

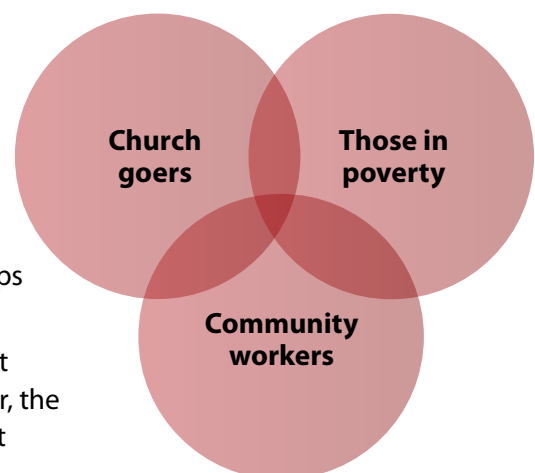
FACING UP TO POVERTY: THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

This research project aimed to explore the impact of church-led community work on the relationships between three groups: churchgoers, community workers and people in poverty (understood broadly as material/resource poverty). It sought to identify the barriers that exist between these three groups and the bridges that bring them together.

Commissioned by Church Urban Fund and conducted independently by Christian Research Consultancy, this research is based on 40 face-to-face, in-depth interviews with people involved in church-led community centres in Newcastle, Preston, Birmingham and Camborne. This paper summarises the key findings from those interviews and looks at what can be done to develop community work that breaks down barriers between these three groups. Data from a quantitative attitudinal survey taking place in October 2012 will be used to test the degree to which these qualitative findings are representative.

THE KEY FINDINGS ARE:

- Effective church-led community work breaks down barriers between these three groups, challenging the validity of such distinct categories. In one community centre we visited the three groups were impossible to distinguish.
- This breaking down of barriers occurs through the relationships that develop in the day-to-day work in the community.
- As community workers welcome people in poverty and treat them as valued individuals with skills and experience to offer, the relationships that grow encourage people in poverty to start volunteering and in some cases attend church services.
- As churchgoers volunteer as community workers, they learn not only to give, but to receive from those they are serving.
- When the three groups remain largely separate, the effectiveness of the community work is limited: community workers feel isolated and unsupported; people in poverty do not receive the full support they need; and churchgoers remain apathetic about the poverty in their community.



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BACKGROUND

Hundreds of churches around the country do very valuable work tackling poverty in their community. To gain a deeper understanding of how this work affects the people involved, a research project was undertaken to investigate the impact of church-led community work on the relationships between three groups: churchgoers, community workers and those experiencing poverty. Recognising that these groups are not mutually exclusive, the aim was nonetheless to explore the barriers that exist between them and the bridges that bring them together. The findings would be used to encourage and support more churchgoers to take action.

A total of 40 in-depth interviews were conducted between May and July 2012 in four deprived areas: Newcastle, Birmingham, Preston and Camborne. In all four areas, churches were running drop-in centres for vulnerable groups in their communities including people who were homeless, on low incomes, socially isolated or addicted to drugs or alcohol.

In each area interviews were conducted with community workers and volunteers (27 interviews), churchgoers (3 interviews)¹, and people experiencing poverty (15 interviews) in order to get different perspectives on the relationships between these three groups.

TRANSFORMATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Despite the initial intention to explore the relationships between the three groups, the research found that effective church-led community work led to a great degree of overlap between the groups. In fact, in the most effective programmes, barriers between the groups were to a large degree broken down and individuals belonged to or moved between all three.

Those in poverty

In the course of the research we interviewed people who had and still were experiencing poverty as a result of abuse, mental health issues, low pay, unemployment, addictions and social isolation. However, some of these individuals reported that they had attended their local drop-in centre and as a result of the way they were welcomed by the community workers, had started to volunteer in the community centre and even attend church services. One churchgoer commented: *"We've got certain people coming in now who would never even believe in coming to church and have started coming."*

In these cases, people acknowledged the transformative power of the relationships they had developed with community workers. As a result of being warmly welcomed and treated as a valuable individual with skills and experience to offer others, their self-confidence and self-esteem were transformed. They often responded to this welcome by volunteering or contributing in some way to the community work.

For example, one woman we spoke to had previously been homeless as a result of addiction to drugs and alcohol. She lived on the streets for five years, moving in and out of supported housing. When she first arrived at the drop-in centre in Camborne she was drunk and very shy, but the project leader welcomed her. After going to the centre for some time, she began to welcome new people herself and show them around. She has now been free from drugs and alcohol for more than two years and is working as a 'learning volunteer' in the centre, helping in the kitchen and welcoming others who drop in.

