

FAITH IN SOCIETY

**A report by Dame Julia Unwin
commissioned by Church Urban Fund**

Winter 2021

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CHANGING LIVES AND
COMMUNITIES TOGETHER



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Faith-based social action has played a central role in shaping the network of provision, support and service of England. Many of our institutions as well as our behaviours, have their foundations in social action: inspired, initiated, shaped and motivated by faith.

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by Dame Julia Unwin

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Executive Summary

Faith-based social action has played a central role in shaping the network of provision, support and service in England. Many of our institutions as well as our behaviours, have their foundations in social action: inspired, initiated, shaped and motivated by faith.

But the world has changed and the COVID pandemic has accelerated that change. This inquiry took place during the COVID pandemic, with associated restrictions, and provides an opportunity to reflect both on what has changed, and what the shape of contemporary social action for the next decade could look like. It suggests that modern faith-based social action at its very best is:

- Deeply rooted in the local – the place and the neighbourhood.
- Relational – building reciprocity and mutuality, recognising that all involved in social action are beneficiaries.
- Collaborative and humble – working with others, enabling and convening, using a wide range of leadership behaviours.
- Bold and ambitious – seeking out the difficult, and the uncomfortable.

Contemporary faith-based social action has three inter-locked manifestations:

- The provision of **support**, hospitality, friendship and care.
- The expression of **solidarity** – standing with people who are dispossessed, drawing attention to challenges, and together sharing knowledge, resource and access to power.
- The use of **sacred space** – offering spiritual space for celebration, for grief, for shared understanding.



These activities emerge from a shared belief in the value of individuals, an enduring presence in communities and the practical application of the gospel values of mercy and justice.

In order to do this, and develop the full capacity of this activity, there needs to be:

- a** A clearer focus on the development of leadership at all levels and across generations. This involves support for leaders, including the sharing of knowledge, and access to training and money.
- b** A new, refreshed and bold narrative about what faith-based social action is, and what it contributes.
- c** A more locally informed and directed approach to faith-based social action – which also takes the lived experience of people of faith, and those with none, into the wider world – translating, interpreting, calling for action and for change.



Dame Julia Unwin

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There is no true commitment to solidarity with the poor if one sees them merely as people passively waiting for help... The goal is not to become “the voice of the voiceless” but to help those without a voice find one.

*Gustavo Gutierrez,
Peruvian liberation theologian and Dominican priest*



Introduction

Faith-based social action has a long and glorious history – indeed it is faith that was the motivator of many institutions and their approaches today.

From monasteries and abbeys providing shelter, health care and sanctuary, through to the development of schools, residential care and indeed the founding of the welfare state, people of faith have been behind a great deal of the social effort and the network of provision that we rely on today. So many major civil society organisations such as the Children’s Society, the YMCA, a range of housing associations, trade unions, and local organisations across the country have their roots, and their original impetus, in communities and groupings of people of faith. The historic arc reveals the ways in which faith-based social action has developed, created legacy and altered over centuries. This is a proud record of achievement and there never was a time when the church stood back from social action. It has always been an integral part of the purpose and mission of the church.

Scope

In commissioning the inquiry, the Church Urban Fund asked me to consider various aspects of faith-based social action promoted by and with the Church of England, often in close collaboration with other denominations, faith groups and secular organisations. I focus on its narrative, distinctive value, the aspects which are widely shared, and crucially, what may change and develop over the next few years.

This report was commissioned early in the global pandemic, recognising that the health emergency, consequent measures and related social and economic crisis, create a different environment for faith-based social action.

Methodology

This inquiry was produced through discussions with a number of participants in the field and some reading around the subject. The annex to this report includes a short bibliography. The conclusions are the responsibility of the author.



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So we must look elsewhere: we must look inwards, seeking to honestly acknowledge the needs, anxieties and desires often hidden deep within ourselves; we must look outwards, to critically examine the fabric and structures of our society and our churches; and we must look to the edges, to those whom those structures tend so often to exclude, silence and render invisible.²

² Barrett, A., Harley, R., *Being Interrupted. Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside*, In (with a foreword by Rachel Mann), SCM Press, 2020.

SECTION 1

‘Faith in the City’

The state we’re in

**Faith-based social action
at a time of COVID**

Features of faith-based social action

Faith in the City

No review of faith-based social action would be complete without starting with some historical perspective, if only to confirm changes in society since then. The publication of *Faith in the City*³ in 1985 and the creation of the Church Urban Fund defines, for many, the last occasion when there was a serious and considered review of the role of the Church of England in social action.

Faith In The City emerged within a very different political, social and economic landscape from today. Sparked by civil unrest in a number of inner city areas, it challenged the apparent indifference of the Government to the growing inequalities within UK society and the way in which the price of economic restructuring was being paid disproportionately by the urban poor.

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Faith In The City’s lasting impact on the country reflected the fact that it was one of the most robust and politically literate reports to emerge from the Church of England.

Its 61 recommendations – 23 to the nation and 38 to the church – were based on a conviction that the state of our cities is a litmus test of justice and equity within society as a whole, alongside the insight from liberation theology that God has a ‘bias to the poor’.

Faith In The City’s lasting impact on the country reflected the fact that it was one of the most robust and politically literate reports to emerge from the Church of England. The absence of any effective political opposition at the time, the authenticity of the report’s methodology (serious empirical research combined with a deep commitment to receive and value voices and perspectives which were rarely heard in public debate), and the timing of its publication – in the autumn days of the Church of England’s ability to speak with credibility as a voice for the nation – meant that it was profoundly influential in changing the direction of social policy.

