

*'Religious Capital in Regenerating  
Communities'*

## **Acknowledgements**

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**Foreword**  
**Introducing the Manchester Centre for Public Theology**  
Chris Baker and Elaine Graham

This report draws on the proceedings of the launch conference of the Manchester Centre for Public Theology, held at Hulme Hall, University of Manchester, in May 2004. MCPT represents a broad-based network of researchers, practitioners and educators based in and around Greater Manchester and beyond, with a shared interest in the contribution of theological understanding and practice to the well-being of communities and individuals in contemporary society.

We hope that the Centre's distinctive contribution will rest in its capacity to bridge the various constituencies of urban regeneration, public policy, the churches, research and academia, theological education and community development. We see our task as *drawing together* these different strands, creating opportunities for them to interact, and generating new insights and proposals for action from such encounters. Our key focus on 'Public Theology' relates to an awareness of renewed interest, not least at local, regional and national government levels, of the role of faith-based organisations in contributing to the well-being of what is often termed 'civil society', and of the persistence of the values and traditions of religious faith in public life. We will be concerned to examine the ethical,

philosophical and theological principles and convictions underlying questions of political and economic policy, social change, governance and power, and to use the traditions and perspectives of faith to illuminate the *core values* at work in contemporary public life, thereby facilitating more effective engagement on the part of those involved at different levels of those areas of research, policy and action.

Our main objective is therefore to draw together the best in reflective practice from grass-roots activity with cutting-edge research in order to contribute effectively and responsibly to the continuing debate about the role of religious faith and faith-based organisations in public life. It was just such a process we were anxious to embody in our very first public event - our launch conference, entitled 'Religious Capital in Declining Communities', held in spring 2004. The conference was intentionally designed as a conversation between those working within academic and research-based contexts, and those involved in local community campaigns in various parts of Manchester. Despite their different locations, however, all participants shared a common concern: the relationship between faith-based organisations and the values, motivations and resources

vital for fuelling community regeneration – the possibilities for ‘religious capital’ to assist in the process of overcoming the obstacles of economic decline and social exclusion experienced by many urban communities over the past generation. This report brings together the various voices and perspectives on that question.

## **Introduction: ‘Religious Capital in Declining Communities’**

Elaine Graham

Discussion and analysis of the role of faith-based organisations in contributing to civil society – that arena of public life positioned between the market and the State – has become a veritable industry



*Speakers and attendees at the MCPT launch in May 2004*

in its own right. It reflects not only intense interest in the nature of civil society itself, at a time of changing patterns of political participation and concerns about the nature of citizenship and governance, but recognition of the increasingly pluralist and diverse nature of society, from the local up to the global. Part of that reflects the re-emergence of religion into public

life, causing a re-evaluation of conventional analyses which suggest that industrial, urban societies would necessarily also be secular, and that religion would become marginal to questions of public policy. Yet despite the undeniable decline in religious observance and affiliation in the West, religious bodies still constitute a major part of the voluntary sector and continue to play an active role as agents of

service provision and community cohesion – whilst at the same time representing potential sources of division and misunderstanding.

The voices in this report offer further contributions to this continuing debate, but the strength of this report is its ability to address the issues from a 360-degree perspective. We have the immediacy of local stories from grass-roots campaigns as well as the broader overview of analysis drawn on research in the wider public domain. What themes, therefore, do these papers offer for our consideration?

#### *'Decline' or 'Regeneration'?*

The first theme to emerge from these conference proceedings is that despite the problems of under-investment in public services and environmental infrastructure, poor housing and the human dimensions of poverty and social exclusion, the story of many urban communities is not simply one of decline and dispossession. One of the hallmarks of the contributions of the community groups represented at our conference was their affirmation of the resilience of local people, and their determination to build on the 'social capital' already available in the personal qualities and positive values of their communities. David Gray, in particular, challenges one particular understanding of urban

communities as 'in decline' and paints a moving picture of the power of a community's shared memory, mediated through an historic building, to galvanise new hope for the future. Meanwhile Claire Staniforth reflects on the long, drawn-out experience of improving previously-abandoned communities and how local people have had to move from 'dreamers' to 'realists' in order to keep the momentum of change going.