She commented: *"I absolutely love it here... everybody's been through something difficult, and to reassure them that life can get better, it doesn't have to get any worse than it is, and just have a good chat really."*

¹ This group comprises churchgoers that were not involved in the community work or experiencing poverty. However, several people in the other two groups also attended church.

Personal experiences of poverty also gave these individuals an awareness of their own vulnerability and helped them to empathise with other people who were struggling with addiction, social isolation or lack of money. This empathy helped to further break down the barriers between community workers and those experiencing poverty.

The research showed that community centres that treat people not as problems to be solved, but as people who have intrinsic worth and a potential contribution to make to the rest of the group, are most effective at breaking down barriers between these often separate groups of churchgoers, community workers and people experiencing poverty.

Indeed, in the best examples of community work, 'family' was a word that was commonly used to describe the relationships formed: *"The people in this community and especially the people I'm directly working with, I class them as my family now."*

STRUGGLING WITH ABUSE

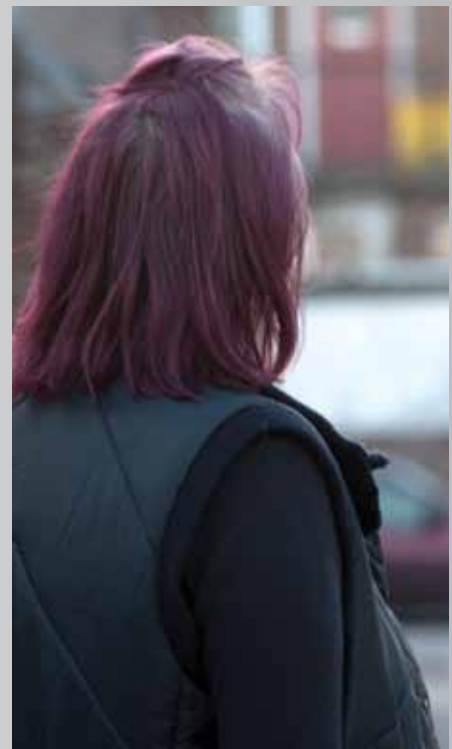
I was incredibly abused as a child, because of my mother's gambling habit. If she was in a bad mood, she used to ram us into the coalhouse. I was sexually abused, physically abused and mentally abused, so as you never knew one day to the next if you were going to have something to eat.

So when I turned 14, I decided I'm not living in poverty. I couldn't read or write by this time. So I went to school and I slogged every day, every hour, to learn to read and write. I passed my exams at 16. And then I started to realise in life you can overcome things if you really set your heart on it.

So I got to that point in my life when I was attacked and raped by my sister's first husband. But by this time I actually went right off the rails. I must have been about 14 months of just blotto, absolutely mortal drunk, going from one man to another. I'd gone home to tell my parents what had happened, and my dad said, "rubbish". So I walked back out of that house and took an overdose. It had nothing to do with dying. I needed something more real. I felt like I was just this entity.

The one thing about suffering abuse, you have no self-esteem. Something just happens, it's your fault, and you know, everything's your fault. If you haven't got money for the tea, your fault. Your child falls over and cuts themselves, your fault.

When I met my husband, we swore blind that no child would ever suffer. I would always stand instead for children. I've always put children first. I became an adopted grandmother to twenty-three. A lot of kids in this area call me Auntie. God's given me this knack with children, and I've volunteered since I was twenty-three years old to make sure children got as much as they needed, as much as I could get them. We have to teach these children that there's hope.



Those working in the community

This kind of relational approach not only transforms the people who drop in to use the centres' services or join their groups, it was also seen to have an impact on the attitudes and behaviour of staff and volunteers.

Typically, those engaged in community work spontaneously talked about the benefits they received from their involvement, including the enjoyment of taking part in the activities, the sense of purpose from helping others, and above all the relationships they built with the people they were there to serve.

"If you really accept them as equals, they tell you so much, and I often leave here feeling very grateful... and I can share things with these guys and women too."

Recognising that the benefits of engaging in community work are two-way helps to further break down barriers that exist between staff and volunteers and the people they are working with. It also challenges the assumption that churches are giving to and serving those in poverty, receiving little in return. For all involved, there needs to be an openness to give and receive, to serve and be served, to love and be loved.

"I feel they're like family. I mean they'll come and give us a hug and we give them a hug. We ask about their family, they ask about us, we tell them what's going on in our lives, and they really do take an interest in us as much as we take an interest in them. So it's like a family I think here. I'm not saying in every lunch club it is but I do think it's like a family here."