³ <https://www.chpublishing.co.uk/books/9780715143261/faith-in-the-city>

Once the initial hiatus had died down (who can forget Norman Tebitt's accusation of Faith In The City as 'Marxist', a charge rarely laid at the door of the Church of England before or since), its arguments and recommendations slowly began to be appropriated and quietly elided into much of subsequent urban policy.

The impact on the church was no less powerful. The report may have been written from the margins but it was appropriated by the centre of the Church of England. That 'appropriation' largely centred around the creation of the Church Urban Fund. Despite the fact that an impressive number of the report's recommendations to the Church of England were taken up and implemented (pp 361–4 of the report makes interesting reading today), in most people's minds it is the Church Urban Fund that defines the church's response to Faith In The City.



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In most people's minds it is the Church Urban Fund that defines the church's response to Faith In The City.

Re-visiting Faith In The City from the vantage point of 2021, any serious consideration of faith-based social action today must take account of some of the report's weaknesses and acknowledge the radical changes that have taken place in society subsequently. These might include:

- The recognition of the intelligence and knowledge held in local communities and places.
- The acknowledgement of issues of race, class and power.
- The acceptance of both the need to hear and engage with diverse and disparate voices, and the essential power of those voices.
- The impact of the digital revolution: everyone can now publish their views, and the expectation is of greater transparency of institutions.

It is clear that, historically, Faith In The City emerged immediately prior to three seismic shifts that have changed the context for urban policy ever since: the 'triumph' of neo-capitalism, globalisation and multiculturalism, and the communications revolution. Of these, the fall of the Berlin Wall, which heralded the collapse of communism and the 'triumph' of capitalism, exerted arguably the strongest influence of them all.

The way in which mainstream economics developed had a profound effect on the establishment of a new set of cultural 'norms' in society the world over. It changed the whole language of the prevailing culture, as a form of 'neo-capitalism' established itself as the dominant ideology. Therefore the 'lens' through which Faith In The City saw and understood the world all but disappeared within a few short years of its publication.

The church, like the rest of society, got caught up in the curve of this wave in a fairly unquestioning way. Just as the spectrum of political thought narrowed towards the centre, so the church also lost its radical edge.

The state we're in

Fast-forwarding to the present day, The National Churches Trust Report⁴ sought to quantify the economic and social value generated by church buildings and calculated that £12.4 billion is generated annually, as much, say the authors, as the NHS spends on mental health services every year.

The report catalogues an extensive range of services and activities, develops a model of 'six stages of value, or the halo effect, and argues it is the churches that provides both the social glue that keeps our communities together and the safety net that stops the most vulnerable people falling through the cracks. It argues that maintaining the fabric of the churches is central to maintaining and developing this vital web of services.

This assessment is a compelling one, and nothing in this inquiry contradicts what is reported.



⁴ <https://www.houseofgood.nationalchurchestrust.org/>

Faith-based social action at a time of COVID-19

The extraordinary and unprecedented scale of the COVID crisis, and the impact of responses to it, have both accelerated and exposed changes happening in society as a whole.

For those involved in faith-based social action there seems to be a number of important points to consider:

- 1** The pandemic has highlighted – and indeed confirmed – the universal human need to belong, to express affiliation, and to be part of something.
- 2** For very many this has taken the form of a passionate concern about ‘place’, and about the local. For many this has been because the responses to the pandemic largely resulted in a form of stasis, a reduction in the circumference of movement. For others it alerted them to the needs, and the contributions made locally. It has also – in the economic crisis – accelerated the hollowing out of city centres, the decline of the high street, and focus on smaller units of belonging – towns, parishes, villages, estates.
- 3** In addition, and perhaps most strikingly, the pandemic has been a time of mourning, fear and grief – with all the associated search for meaning and expression.
- 4** The anxiety experienced by the population, has been mirrored by an institutional nervousness and anxiety, amplified by a fractious press and a largely unconstrained social media. While household name charities have been threatened with closure, or at the very least a radical reduction in their scope, the febrile nature of politics has also become laden with anxiety, with attacks on many of our institutions including ones as different as the BBC, the National Trust, and indeed the established church.

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Many observers and participants listened to in the course of this inquiry have been at pains to explore the way in which the pandemic has exposed and accelerated changes that were already evident.

- 5 There has been an observable decline of trust in political and other leadership, the news media (both mainstream and online), and in the major institutions. And closely associated with this there has been a proliferation of conspiracy theory and ‘fake news’.
- 6 And of course, the pandemic has exposed the inequality and division within English society. This has been particularly marked in shining a bright light on levels of racism in English society, and exposing differences both in treatment and in outcomes on the grounds of ethnicity. This has generated a wide ranging and important discussion about race and racism, empire and colonialism in many institutions. But it has also highlighted differences between generations and divisions between different parts of the country.

In this context, and facing an uncertain future, it would be odd indeed if some serious re-evaluation of the role of faith-based social action did not take place.

But of course, the changes have not only happened because of the pandemic, and many observers and participants listened to in the course of this inquiry have been at pains to explore the way in which the pandemic has exposed and accelerated changes that were already evident:



- The loss of deference and respect for institutions, and associated decline in trust
- Visible and damaging inequality, and high levels of poverty
- A recognition of the scarring and damaging impact of racism
- Commitment to place and to the local were all identifiable before the pandemic.

Equally important are the seismic shifts affecting our understanding of society that were already present in the debate around the apparent demise of liberal democracy, and the challenges to unity and identity surrounding Brexit.