#### *Obstacles or Opportunities?*

Helen France neatly summarises two of the key dimensions of the current discussion of faith-based organisations in relation to civil society: their potential as key agents of *service delivery*, and their role in fostering *social cohesion*. Both areas, however, merit further examination, and this report begins to adopt the kind of 'alternative critique' in relation to such terms that Helen herself commends. On the one hand, for example, talk of 'partnership' between government and community groups is often greeted with suspicion in case voluntary efforts are substituted for statutory support; or if blanket commendation of 'faith communities' is enlisted as a way of avoiding meeting the material needs of minority groups. Equally, government must be aware that 'religion' is not a panacea, and that tensions between faith-based groups may engender social conflict rather than cohesion. Helen Cameron and Viv Lowndes both

present useful and realistic overviews of the potentials and the pitfalls of faith-based organisations' contributions to civil society. In direct response to that analysis, both Claire Kerfoot and Anne Stewart describe how faith-based groups are pioneering forms of participative democracy amongst local communities in Manchester as a counter-balance to the tendency, identified by Helen Cameron, for central government and local authorities to co-opt the voluntary sector of civil society for their own 'instrumental' ends.

*What is public theology for?*

Our proceedings also offer some important pointers to future projects in public theology. Firstly, it may serve as a channel of communication between the specifics of faith and the wider scrutiny of public accountability; secondly, it acts as the well-spring of values which forge and direct the 'religious capital' of faith-based organisations' engagement with a wider community; and thirdly, it may be a critical lens through which the contributions of religion to public life might be evaluated. For that reason, the activity of public theology must be both engaged and non-partisan: sufficiently empathetic to appreciate the distinctive nature of faith, yet rooted in objective understandings of the common good. It is that ability to make

connections across different contexts and discourses that Helen Cameron articulates as follows:

'We need public theologians who have a way with words, who are willing to learn academic and policy languages that are not their own, who can express compelling links between belief and action.'

However, it may be that current preoccupations with religious capital are short-lived, certainly if faith-communities cannot sustain current levels of activity, becoming, in Viv Lowndes' words, 'hollowed out' by the forces of institutional decline. Or perhaps we will see the political fortunes of the significance of religious capital wither away as government priorities change. The task of public theology must therefore necessarily be a dynamic process, attuned to changing circumstances. Judging from the vitality of the debates and campaigns reflected in this report, however, attention to 'religious capital' in urban communities remains crucial. We hope the voices in this report contribute further to the conversation.

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## Religious involvement and social capital: incompatible, invaluable or irrelevant?

Vivien Lowndes

This paper examines the relationship between religious involvement, social capital, and the governance of local communities. What role does religious involvement play in promoting social capital and how, in turn, is this linked to good governance?

### Local governance

We use the term *local governance* rather than local government for two reasons: first, to highlight that the governing of local communities is an *active process* (and not a set of buildings or procedures); and second, to indicate that this process involves *many different groups and people* – outside as well as inside government itself. The term ‘governance’ refers to arrangements for collective decision-making, which may take many different forms over time and between places.

Since the early 1980s, the power of the town hall has waned. The elected local authority must now work in partnership with neighbourhood-level agencies, voluntary and community groups, private companies, regional bodies and public sector quangos. Nowhere is this more true than in disadvantaged communities where there exists a patchwork of different agencies and partnerships, zones and initiatives. The potential value of the new arrangements is in the recognition that governance is a process and not a thing: it involves many different parties working together to find out about local needs and preferences, to make decisions about local priorities, to develop local policies, and to deliver and monitor local services. The potential

downside lies in buck-passing and confused accountabilities, waste and duplication (see Stoker and Wilson, 2004).

