ". The contentious area surrounds defining the boundaries of the church, the congregation or God's chosen people, in terms of those who have true or saving faith, for inevitably this excludes others. And though there are New Testament texts that clearly call us to live at peace with all people and to pray and work for the welfare of all (e.g. Gal.6.10), acting as salt and light (Matt 5.12) in the world, there are also ones which say "do not be unequally

yoked with unbelievers" (2 Cor 6;14). Reflecting on how to apply this in local community contexts is an important theological task.

Pounds and Pragmatism :funding and counting the cost.

Faith groups working in deprived areas where regeneration programmes and other special funding regimes offer clear opportunities for local improvements, and especially where the statutory world is starting to court their involvement, can often be tempted by the money on offer. Some might say they are too easily seduced. In order to steer a way through this minefield of difficult issues it is helpful to reflect on a theology of resources and to have a practical understanding of the issues of financial accountability for outside money.

Christian theology recognises that all the resources of earth and heaven are created by and belong to God (The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; Ps 24;1 and the cattle on a thousand hills are his also Ps 50;10) and are on loan to human beings who are called to be stewards. Islam in a similar way speaks of human beings as Allah's vice regents on earth. Yet many Christians and Muslims have a tender conscience about taking money from immoral sources and applying it for religious or charitable work. Profits of gambling (including national Lottery grants), brewing and the sex industry have long been regarded as suspect, while in the contemporary world many might want to add the tobacco industry, drugs barons, the arms trade, and unjust trading arrangements or dealings with particular oppressive regimes. Yet the complexity of flows of finance in the modern global economy mean that almost all money (including that given directly into the church collection plate) has passed through some dubious channels and has untraceable origins. It may be that we have to simply say in words I have heard attributed to General Booth of the Salvation Army, "the trouble with tainted money is there simply tain't enough of it". Or we may need to do more serious theological investigation for example in the way that a local Muslim organisation has in obtaining a fatwa from the scholars that offers the judgment that "grant money from the Lottery is only taken from the proportion that punters know will be devoted to good causes and therefore may be taken as a charitable gift rather than as the profits of the gambling industry which would be *haram* (forbidden)."

If a faith group does decide to take public money for its work it will do well (echoing Jesus' words) to calculate and count the probable cost. There is always a sense in which (to mix metaphors) he who pays the piper pulls the strings. Taking large scale funding can easily distort the objectives, blur the vision and transform the ethos of any organisation. Employing new staff, managing large budgets and delivering targeted projects will be costly in terms of the time commitments of existing staff and volunteers and inevitably draw them away from former regular tasks. It is possible that the new work will be a more effective use of time and resources, but it is unlikely that everyone will agree and some people may be deeply hurt by changes. Discernment is needed as to whether new funding will fulfil or complement the vision and vocation of the faith group or distort or overwhelm it. Will it lead to loss of control over the destiny of the future direction of the faith group? If so how much does that matter in the context of eternity and God's purposes for the local community?

There are other major implications of accepting government funding that under current policy guidelines remain rather unclear and of concern to faith based groups.

- Can we still be prophetic? Many in the sector fear that it may not be so easy to offer robust criticism of state policy and practice if it is seen to bite the hand which feeds it.

- Calling on the power of God? Is it legitimate for a faith group, in receipt of public funding to call on or make reference to this additional dimension in the context of its community work. Is a group allowed to say a prayer before a meal it serves in its lunch club or langar kitchen? Can a faith based drugs project offer to say prayers for or with a client in the hope that this will improve her chances of staying "clean"?

- Will we have to give up preaching and evangelism? Most religious groups would reject the idea that their practical service to outsiders is dependent upon them accepting the group's beliefs, they inevitably see such work as a witness to their faith, and hope it would play some part in drawing people towards their God and into their community. Obviously no one would wish to use a large amount of public money to

pay salaries which subsidise the worship life, or recruitment drive of a local mosque or church. The difficulty is how much verbalisation, dialogue or persuasion is allowed in the context of a social action programme. Are posters, or artefacts depicting sacred texts or symbols permissible in the building? Can a community worker employed through a public sector grant speak about his faith based motivation for the work? May a children's play scheme use stories or songs drawn from the faith tradition when the children and their parents are actually quite enthusiastic about this aspect of the club?

Most religious groups would find it totally unacceptable to be forced to give up these spiritual aspects of their work. But it is important to establish a clear contractual understanding with the funder about what is and what is not seen as appropriate in advance and to decide if there are issues so important that the funding cannot be accepted with integrity.

Finally there are a number of smaller day to day costs that are incurred by any group accepting partnership funding. Among the most irritating are the bureaucratic hassles of collecting and providing information. Even before money is released there is a daunting form to be completed, specifying details of targets, outputs and outcomes and the detailed budgetary forecasts sometimes on a month by month basis. Then if funding is released there is the need for detailed financial bookkeeping and collecting data on every user of the project, often including post codes and ethnic monitoring information. While there are some sad souls who actually relish these time consuming administrative tasks, and staff can develop the routines and skills to satisfy the paymasters, most community workers and clergy feel they would much rather be doing "real" work with "real" people and get overwhelmed. To be fair their may be some real value in collecting and analysing this type of data for they can provide real evidence on which to evaluate the success or failure, or need to modify the practice in a project.

However it is also possible to raise theological questions as to whether such approaches directly contradict faith based understandings of human nature. Are not whole people, made in God's image and designed for relationships with Him and with each other, not just being reduced to numbers and statistics. Is not the endless process of social sorting of individuals into state defined categories not a dangerous process of dehumanisation? How

far is this linked to a growing emphasis on state surveillance and control of citizens through the power of information technology? How much does this approach contradict what the Christian church, and many other faith groups seek to do in ministering to the whole person in the context of their community? How far can people of faith collude with these secular and technological processes which magnify human pride and autonomy? King David (1 Chronicles 21) was criticised by Joab and the prophet Gad for attempting to take a census (at the instigation of Satan according to the text) which would show his nation's strength, while the story of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11) remains as a warning to the hubris of human technologists.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper has been to show that theological reflection is an important, worthwhile and hopefully interesting task in the context of developing partnerships in community development and urban regeneration. Other Christians, and people from other faith communities will no doubt prefer to use alternative methods, and focus on rather different issues. There are in this area too many questions without simple answers to be left to the secular non-theologians and pragmatic politicians. People of faith, who do not need to be learned or formally trained in theology, have a great advantage here, that their very beliefs and spiritual experiences equip them with the ability to consider such issues in the light of eternity, But by thinking, talking and praying about these things together, only good can come.