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The pandemic has highlighted – and indeed confirmed – the universal human need to belong, to express affiliation, and to be part of something.

Features of faith-based social action

Faith groups contribute an extraordinary ‘footprint’ of social action, without which our society would be much poorer.



William Temple put this beautifully when he said: ‘Nine-Tenths of the work of the Church in the world is done by Christian people fulfilling responsibilities and performing tasks which in themselves are not part of the official system of the Church at all.’⁵

But it would be wrong to understand this as the ecclesiastical equivalent of Meals on Wheels – for Christians (as for those of other faiths) it’s a contribution to the common good that is directly linked to faith, individually and collectively. This theological aspect of faith-based social action is easily overlooked or ignored, but to divorce the action from the underlying motivation is to seriously misunderstand the nature of all that faith groups contribute.

Perhaps nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in the **Five Marks of Mission**, which

express the Anglican Communion’s common commitment to, and understanding of, a mission for the Church which is derived from the mission of Christ.

It is clear that social action is integrated deeply, profoundly and indivisibly within a Christian understanding of mission and the life of the Church.

And William Temple put this beautifully when he said: Nine-tenths of the work of the Church in the world is done by Christian people fulfilling responsibilities and performing tasks which in themselves are not part of the official system of the Church at all.⁵

⁵ Temple, W., *Christianity and Social Order*, Penguin, 1st Edn. 1942, p.17.

At its best, social action that is motivated by faith and brings together people of faith in a social purpose, demonstrates a number of features. These do not distinguish faith-based social action uniquely but, taken together, illustrates the value and contribution made.

It is **relational** – meaning it is based on the relationships between individuals and within communities. This distinguishes it from high volume, largely process driven approaches, but it also encompasses the reciprocity and shared endeavour of genuinely relational work.⁶

It is **local** – even if nationally designed and supported, it understands the deep roots people have in their localities, and respects the identity and difference in different patches.

It builds on the **strength and assets** in any community.

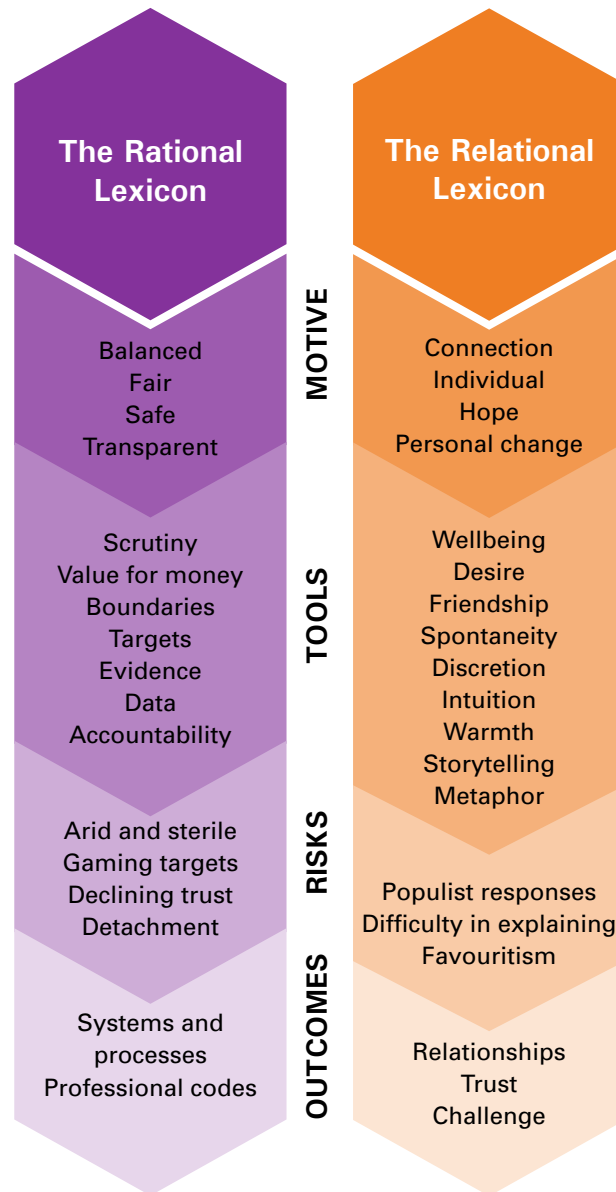
And it is **collaborative** – asking always

- Who else is doing this?
- How can we help?

These four features are not features of faith-based social action alone and are found in many areas of community development and engagement. But taken as a whole they are essential characteristics of the best of faith-based social action, and have been influential across the breadth of social action. Behaving in this way, the best of faith-based social action is both humble (in that it recognises the strengths and assets of others) but bold in that it is willing to address issues that are challenging, difficult or easy to ignore.

The Church Urban Fund has developed a Living Theology Forum which explores the theology of faith-based social action: www.livingtheology.cuf.org.uk

⁶ Unwin, J., *Kindness, Emotions and Human Relationships. The Blind Spot in Public Policy*, Carnegie UK Trust, 2018



This chart is from a report commissioned by the Carnegie UK Trust which sought to understand the role of kindness, and emotions, in the development and formation of public policy. The framing of the two lexicons is intended to show the need – not for one to be superior to the other – but for a bi-lingual approach, a fluency in both the rational and the relational to achieve the balance between the highly individual and the common good.

SECTION 2

A model of faith-based social action

There are any number of definitions of faith-based social action, but in discussion, a model of three overlapping sets of activities has emerged and is intended to provide a framework for discussion.