### Social capital and local governance

So what determines the quality of local governance? Traditionally, a link has been made to specifically political factors (like constitutional design) or to economic variables (like the development of competitive markets). But since the mid 1990s, there has been a new interest in the role that socio-cultural factors play in securing good governance. ‘Social capital’ theory makes the startling claim that the best predictor of good government is actually the ‘civic-ness’ of a local community – measured in terms of social trust, involvement in local associations and informal sociability. Social capital is defined as ‘features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam 1995, p 67).

But how, in practice, does a healthy community life influence the quality of governance? The story goes like this. People learn to trust one another through face-to-face interaction in associations and informal social networks; norms of trust and reciprocity ‘spill over’ into society at large; a capacity is created for collective action in pursuit of shared goals; citizens expect, and representatives provide, competent and responsive government. Civic communities (and their ‘uncivic’ counterparts) are self-reinforcing: civic engagement and good governance



become locked together in a 'virtuous circle' - in contrast to a parallel 'vicious circle' of distrust, disorder and poor government (Putnam 1993, p 117).

The thesis has had a major impact outside academic circles and lies at the heart of the 'third way' politics professed by Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and many European leaders in the East and West (see Giddens 1998). Promoting the health of civil society becomes as important as choices between left and right, state and market, or nationalisation and privatisation. Policies of social cohesion, civic renewal and community capacity building have received new attention in the context of decreases in electoral turnout, party membership and political interest. In policy circles, social capital has emerged as a 'magic bullet' for tackling not just political disengagement but issues as diverse as crime and disorder, educational underachievement, ill health and small business development.

The American philosopher Michael Walzer provides a helpful definition of civil society: 'the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology – that fill this space'. Civil society is that arena of social interaction *beyond* the state and economy: it is constituted by the family and the household, the neighbourhood and the community, the club and association, the church and faith group. But how does religious involvement, as a key arena within civil society, relate to the wider governance of our communities?

### **Religious involvement and social capital**

Clearly faith and governance may be linked through *normative* connections. Values of equality and justice within the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, have had a long affinity with liberal democratic practice. Overtly religious states clearly share a normative base with the dominant faith, as in modern Islamic republics and European church-states of an earlier era. But our concern here is with *institutional* rather than normative links. What connections might there be between the social networks and interactions associated with faith communities and the style and quality of governance within a society?

'Institutional' is not intended to apply solely to 'bricks and mortar' structures (like churches) or to formal organisations (like the synod). Sometimes the most influential institutional arrangements are those that are informal (see Lowndes 2002) – the taken-for-granted rules and conventions about how people worship together, organise the life of their faith group and its relations to the wider community. Social capital may be created within faith groups through their specifically religious activities, but also through a whole range of associated activities (choirs, reading circles, flower rotas). Social capital may also be created through the interventions of a faith group in the life of the wider community (parent and toddler groups, youth clubs, visiting for the sick and elderly). Religious involvement is of particular importance because of its potential to create *bridging* as well as *bonding* social capital. Bridging social capital involves relations of trust and mutuality that span different sociological niches: it links us with people with whom we would not ordinarily mix (people who are not 'like us' in any obvious way). Other forms of engagement in civil society tend to be oriented to a particular social class (e.g.

trades unions or golf clubs) or social identity (e.g. campaigning groups, youth subcultures). While there may, in practice, be social bias within specific faith groups (whether by class, age, gender or ethnicity), this is not linked to the primary purpose of religious involvement. In addition, many faith groups are actively engaged in community development activities (as noted above), which further extends their potential for creating and mobilising bridging social capital.