Those in the church

Some of the churchgoers we interviewed exemplified the overlap that exists between our three groups. For example, one community worker we spoke to told us about his struggles when he had to give up his job to look after his disabled parents and admitted:

"I was years and years at the church before I visited or started helping with the project. I never really thought about coming in, I just thought of it, as probably a lot of people do, just think it was for homeless and people with drink and drug problems not realising that anybody can come in. I came to the church service as normal on Christmas Day and you could smell the cooking in the church ... so I came in on Boxing Day, there was quite a few volunteers and helpers from the church and other churches as well. We were just chatting and I could see the dirty plates getting higher and I said 'I could give you a hand washing the dishes' so it basically started from there."

This particular individual belonged to all of our three groups: he experienced poverty; he was a member of the church, and he volunteered at the drop-in centre. He commented that the real strength of the community work was that it *"Shows them there are people that do care"*.

WHEN THE BARRIERS REMAIN

Unfortunately, not all churchgoers reflected this enthusiasm for the work going on in their community. Some churchgoers were found to be apathetic, showing little interest or anything other than superficial concern for people in poverty.

For some churchgoers a lack of understanding of local poverty or knowledge of the community work contributed to their apathy: *"They always say Camborne and Redruth are a deprived area and yet looking around it never seems obvious to me that it is particularly deprived in that way... I mean you don't see anybody in rags going around or this sort of thing."*

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BATTLING WITH ADDICTION

I grew up in Camborne, then I left to join the Navy. I was diagnosed with depression when I was 18 and that has been a constant battle. I am now 40 so I have battled with mental illness for 22 years and it has been difficult. I got married, moved away, had two children, came back when my marriage split up. I turned to drugs and alcohol. I have got a history of drugs and alcohol right the way through my teens and most of my adulthood. Suicidal tendencies, self-harming; basically I just lost the plot. I lost my way, I lost my faith.



Then, a couple of years ago, I got to a point where I just had enough and I knew that I had to change, and I wanted to change because I couldn't continue living my life that way. I had two options, I either gave up drinking and using drugs or I killed myself. I have got two children and I didn't want them to be without a mother, and at that point I just looked up in the air and I said if there is a God there please help me. And I detoxed at home on my own. It was one of the worst experiences I have ever been through. I shut myself off from everybody and it was the shame and the guilt.

It is difficult, especially mental illness; people aren't aware of it, they look at you and they think that you are okay, but it's the mental illness, the depression, the agoraphobia. People just think because I don't look like I am ill then you don't suffer from it. People need to be aware of how much people suffer and how vulnerable people are.

I have been volunteering for a fortnight. My eyes have certainly been opened to how much this church is doing. I wasn't aware of how much they actually did for people in the community. There are food banks, there are clothing banks, the drop-in centre for vulnerable adults. I think it is absolutely amazing; I get goose bumps when I think about the good things.

Some people are lonely, they just want to sit and have a cup of tea and talk to somebody. They want people to listen to them, they need people there to share their problems with or even just somebody to smile at them and say, have a good day, and not look down on them and be judgemental. You know sometimes it is that simple.

For others, concern for personal safety or prejudice towards certain groups perceived to be 'undeserving' acted as barriers to any involvement with the community work.

A good example of the divergent attitudes amongst churchgoers was seen at a church where youths were vandalising the church building. Some members advocated significantly increasing the security system, increasing the physical barriers between the church and the young people, while others suggested starting a project to engage and empower the local youths. In the end a decision was taken to engage, which led to a very successful youth project.

Where apathy or even aversion were expressed by churchgoers, a distance was seen between them and the community workers and people in poverty. This distance limited the effectiveness of the community work as community workers felt isolated and unsupported by the church.

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HOW TO BUILD BRIDGES

In one of the projects visited, the community work was fully integrated into the life of the church, with all new church members encouraged to contribute their skills and gifts, whatever they might be, towards this work. One lady was even asked to use her flower arranging skills to bring colour to the drop-in centre.

This kind of integration builds bridges between the three groups and results in lives that are transformed. People experiencing poverty feel loved and in turn strive to love others; community workers feel supported by the church, and churchgoers learn how to give and receive in their own community.

Our research suggests the following can be done to develop such integration:

- **Encourage integration of faith, community work and church:** church leaders can encourage all members of their congregation to get involved with the community work, using their individual skills to contribute in whatever way possible.
- **Emphasise that meeting physical needs is not enough:** community workers can be encouraged to focus on building relationships with others and not just meeting physical needs. Testimonies of the transformational power of friendship can foster this approach.
- **Change perceptions from 'giving' to 'giving and receiving':** churchgoers and community workers should be reminded that relationships are two-way and that those in poverty have a lot to teach the church.
- **Challenge perceptions of who is involved in church-led community work:** there is a need to communicate that many of those doing community work in deprived areas have experienced poverty themselves and are using those experiences to help others.

FURTHER INFORMATION

A copy of the full report is available as a free download from www.cuf.org.uk/research. For more information about this study please contact us at Church Urban Fund (bethany.eckley@cuf.org.uk).