- Services**
- Solidarity**
- Sacred space and spirituality**

Services

A life of service – supporting the marginalised – is the first and most readily recognised strand of faith-based social action. Dating back to the earliest days of the church, and documented in this country from the Middle Ages onwards, there is evidence of the giving of alms and food, the provision of shelter to the indigent and health care to the sick. In contemporary terms this offering of service takes a number of distinct forms.

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Specifically in the context of local faith-based social action the existence of a Church of England primary school, alongside a church, within a parish, provides a sound base for connection and for engagement.

The first is through the major institutions originally created through the church and people of faith – the universities, schools and residential care providers – where the provision of education, housing and care is a long established activity, sometimes consciously and deliberately seen as part of a current expression of faith, and sometimes – perhaps more commonly – seen as founded in faith, partially governed through faith-based organisations, but delivering a more or less uniform service, recognising the

motivation behind it. The Roman Catholic church remains the biggest single provider of residential care and the Church of England, through its influence in schools (both primary and secondary) and through universities⁷ both in England and globally⁸ is a significant provider of important, foundational and influential services. Specifically in the context of local faith-based social action the existence of a Church of England primary school, alongside a church, within a parish, provides a sound base for connection and for engagement.

⁷ <https://www.cathedralsgroup.ac.uk/>

⁸ <https://cuac.anglicancommunion.org/>



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In Liverpool 76%
of churches are
involved in food
provision.

The second form of service is that most readily described by those observing faith-based social action, and it is the collection of services to support people in the following ways:

- Tackling hunger – through food banks, community larders, pantries and meal services. In Liverpool 76% of churches are involved in food provision.
- Combatting isolation and/or crisis through youth services, mother and toddler groups, welcome for refugees, emergency crash pads, and home visiting services which are largely instigated and supported at parish level and provide a dense and rich network of vital services in communities.
- Addressing cohesion and difference, through planned approaches to community development and outreach.



Frequently lauded as a form of mutual aid based in notions of reciprocity and friendship, as much as more conventional charity, these locally managed, frequently unfunded services, are part and parcel of parish life. Often using church premises, promoted through the church, they form an informal, but deeply needed, patchwork of local support. There is good evidence that at the start of the pandemic the high level of mutual aid experienced came in part at least from these pre-existing networks.

The most recent National Churches Trust estimate of economic value is primarily focused on the real, and frequently overlooked value of this sort of activity.⁹

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⁹ <https://www.houseofgood.nationalchurchestrust.org/>

The third strand of services may have their origins at parish level but have grown regionally or nationally, and these are the services and support offered to those most marginalised – former prisoners, people experiencing homelessness, those addicted to drugs and alcohol. These support services have provided the impetus for many of our household name charities – Shelter, Crisis, St Mungo’s – as well as a host of other initiatives run more or less formally. Again, these services provide vital support, are more or less explicit in their faith-based motivation, but are a central plank of the broader network of service delivery.

This triad of inter-related services – clearly not exhaustively described here – represent a considerable contribution by the Church of England, and a very significant footprint. It is right to itemise and recognise them in the way that has most recently been done, and to make explicit their contribution.



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Parishioners report that this largely voluntary work gives them a new and humbler perspective about the needs and desires of those they seek to serve.





While applauding and recognising their value, there are a number of ways in which this collection of services can be examined, and indeed interrogated.

1 To what extent are they still consciously rooted in faith?

For some, the connection to faith/church will be historic and associated with their foundation, their current governance, or their fundraising base, while for others they will still be actively animated and supported by people of faith. Others still will demonstrate strong missional and indeed evangelising activity, while others treat this as more incidental. For some there will only be historical echo and resonance, for others it remains active.

2 To what extent do they seek to build agency and change relationships?

In theological terms, do they do justice as well as mercy? Historically there has been criticism of local charity, especially that provided through churches, that it is simply benevolent, not recognising the extraordinary strength and resilience in those who need the services, and rarely treating ‘beneficiaries’ as agents in creating change. And yet for many of those involved, the story is very different. Parishioners report that this largely voluntary work gives them a new and humbler perspective about the needs and desires of those they seek to serve. Those using the services report that they find them more welcoming, and perhaps less judgemental than those that might be more obviously ‘professional’, and the formation of deep and important relationships are regularly reported. Frequently services run in this way have an ability to sit with people at the margins, and not necessarily encourage or force change, and this has great merit. However, as Jon Kuhrt¹⁰ has skilfully pointed out, there is a need to balance the ‘grace’ to sit alongside the dispossessed, with the ‘truth’ to also facilitate change.



Those using the services report that they find them more welcoming, and perhaps less judgemental than those that might be more obviously ‘professional’, and the formation of deep and important relationships are regularly reported.

¹⁰ Barrett, A., Harley, R., *Being Interrupted. Reimagining the Church’s Mission from the Outside*, In (with a foreword by Rachel Mann), SCM Press, 2020

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It is increasingly well documented that volunteering – in all of its forms, builds confidence and well-being.



3 Who really benefits?

It is increasingly well documented that volunteering – in all of its forms – builds confidence and well-being¹¹. Associational life and a desire to belong is incredibly important to people, and so parish based voluntary action of all sorts will both build confidence and a sense of belonging in those offering support, but may also foster the sort of mutual support that is the bedrock of so much community activity.