Despite this potential, the ‘social capital industry’ has had surprisingly little to say about the role of religious involvement in the relationship between civil society and governance: sports clubs, PTAs and voluntary organisations have received far more attention. The evidence that does exist, as we shall see, provides decidedly mixed messages. But the importance of the link is not lost on policy-makers, as demonstrated by the emphasis on faith groups within recent policy statements on social cohesion and civic renewal. The stress here tends to be, however, on the *remedial* role that faith groups may play in contexts of civic breakdown (e.g. Cantle, 2001). Are church and faith groups part of the life-blood of healthy social capital, or are they more of a sticking plaster to be applied to an injured patient?

This paper can only provide a preliminary response to these questions: its main purpose is to identify propositions for further research and investigation. Here, I explore the evidence in relation to three alternative – and deliberately provocative – propositions.

### **1. Religious involvement is incompatible with social capital**

A pioneering study in Italy found that the most devout churchgoers were the least civic-minded individuals in surveys carried out over a 20 year period. Putnam came to the conclusion that religious involvement was an alternative to civic engagement rather than a part of it. On the basis of survey evidence comparing both individuals and different regions of Italy, he concluded that civic engagement and religious involvement are incompatible. Putnam (1993, p 171) concludes that ‘good governance in Italy is a by-product of singing groups and soccer clubs, not prayer’.

### **2. Religious involvement is invaluable to social capital**

A sharp contrast is provided by survey evidence from the USA, subsequently analysed by the same author. In his influential book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) explains that – in the post war period - religious involvement is second only to education as a predictor of civic engagement. Indeed, in the UK a recent study by the North West Development Agency estimated that there were 46,000 volunteers in their region with religious connections (NWDA, 2003).

In the American study, it was discovered that half of all associational membership, half of all personal philanthropy and half of all volunteering had a religious connection. Among Americans, those who are religiously involved are also more active in secular civic organisations and in informal social relationships. Religious people were simply ‘better connected’: it is estimated that churchgoers talk with 40% more people a day! Putnam shows how American churches acts as ‘an incubator for civic skills, civic norms, community interest and civic recruitment’ (2000, p 66).

Another US study shows that church involvement is a particularly important factor in stimulating civic involvement among people from lower socio-economic groups. While education and income are the best predictors of civic involvement, religious institutions are able 'to provide a counterbalance to this cumulative resource process'. In short, they provide opportunities for the development of civic skills among those who would otherwise be 'resource poor' (Verba et al 1995, p18).

It's not all good news, however. Putnam notes that in the USA the church is being 'hollowed out'. Over the last three or four decades, survey evidence shows that people are now 10% less likely to claim church membership. When they are asked about their *actual* church attendance and religious activities, these are found to have fallen by 25-50% in the same period. If religious involvement is so central to the health of social capital, what are the likely effects of growing secularisation *outside* the church itself?

### **3. Religious involvement is irrelevant to social capital**

A third strand of evidence contradicts both of the previous propositions. The European Values Survey found that, among 29 countries over a 30 year time period, there was no relationship between religiosity and social capital (measured in relation to levels of trust and civic engagement) (see Halman and Pettersson, 2001). There was no statistical relationship when comparing individuals in a sample survey; nor was there any relationship when comparing more or less religious countries. In fact, high levels of secularisation coincided with high levels of social capital: Denmark, Norway and Sweden have the highest levels of social capital but are

the most secular parts of Europe. There was also no clear pattern in comparing the relationship between different religions and social capital (the survey contrasted countries dominated by Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox religions respectively). The authors conclude that at both the personal and aggregate level, 'religion does not influence the degree of social capital'. Being a relatively more religious person or living in a relatively more religious country had no bearing upon an individual's level of social capital – there was neither a positive nor a negative relationship.

### **Intervening variables**

What the evidence suggests, therefore, is that religious involvement *per se* is not a good predictor of social capital. There are important intervening variables at work – factors that mediate the relationship between religious involvement, 'civicness' and good governance. These are now discussed in relation to three key questions: How is religious activity organised? What opportunities are there to learn civic skills in religious settings? And do faith groups have a public policy orientation?

