

GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER: HOW CAN WE BUILD FLOURISHING COMMUNITIES?

Part one, July 2015

In July 2015, Church Urban Fund and Edinburgh University's Divinity School hosted an event on the theme of flourishing communities. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, this event was one of a series of four that will be held in different locations and on different themes around England.

This series of events aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice; bringing together academics, clergy and practitioners in order to share their diverse experience and expertise on various poverty-related themes.

This paper is a summary of the presentations delivered in the first event and has been written in order to share the learning and hopefully, to encourage similar discussions around the country.

A POLITICAL REFLECTION:

*Lord Maurice Glasman, Senior Lecturer in Political Theory,
London Metropolitan University*



Politically we are now at a turning point where, with deep welfare cuts, the stakes are high. In our country, only the Church bears witness to what is happening in all places. It provides a civic and ethical inheritance that may be passed on to all people, whether churchgoers or not. My Jewish background has enabled me to see the value of Christian social thought, particularly in its assertion that humans are not commodities or administrative units.

In order to respond to today's political situation, we need a politics of the common good. The Church has an essential role in promoting this because of the transformative power of love and relationships that it brings.

This new politics needs to be structured by three powers. The powers of *money*, including resources and employment, and the *state*, which operates coercively and collectively, have roles to play. However, *relational power* will be key to the new politics. Poverty is partly about a lack of resources but also about isolation, about being alone. Our relationships open new possibilities to us, showing us ways of reforming our fallen, sinful, impoverished systems.



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A true leadership of the poor is needed, with leaders developed from among the poor, if we are to see significant change. I define leaders as people with followers – rather than challengers with few supporters. We need leaders with compelling visions of the future that inspire others to follow. The Church can play a central role in this leadership development.



The announcement in yesterday's budget of a living wage of £9 per hour by 2020 is a shining example of what churches can do to tackle poverty - for a long time, the living wage was primarily a church campaign. "

But to do this, we need to look around us at what is already going on. Although the Church has a comprehensive national coverage through its parish system, it needs to seek allies in other institutions. These will be bodies and corporations in the same way the Church is, with similar goals and ways of being. Institutions uphold traditions and goods, and all have a role in resisting the state's demand for uniformity.

Before the election, I took part in a piece of research that involved asking people what they cared about most. We found that people listed three things in particular. The first was *family*, which is held together by love and sacrifice. The second was *place*, which is being degraded as power is taken out of localities. The third was *work* (understood by church tradition as vocation), which entails ethical and meaningful work. If the capitalist system fails to deliver these three things it is indecent. For example, to feed a family, it shouldn't be necessary to hold down two jobs.

The announcement in yesterday's budget of a living wage of £9 per hour by 2020 is a shining example of what churches can do to tackle poverty - for a long time, the living wage was primarily a church campaign. But we need to do more to build upon the success of that campaign, and an issue of particular importance is the establishment of an alternative banking system. Such a system would have a cap on interest rates for loan repayments, would encourage the redistribution of assets and would ensure that banks were endowed with capital that could not be lent to people outside their local area. Another important issue is that of work – skilled work needs to be valued far more highly, whether this be the work of the plumber, the priest or the carer.

Faithful relationships require us to be true to the people who really help us. We need to do things with other people and develop the virtues that enable this, transforming a shared fate into a mutual destiny.



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A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION:

*Prof Luke Bretherton, Professor of Theological Ethics and Senior Fellow,
Kenan Institute for Ethics, Duke University*



Social change requires both hearing and listening. Scripture teaches us that, for Christians, the most basic act should be listening. Paul asks 'How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?' (Romans 10.14) while the ancient Hebrew prayer begins 'Hear, O Israel' (Deuteronomy 6.4). Hearing and listening constitute the Church; hearing God's Word while listening to the cries of our neighbours.

From listening we may move into action.

As Christians we have a rich language of change, which is also known as repentance. Christ is the Word, the resurrected and ascended Lord and the one who sends his Spirit to inspire humankind. He creates a common world of shared meaning in which action becomes possible.

In this world we need to listen with our gut as well as with our ears. In the parable of the Good Samaritan the word for compassion is *esplagchnisthe*, literally being gutted or moved in the gut. It is hearing the silent cry of the beaten, suffering body that causes this kind of compassion. Yet in present society, compassion has been eviscerated and disembowelled. It is impeded by the culture of targets, quotas, professional distance and impartiality. We need to rebuild our ability to hear with our gut and to respond with deep compassion to the suffering around us.

We also need to be more angry as well as more loving. Yet we must respond with constructive action, not destruction. The Norse understanding of anger included grief about what had been lost. This kind of anger can be positively expressed as *lament*.



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Lament is structured grief, orientated to hope for a better reconfiguration of the world as it is. Lament thereby reclaims agency. Because it is addressed to God, there is an expectation that lament will be heard, as in the Psalms and the book of Job.