¹¹ <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/volunteer-wellbeing-what-works-and-who-benefits/>

4 To what extent do they relate to the state?

There is undoubtedly interest within what is loosely called the 'state' in the operation and activity of community level faith-based social action, and a number of recent publications draw explicit attention to the very particular contributions made. Specifically, New Local¹², the Local Trust¹³ and more recently the Keeping the Faith report¹⁴ from the APPG on faith and society, acknowledge and recognise the role of faith-based actions in building trust and engagement. Nationally there are clear overtures and recognition of the role of faith in supporting social action and innovation. The specific role of Jon Kuhrt¹⁵ in the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government in support of faith-based action on rough sleeping, is an indicator of the value attached to this area of service.

However, faith-based organisations regularly report a different experience. They consider that more secular funders are frequently unwilling to consider funding an organisation or group that has its roots in faith, and that there is suspicion about them and their motives. Other observers, however, have noted that there is frequently a greater willingness to support faith-based social action as 'the last resort'. In other words, they will fund when they can see no secular alternative that can cope with the work.

¹² <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/>

¹³ Stephen Bates, Community Spirits. The changing role of faith in place, Local Trust 2018 available online <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/essays/community-spirits-an-essay-by-stephen-bates/>

¹⁴ https://www.faihandandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG_CovidReport_Full_V4.pdf

¹⁵ <https://gracetruth.blog/author/jonkuhrt/>

5 Where is the innovation and the courage?

Despite the fact that the Church of England has pioneered some imaginative and innovative projects on issues such as the environment, refugees, homelessness, immigration/asylum, credit/debt, modern slavery, gender-based violence, and food poverty, new challenges require new responses, and a number of observers did question whether parishes that had decided to support people facing hunger, were being as imaginative and innovative as they could be in designing responses. New challenges such as debt, the challenge of racism and hate crime, seemed to some observers to be avoided, and older models of 'relief' dominated. And rather than play 'catch-up' with the past, how can the Church look ahead imaginatively to the issues and challenges that will predominate in the next 10 years?

In considering what is distinctive about the services provided through the Church of England, and indeed other denominations and faiths, a powerful framework has been developed by Wells, Rock and Barclay.¹⁶ This uses the concept of community assets indicators to consider:

- Relationships
- Creativity
- Partnership
- Compassion
- Joy

This provides a new vocabulary for assessing the development, and indeed the impact, of different services.

¹⁶Wells, S., Russe, R., Barclay, D., *For Good. The Church and the Future of Welfare*, Canterbury Press, 2017

Solidarity

The expression of solidarity with those who are suffering is closely associated with, and often has deep roots in, the provision of services and a desire to overturn the conditions that create a demand for these. However, it also has a life independent of the provision of services and, in some quarters, is expressed as distinct from, or even in opposition to, such provision.

1 Protest and advocacy

There is a form of solidarity which speaks up about abuse and detriment, developing a platform for discontent to be expressed and heard.

2 Civic leadership

There is also solidarity which brings together people, frequently through initiatives to create a civic voice in diverse places. Cities and districts like Birmingham, Liverpool and Bradford demonstrate regularly the convening, representational power of solidarity, working in concert with other faiths, with other part of civil society and with local authorities.

3 Local leadership

Representation, convening and mediation is an often overlooked and unsung part of the way in which places are supported.

4 Pope Francis' call for a *Church of the Poor* has chimed with many across the Church of England, and in particular the development of **Church at the Margins** standing shoulder to shoulder in prayer with those who are dispossessed and too often overlooked.

5 **Poverty Truth Commissions**, originally developed by the Church of Scotland, bring civic leaders, churches and people in poverty together, building both shared knowledge and solidarity.

This work is valued and important, but – like services – requires some further analysis and interrogation:

- 1** The power of **civic leadership**, especially in the large city based dioceses, is valued and valuable, and there is a direct line between the role of church leadership, frequently working with those of other faiths, and the ability of cities to come together at times of challenge and to build stronger relational networks. Just as this is true at the diocesan level, it is also, of course, true at parish level where as one community development body put it: ‘the vicar is often the most confident, skilled and middle class person there’ and so becomes a natural chair, spokesperson, or representative.

For a brief comment on the role of power, class and race, and the implications for faith-based social action, see page 37.

This work has a long pedigree and is highly valued. But in changing times, it needs to be managed with care and thought. It is not easy to work collaboratively, with humility, with others, and at the same time pursue a strong and relevant agenda. Furthermore, it can be personally and professionally challenging, and in our current environment the personal and family pressures can be immense. It is not clear where the training, support and resource for this sort of civic leadership is provided. In an increasingly fractured, (and fractious) public debate there is a pressing need for more investment in the support, resource and training of civic leadership at all levels.




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- 2** For a number of churches, the act of solidarity has been based on the promotion of a **place/ neighbourhood**, with the church itself as a symbol or emblem of change. The 'Love Streatham'¹⁷ campaign run by a group of churches is an example of the use of place to promote and support an area. So too the 'Bigger Church, Bigger Difference'¹⁸ programme in Liverpool defines an approach to place that is founded on solidarity and representation. Both of these examples, among countless others, illustrate the productive weaving together of services, in a place, expressed as a form of solidarity, indeed celebration.
- 3** The '**solidarity of the shaken**' to use the phrase used by Bishop Nick Baines on *Thought for the Day*, is an important part of this strand. It involves a different relationship with those who are broken and hurt, and is part of the continuous, non-judgemental role of the church, offering permanence in its solidarity, and willingness to stand with the dispossessed. But this work is hard and challenging, and introduces conflict and difficulty, and again, the true work of solidarity needs resource, training and support.

