

KEY QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

GROWING CHURCH THROUGH SOCIAL ACTION: A STUDY OF ACTIVELY-ENGAGED AND GROWING CHURCHES

There is a hypothesis that when a church looks outward - actively loving and serving its neighbours, especially the 'least of these' – then the church will be healthier and grow. Commissioned by Church Urban Fund and conducted independently by Christian Research Consultancy, the aim of this research is to explore the impact that social action has on churches, as well as on the communities they serve. How does active engagement in the community help to stimulate church 'growth'? This project combined face-to-face in-depth interviews with a selection of clergy from churches that were known to be very active in tackling poverty in their local communities, with an online survey of around 900 Church of England clergy. This is a summary of the qualitative research. The key findings are:

- For the eight churches included in the qualitative part of this project, there is no doubt that as they worked to transform their local communities the churches themselves were also transformed.
- Each story started with a community that was, in its own way, broken, deprived or neglected and a church that was also often described as neglected, doing little to serve the local community. The church leaders arrived into these situations and could see some of the local needs and a way for the church to start meeting those needs.
- Working with a range of partners, they each started a journey of remarkable transformation, repositioning the church to be at the very heart of the community. And as they did so, these churches became more attractive – to worshippers, to volunteers, as a place to belong. They attracted funding or donations of goods and services and support from other organisations wanting to work with the local community.
- Each of the eight church leaders had a unique and inspiring story to tell. The leaders came from different backgrounds; the churches were different in terms of size and churchmanship, and the communities themselves were also very different, ranging from rural areas to deprived inner cities.
- However, a number of common factors emerged which should be useful in encouraging other churches to engage more actively with their communities. These factors include: a passion and commitment to respond to the needs of those around them; working in close partnership with other organisations; strong leadership; a robust faith, and a willingness to take risks and adapt to changing circumstances.

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BACKGROUND

The aim of the research was to investigate whether active engagement in tackling poverty is helpful in stimulating church 'growth', where this is defined broadly to include increased church attendance; more committed discipleship; increased church income and improved relations with the local community.

The participants were purposefully chosen as examples of church leaders who had made a real difference in helping to alleviate poverty in the local area. The interviews, which were carried out in autumn 2011, explored the journeys these churches had been on, and sought to learn from the different approaches they had taken. Most of the respondents were still in post, but three had moved onto other roles.

The eight churches varied greatly in terms of size, churchmanship and context, including an evangelical church in inner city Birmingham, an anglo-catholic church in South West London and a mainstream church in rural Herefordshire. Five of the eight churches were within the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, typically in areas with high rates of unemployment, drug misuse and crime. When the church leaders we interviewed moved to these parishes, most had largely elderly female congregations and four out of eight had fewer than twenty regular worshippers.

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

The starting point for the journeys described in the full report was the arrival of a hardworking, risk taking, entrepreneurial leader who saw the needs in the local community and passionately believed that the church could make a difference, almost regardless of local circumstances. The most important factor driving new initiatives was the discovery of community needs, for example the arrival of a group of Armenian refugees who couldn't speak any English or finding used syringes in the vicar's garden.

The churches responded creatively to these needs, adapting as circumstances changed. Formal community work varied according to need, but included a restaurant for homeless people, a gym in the church for drug addicts, a public library in the bell tower, and a fruit and vegetable cooperative, as well as youth work, cafés, food banks, debt counselling and arts and music projects.

"We have another really good local project called The Community Childcare Project and that grew out of somebody asking, 'Could we find them a list of local childminders?' So we contacted the local authority and they just laughed. They said, 'There's only one registered childminder and he's 60.' We thought, 'Well, there's obviously something to be done here.' There were dozens of childminders but none of them were registered. The Community Childcare Project has worked with helping local women to get qualified and registered as local childminders. Something like 150 women have gone through that project now, many of whom have then gone on to do all sorts of different things, including degrees."

"We started finding out more about the need of the community. People were donating things, which started in our garage at home and then developed from that into what is now a large Resource Centre for refugees and asylum seekers ...more recently we started finding that the demand was coming in for food for Eastern Europeans, who have no recourse to public funding, find themselves without work and can't get home for one reason or another. We had a family of six in last week, in desperate need of food. That's how our work began to develop."

As well as helping those with immediate needs, the churches were also intent on bringing about long-term, sustainable transformation of communities by:

- **Caring:** constantly listening to and responding to needs, showing that they cared for local people – and that this was not driven by short-term government initiatives, but unconditional love for the community.
- **Building relationships:** between church and community, between church and other organisations and within the community itself, providing a support network for people when things get tough.
- **Providing hope:** by organising activities such as helping adults with education and encouraging people to deal with addiction and debt, these churches were giving communities hope for the future.