The Church has a key role in giving voice to lament. Yet we need to beware - this *politics of lament* has three enemies.



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First the politics of *respectability*, which is based on consensus, rationality, professional expertise and the avoidance of conflict. Such behaviour impairs the expression of communal grief and instead encourages deference to authority.

Second the politics of *polarisation*, which seeks to recruit others to an ideological cause and instead of bringing people together, creates enemies and victims. This behaviour causes us to lose sight of complexity and ambiguity and weakens our ability to build a common life.

Third is the politics of *escape*, which involves a retreat into ghettos away from the world as it is. Some escape into religious piety that fails to engage with reality. Others escape by immersing themselves in life's mundane details, technologies and celebrity fantasies.

All three behaviours are refusals to listen or to repent.

Communities need to hear together. God commands Jeremiah to seek the welfare of the city to which he has been sent (Jeremiah 29.7). We need to become drawn into the fate of our communities, finding common interest and working with others. We need a politics of hospitable, common life that begins with the 'yes', not with the 'no'.

A SOCIAL POLICY PERSPECTIVE:

Dr David Jarvis, Reader in Local and Regional Economic Development and Co-Director of the Centre for Business in Society at Coventry University



For over twenty years, researchers at Coventry University have sought to understand how people of faith tackle social exclusion and build social capital through contributions to regeneration. Multiple research projects have sought to address these questions:

- What are faith communities doing?
- What is their role in tackling social exclusion and building social capital?
- What are the barriers to the participation of faith communities in regeneration?
- What are the problematic issues for faith groups as they define them?

Two projects in particular help show how worshipping communities and faith-based organisations are building flourishing communities. The first, *Churches in Action*, sought a better understanding of the added value of local faith-based social action projects in addressing deprivation and disadvantage. The research identified several distinctive features of faith-based projects, including:

- **Provision of safe spaces** where people feel valued and safe, giving project users an often unique opportunity to meet others
- **Holistic focus** on people rather than on targets, allowing an appreciation of people and their circumstances to emerge over time



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- **Users giving something back** by becoming providers for others
- **Outreach** or a capacity to engage people as equals and support them in the places where they live
- **Dedicated volunteers** whose impetus to make a difference stems from the immediacy of local issues and an underlying faith motivation



Both projects suggest that the core values of faith-based social action projects place an intrinsic value on people who are struggling to flourish, and in meeting their needs holistically in the place where they live. ”

The second project, *Building Better Neighbourhoods*, surveyed the work of worshipping communities, including their financial investment in paid staff, volunteering, rooms and halls, their response to local needs, their work with the public sector and voluntary organisations, their policy development and implementation and their contributions to developing ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ social capital.

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SNAPSHOT ON PROJECTS

Together for the Common Good continues the bridge-building work of Liverpool church leaders Derek Warlock, David Sheppard and John Newton. This is a ‘better together’ ministry which seeks to help people of goodwill become agents of change for the common good. Key principles include subsidiarity and a bias to the poor. See more at www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk.

Nottingham Citizens believes that we need to organise civil society rather than simply accept poverty and degradation. The alliance consists of dues-paying members and seeks to help people listen to local needs and respond with campaigns for change. Relational church culture should not be undervalued and churches should recognise the power they have to change things. See more at www.citizensuk.org/nottingham.

Transforming Notts Together, a joint venture between Church Urban Fund and the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham, supports and resources churches to engage with their communities. Churches are still there at the centre of neighbourhoods, even when other organisations have departed. They bring trust and foster relationships. The venture is more about networking than service delivery, aiding cooperation and collaboration between different providers. See more at www.cuf.org.uk/transforming-notts-together.



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POINTS FROM DISCUSSION

The event ended with an extended time of discussion, reflecting on the day's presentations and identifying key learning points, including:

- It's good to access the language, methodology and scholarship of community building.
- What the Church has done well for a long time needs to be better articulated, more reflectively.
- The Church needs to challenge both markets and the state.
- In order to work better together in community, we need to let go.
- We need the confidence to embrace failure.
- We need to ensure that community organising doesn't increase polarisation.
- All organising is reorganising.
- We should encourage listening within the local area and address specific local issues.
- Don't be afraid of power: it can be used for good.
- Volunteers in the pews need to be empowered and encouraged.
- Activities must be collectively owned.
- The growing secular acceptance of spirituality provides new openings for churches.
- International community links help us understand our own local community more than we might expect.
- Strength may be gained from the global context and connections with poorer countries.
- The welfare landscape is changing, the voluntary sector is crumbling and the churches are what is left.

We hope that this event was an encouragement for the people who attended, and also for those who read this summary. We would like to thank all the speakers who contributed to the day and look forward to working more closely in partnership with many of the people and organisations who work so hard to build flourishing communities.



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