¹⁷ <http://www.lovestreatham.org/#Welcome>

¹⁸ <https://liverpool.anglican.org/making-it-easier-parishes/how-to-make-a-bigger-difference/>

- 4 The relationship **between advocacy and solidarity** is a vexed and challenging one. While many involved in the churches' work on solidarity believe that its most important target is in challenging structural injustice, and advocating for systemic change, there is also some nervousness that this approach mimics the approach taken by a wider population of NGOs and charities in a crowded field.
- 5 Mutual aid and supportive service is part of everyday parish life, and it is the provision of service that provides a spur to solidarity, giving evidence of need and injustice that is often translated into powerful advocacy. But solidarity may also be **a critique of existing services**, demanding change of those same services. For example, groupings of people experiencing homelessness, brought together through faith, may be powerful voices challenging and questioning other charities, and other faith-based providers. In other words, the object of some advocacy may be government (local, regional and national) but it may equally be other providers of service.



In all these manifestations, solidarity and advocacy involve engagement with the world. They take the lived experience of people, of faith, and those with none, into the wider world, translating, interpreting, calling for action and for change. This requires confidence, and it requires deep connection within the served communities. At a time of public scepticism about institutions, and about their leaders, this sort of work will face criticism and may not be popular. It may too readily be treated as if it is simply part of shrill campaign. But it is seen as being at the heart of Christian witness and locally, regionally, and nationally and demands a particular and new set of skills from bold, courageous leaders, willing to work closely with others.

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It means therefore that a human person is worth extravagant and lasting commitment. A human being derives complete attention and care.

Rowan Williams



Power, class and race

No discussion on the power of solidarity would be complete without reflecting on the increased consciousness of class and race.

If the last two years in England has been defined by the pandemic and the reactions to it, it has also both exposed and accelerated a long overdue conversation about the nature of power in English institutions, and the ways in which divisions and discrimination on the grounds of race, and class, are hampering progress and development in so many ways.

Faith-based social action is not immune to these divisions and many of the clearest and most compelling voices in this field are raised in ways that are both challenging and demanding (for example, alongside – but entirely independent of – the Black Lives Matter protests, the question of racism in the

Church was raised by Azariah France-Williams in his provocative and passionate book 'Ghost Ship').¹⁹ This has profound and important implications for the ways in which this action – in all of its forms – is developed. Specifically, and at risk of oversimplifying issues that deserve much more attention:



There is deep-seated anger in many places about the ways in which people in poverty, and people of colour, have been excluded and overlooked.

- There is deep-seated anger in many places about the ways in which people in poverty, and people of colour, have been excluded and overlooked. This shapes and informs intolerance to any narrative that is not consciously addressing this injustice, and seeking to address it.

¹⁹ France-Williams, A.D.A., *Ghost Ship. Institutional racism and the Church of England*, SCM Press, 2020



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The facilitating, enabling, convening role of the Church of England is important, and celebrated, but any and every intervention needs to be shaped by, and reflective of, the experience of the people affected.

- While it has become commonplace in English public policy discussions to talk about the importance of place, there is always a risk that this is done in way which does not recognise the very real differences between places, and in particular the inequality between places.
- For these reasons, and for many others, the days in which it was sufficient for senior people in the Church of England to speak on behalf of places and people in poverty have gone. The facilitating, enabling, convening role of the Church of England is important, and celebrated, but any and every intervention needs to be shaped by, and reflective of, the experience of the people affected.

This does not suggest any abdication of responsibility. Rather it demands a more inclusive, perhaps more humble approach to leadership, recognising the skills and knowledge held in communities and providing reach and amplification, not merely representation.



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The third strand of faith-based social action lies in the provision of space, the ability to provide places for people to gather – to celebrate, to mourn to share, to discuss.

Sacred space and spirituality

The third strand of faith-based social action lies in the provision of space, the ability to provide places for people to gather – to celebrate, to mourn to share, to discuss. The concept of sacred space – of a place where people can think and associate, whether or not they are engaged in worship – is a consistent theme across faith-based social action, but one less readily articulated.

This is not just about space – but about the use of space and gatherings of people to develop a sense of shared meaning, through shared language, music, contemplation – which may be liturgical but may also take other forms. It is space into which people of faith may bring particular gifts.

This need for space to gather, and to share, has been articulated in many reports, and is frequently noted. Civicus²⁰ in 2016 reported on a global decline in civic spaces, and this was echoed in England by the Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society.²¹ More recently a poll by Survation for Local Trust ²² drew further attention to the shortage of shared and community space in poorer neighbourhoods, and the deficit that was experienced by people living there.



At a time of national trauma, anxiety and grief there is a desperate need for places where these emotions can be addressed and expressed, and a universal search for meaning and belonging.

²⁰ <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/socs2016>

²¹ <https://civilsocietyfutures.org/final-reports/>

²² <https://localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/news/left-behind-areas-missing-out-on-community-facilities-and-places-to-meet/>



On the face of it, this could be described as simply a desire for more community centres and inter-generational meeting places, and seen as a purely secular concern. And the contribution of the church to that is valued and valuable. But a number of themes emerge that have deeper resonance for faith-based social action.

- At a time of national trauma, anxiety and grief there is a desperate need for places where these emotions can be addressed and expressed, and a universal search for meaning and belonging. As a number of people pointed out, historically church was where you fled at a time of pestilence.
- Others still have experience of the importance of bringing the sacred to shared common space and Al Barrett in both his blog “the estate we are in”²³ and his new book²⁴ is full of examples of the ways in which commonly held land can hold events – of all sorts – that are both sacred and popularly engaging.
- The rituals and practices of the church – its liturgy, its stories and its hymns – exert a powerful influence and comfort for a much wider group of people than the relatively small number who worship regularly.