The more the churches did to respond to the needs of the community, then generally the more the community made its needs known, and the more the churches grew in their awareness of what still needed to be done.

TRANSFORMING CHURCHES

As the churches moved to the heart of their communities, they became more attractive to different types of people and organisations. Worshippers were drawn to a church that helped them to make sense of the gospel. Volunteers, donors and other supporters were also attracted – people who shared a heart for the community, who wanted to join in with what the church was doing or to contribute financially.

As well as attracting people, churches that became established as hubs in the local community also attracted organisations and funding. For example, a rural church was initially offered £20,000 to refurbish the building as a venue for Sure Start services, but this eventually grew to around £500,000. Another church receives referrals from about 40 different agencies to its Refugee Resource Centre.

All but one of the churches had experienced significant growth – three of the churches now have congregations of 250 or more - and all have diversified in terms of how people worship. One of the churches is in an area with a high concentration of Muslim residents and, though it has not grown in numbers of worshippers, it has grown significantly in many other ways, for example numbers of volunteers, levels of funding, and community profile and impact. When asked about the reasons for church growth, this was largely attributed to the fact that the church was now actively serving the community. Despite this, respondents from all styles of church were very clear in pointing out that the work to serve the community was not done with the primary aim of growing the church.

“You don’t do the projects in order to grow the church. You do the projects in order to love people, but if you’re doing that, the Holy Spirit has got to be at work somewhere amidst all these people that you’re helping. Somebody’s got to be asking questions about faith out of all that. Otherwise, what are we saying? Is God not active out there?”

Although most of the churches were in deprived areas and many had congregations who themselves were relatively poor, most reported increases in levels of giving. This, again, was largely attributed to their work in the community – “people give because they see lives changed”. Some of the churches were also able to sell or develop assets, such as land, to raise funds and all the leaders became proficient fundraisers, securing grants, in some cases totalling millions, from a wide variety of public and private sources.

Those interviewed talked about the fact that church members took responsibility for serving the local community and it became central to the ethos of the church.

“The dirtiest, smelliest people we roll the red carpet out for. That’s the deal. That’s what we do. That’s how our church operates. If you’re not prepared to do that, go.’ . . . Part of the vision of our church was that every single member was reaching out their hand to somebody less well off than themselves. Everybody.”

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COMMON FACTORS AND DIFFERENCES

Despite the uniqueness of each story, a number of common factors emerged. Although different in terms of background, experience and churchmanship, the leaders shared a number of personal qualities:

- **Strength of leadership:** they inspired, encouraged and supported others.
- **Network-building:** they recognised the importance of building relationships with those in official positions and with natural leaders in the community who were in a position to influence others.
- **Entrepreneurship:** they were prepared to take risks and seize opportunities, being visionary but not afraid to learn and adapt.
- **Robust faith:** this helped them to make personal sacrifices and to deal with setbacks.
- **Passion:** they were strongly committed to what they were trying to achieve and sought out others who shared that passion.

These church leaders stressed the importance of working with other organisations, including schools, police, social services, local playgroups and other community groups; one church even had a policy of not undertaking any project unless a partner could be found. The churches also recognised what they themselves could bring to a partnership: continuity; a physical presence; access to volunteers, and (over time) trust and professionalism.

For most of those interviewed, buildings were an important part of the transformation. For some churches the focus was on developing a new or re-developed community building from which to serve the community, including one new church building that incorporates a GP surgery, Sure Start centre and community café. Other churches refurbished their own buildings and another does not use its own building at all but serves from other places within the community.

Church leaders also differed in their approaches:

- **Autocratic or democratic:** some appeared to be very autocratic in their decision making, whereas others devolved responsibility to church members or groups.
- **Strategic or opportunistic:** some churches set out with a clear vision in mind and were more intentional in their activities, whereas other churches were more reactive, responding positively to opportunities as they arose.
- **Indigenous or missional:** some churches sought to meet the needs of the community from within the community; others attracted people with a heart for mission from outside the community.

FURTHER INFORMATION

A copy of the full report, prepared by Benita Hewitt at Christian Research Consultancy, can be downloaded free of charge from www.cuf.org.uk/research. A separate report with the findings from our online 'Church & Poverty' survey of 900 church leaders is also available. For more information about this project, please contact Tom Sefton at Church Urban Fund (tom.sefton@cuf.org.uk).