²³ Al Barrett <http://thisestate.blogspot.com/>

²⁴ Barrett, A., Harley, R., *Being Interrupted. Reimagining the Church’s Mission from the Outside*, In (with a foreword by Rachel Mann), SCM Press, 2020



This report particularly notes the strong mutual respect between the different faith leaders in the area, and therefore the ability of Christian and Muslim leaders to understand each other's beliefs, preferences and priorities.

- At times of trauma and crisis, the role of the church in providing pastoral comfort, prayers and emotional support is well documented in the review conducted by Theos²⁵ after the Grenfell Tower tragedy. This review distinguished between the immediate response to trauma, and the long term psychological, emotional and pastoral support and noted the particular liturgical support offered through commemorative events, public mourning, and the six-month anniversary service at St Paul's Cathedral.

This report particularly notes the strong mutual respect between the different faith leaders in the area, and therefore the ability of Christian and Muslim leaders to understand each other's beliefs, preferences and priorities.

- There is some anecdotal evidence that the online worship made necessary during the pandemic has brought a broader range of people back into the community of worship, and while this is not tested or verified, – if true – it suggests that at a time of national crisis the commitment to shared worship is broader. And as Elizabeth Oldfield²⁶ has recently said there are powerful benefits from congregating and taking part in more contemplative and sacred activity than is ever recognised in secular activity. This is regularly reported by those running services for people experiencing homelessness or those struggling with addiction, who frequently welcome the opportunity to participate.

²⁵ Plender, A., *After Grenfell: the Faith Groups' Response*, Theos, 2018

²⁶ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-15-ever-wondered-what-people-actually-get-from-church/id1530418350?i=1000495627207>

At a time when place matters to people, the role of a parish church, and any associated buildings, does seem to have created for many people a strong sense of identity and belonging, and this seems to be true of people from other faiths, people of no faith and those who were raised in Church of England. For very many people the closure of churches during the lockdown period of the pandemic was a source of grief, and even for those who would rarely go into the church, it remained a symbol of place of belonging.



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If the provision of space is part of the benefit brought by faith-based social action, it needs to be acknowledged, and facilitated but it also needs to be recognised that, as with all social action, this will take a different form in different places.

But just as the work of solidarity and the provision of service does not stand still, so too the notion of sacred space will mean different things to different people and requires interrogation.

- The identification of a parish church with a place is – of course – not universal, and it would be risky to make assumptions about it. But equally to ignore the great affection in which many parish churches are held, and the importance of them to a place would be short sighted. The long term, rooted, permanent nature of a church has symbolic and felt importance which is impossible to quantify but striking how frequently it is mentioned. Examples abound of parish churches mourning the closure of a coal mine, recognising and mourning death, marking the seasons, celebrating national or local events.
- This may cause anxiety for some who will see this ‘religion-lite’, using the form and shape of worship without the content. And this is obviously a challenge. But if the provision of space – for quiet, to think, to congregate, to celebrate or to mourn – is part of the benefit brought by faith-based social action, it needs to be acknowledged, and facilitated but it also needs to be recognised that, as with all social action, this will take a different form in different places.

Just as some churches have successfully become hubs for inter-faith activity, others are more closely associated with a school, or a particular part of the community. But the contribution is clear and at a time of national anxiety, and a focus on place, the territorial nature of many churches, and the availability of their buildings, must be part of the mix of future social action.

— **Faith and well-being:**

The evidence about the importance of belonging and associational life²⁷ is strong. It is clear that local religious groups and associations play an important role in supporting wellbeing especially by giving opportunities for people to make meaningful social connections, by giving people purpose and role identity, and by supporting vulnerable people and reducing inequalities in the determinants of wellbeing.

There is some evidence, again from the *What Works Centre for Well Being* about the impact on mood of attendance at collective acts of music and singing, and as mood is seen as a major contributor to well-being this should not be dismissed. Additionally, studies of well-being indicate that it is enhanced by the ability to turn to others for support, the sense of being part of something bigger than simply the individual family, and support and buffering at times of stress. These features, more or less explicitly, are found in many faith-based congregations and groups, and seem to contribute significantly to well-being.

²⁷ *Places, Spaces, People and Wellbeing*. Briefing Paper by the What Work Centre for Wellbeing, 2018.

SECTION 3

Money, power and accountability

Opportunities and risks

New vocabulary, new rituals

Money, power and accountability

Faith-based social action does not flourish simply by declaration or will. It does of course require leadership and this inquiry has noted that there are few sources of support for the development of leadership. But it also requires money. Voluntary effort is vast and powerful but it is not free and there are costs associated with all the activities described here.

Furthermore, at a time when parishes are themselves financially hard hit, there is no point in ignoring this. But the distribution of funds, and the way in which they are deployed, focuses attention both on power and on accountability. There is a live conversation in the world of philanthropy²⁸ about this, and this report cannot do justice to the rich and complex debate. But there are some principles about it which may be relevant.

- Trust is a vital currency, and while there will always need to be proper accountability for the dispersal of funds, any fund holder also needs to balance that with trust.
- Decisions about fund allocation should, where possible, be made as close to the people involved as possible. The work of the Local Trust and others involved in place based grant making give some sense of both how this can be done and what the benefits are.
- While distributing funds on behalf of others can be a useful service, it needs to be done with a full appreciation of the impact of this approach. Careful thought about the implications of distributing funds allows for processes that are more transparent, and perceived as both respectful and collaborative.

²⁸ Social Innovation Exchange, <https://socialinnovationexchange.org/>
Association of Charitable Foundations and Foundations Collaborative Hub https://www.acf.org.uk/ACF/Connect_collaborate/Funders-Collaborative-Hub.aspx

Opportunities and risks

- 1** There can be little doubt about the **financial challenges** facing the Church of England. Any attempt to consider the future, needs to acknowledge that a smaller number of physical churches, with more dispersed roles for ministry, and fewer full-time clergy, will change the way in which social action is developed and led. But it will also bring in new ways of working, new forms of leadership and discipleship, and has the potential to bring new and different skills and knowledge into the church.
- 2** The very **deep divisions** in society are painfully, and powerfully reflected within the church, and have a particular bearing on faith-based social action. The compelling narrative of *Ghost Ship* by A.D.A France-Williams²⁹ describes a church deeply damaged by racism, and at the same time an opportunity to restructure and work entirely differently, connecting with black and minority ethnic communities, and consciously distributing and shifting power. While not providing any easy answers the ability of genuinely locally rooted faith-based social action to address these deep divisions provides both possibility and hope.



The narrative describes an opportunity to restructure and work entirely differently, connecting with black and minority ethnic communities, and consciously distributing and shifting power.

²⁹ France-Williams, A.D.A., *Ghost Ship. Institutional racism and the Church of England*, SCM Press, 2020

- 3** As in so many national organisations there is a tension between **local self-determination, intelligence and motivation, and national leadership, funding and resource**. This is by no means unique to faith-based social action, but as with so many other organisations there is a need to recognise the different attributes, and capacity at different levels. In the current environment, with such marked differences between places, there is a premium on deep local and connectivity, represented by people and organisations that are recognised locally.

An earlier tradition of central direction, and access to national levers of power, whether church, parliament or government, is probably much less significant at this moment, and the development of strong local, diocesan and regional networks, working across communities, supported and enabled but not led from the centre, helps to minimise the risks. There is – inevitably – a **tension** between the messiness, the relevance – and the innovation – of the local, and the structured, formal, potentially more uniform approach of the national.

- 4** There is a **divide between generations**, and different and challenging ways of working emerge with new skills, new networks and new priorities, equipping the next generation to take their place as leaders – even with very different styles - is a huge opportunity, but like all opportunities it also brings risks. But the greater risk would be a failure to equip and enable a new and different generation.

New vocabulary, new rituals

The Church of England is rich in vocabulary and ritual. It is unequivocal about the integrity of the marks of mission, and the importance of connection with community, and the active engagement of people in poverty.

And yet there is a nervousness about the language of social action, and the way in which this is expressed. This review cannot – and should not – advise on language but the resonance of some repeated phrasing and ways of thinking is relevant.

challenging leadership
place margins
listening trust
community
permanent sacred

This is a vocabulary helpfully mirrored in the language of the GRA:CE Report ³⁰, which explores the links between social action, discipleship and church growth. The GRA:CE Report talks about concepts like presence, perseverance, hospitality, generosity, adaptability, and the invitation to participation, all of which resonate strongly with the vocabulary suggested here.

These words encapsulate some of the challenges and the opportunities, and they indicate also some of the conceptual framing that a new, post COVID response to faith-based social action may require. This is a focus on the local, with a recognition of the importance of listening, understanding trade-offs and negotiating them. But it is also an approach that looks to the margins to see where change can happen and where need can be addressed and does so in ways that mobilise the community.

³⁰The GRA:CE report, November 2020: <https://cuf.org.uk/what-we-do/the-grace-project>



The GRA:CE Report talks about concepts like presence, perseverance, hospitality, generosity, adaptability, and the invitation to participate, all of which resonate strongly with the vocabulary suggested here.



Crucially, it is rooted in a sense of the sacred, and is not afraid to express deep meaning, and a recognition of the image of God in everyone. This is part of building the deep trust that is the hallmark of all social action, whether faith-based or not, but one of the many distinctive features of this work is its permanence, and its continued and committed presence. At a time of global and national disunity and conflict this is valued hugely, and enables the development of new and challenging approaches to issues.

Yet all of this requires a reimagining of leadership and discipleship. Inevitably, this will be dispersed, untidy and conflicted but it has the capacity to build a new way of working in communities, understanding the range of needs and working alongside people to meet these in different ways.

Conclusions

Faith-based social action, and particularly that promoted and supported and done through the Church of England, has played an incredibly important part in the development of welfare services, both through the state and voluntarily.

It has continued to develop stronger and more resilient communities, has drawn attention to terrible injustices and deprivation, and is rightly recognised as providing a voice for people who are in any way marginalised.

But the events of the last two years have made many people and institutions think again. The global pandemic, the responses to it and in particular the exposure of deep and painful racism, has both strengthened and accelerated a discussion about a new, more distributed approach to social action. This report, and the discussions that contributed to it, suggest that a new approach to faith-based social action should be informed by:

- The importance of place, and the need to find new and different ways of acknowledging and building on peoples' sense of the importance of place, and in this context, parish.
- The need for greater investment in leadership and a recognition that the challenges and demands of leadership are new and different. What is more, leadership, in faith-based social action is found in many different places.
- There is an appetite for social action that is bold, and ambitious, willing to take difficult messages, and address uncomfortable issues. But there is also a need to be humble and appreciative, to understand what others contribute, to learn from those with experience and to ensure that the impact of social action is genuinely transformative.

Dame Julia Unwin

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