It is not religious involvement *per se* that has an affinity with civic life and good governance. Different denominations of Christian churches have a different relationship with civic engagement – for organisational rather than doctrinal reasons. This helps to explain the discrepancy between Putnam's findings in Italy and the USA. Looking at the pattern of civic involvement across different Italian regions, Putnam (1993) observed that membership rates of *hierarchically ordered* organisations (crucially the Catholic Church – but also the mafia!) were negatively associated with measures of good governance. In

contrast, there was a positive correlation between social capital and membership of *horizontally ordered* groups (mostly in the sports and arts field). Hence the more Catholic a region, the lower the level of social capital. In contrast, the presence of Protestant churches within his US study changed this dynamic, given their relatively more horizontal form of organisation. Indeed, Putnam (2000) concludes that the link between religious involvement and wider civic engagement lies primarily in the arena of *informal* sociability. He quotes a Baptist pastor from Boston who states that: 'the church is not a building... it is relationships between one person and the next'.

So, the *internal structure* of religious institutions makes a difference. From their US survey, Verba et al establish that the link between religious involvement and civic engagement is stronger where there are small congregations, horizontal organisation, and lay participation in liturgy. Protestants are less likely than Catholics to attend church regularly but they are more likely to be involved in *church-based* activities. Protestants spend on average twice as many hours as non-Protestants in non-religious activities in church (Verba et al 1995, p 246).

Another important variable concerns the extent to which church members are able to learn and practice *civic skills*. Verba et al (1995) compared the survey evidence for members of Catholic and Baptist churches in the US. They found that Baptists were more likely than Catholics to exercise transferable 'civic skills' in connection with church activities (e.g. speaking at and arranging meetings, keeping minutes and records, writing letters, addressing a large group).

Faith groups are a particularly important arena for the acquisition of civic skills, particularly among disadvantaged individuals and communities who lack the opportunity to develop such skills via employment or education. Verba et al (1995, p 380) study the experience of black churches in the US where an emphasis on civic skills is combined with a wider 'political' or at least *public policy orientation*. In comparison with white Protestant churches, black church members received more exposure to political stimulation (e.g. sermons on issues of social welfare or public concern), more direct invitations to participate in civic life (e.g. through the organisation of campaigns or social action), and more opportunities to practice civic skills. These three sets of factors combined to produce a close relationship between religious and civic involvement.

This has been very much a preliminary attempt at analysing the often paradoxical relationship between religious involvement and social capital. The evidence reported here throws up as many questions as it answers. We have come nearer to understanding the ways in which religious involvement can be positively linked to social capital, and the important role played by institutional variables within faith groups. However, it remains unclear why the European Values Survey discovered no relationship between levels of social capital and different religious denominations, given the data from the US. The statistical association between secularisation and high levels of social capital in Europe also remains obscure. In the US context, the 'hollowing out' of the church provokes interesting questions in relation to the future relationship between religious involvement and civil society.

## **Religious involvement, social capital and good governance**

We have said little so far about the link between religious involvement and *good governance* – via the medium of social capital. Is it sufficient to argue (as we did at the start of the paper) that the trust and mutuality created within civil society simply ‘spills over’ into the political arena? Can we make a simple jump – in either theoretical or policy terms – from networks of informal sociability to active citizens prepared to engage in democratic processes, setting out their demands and holding representatives to account?

The *creation* of social capital is not the same as its *mobilisation* in the service of good governance (see Lowndes and Wilson 2001). The social capital gurus have established a statistical relationship between the presence of high levels of social capital in a society and the presence of responsive and effective democratic governance. Interesting as it is, this association tells us little about the causal mechanisms at work (or indeed the direction of causation), and how they might be influenced by politicians and policy makers, civil society organisations (including churches and faith groups), and citizens themselves. My own research into local governance in contrasting English localities has revealed that high levels of social capital do not always map on to high levels of political participation, or vice versa. Social capital does, or fails to do, its work in particular contexts (Lowndes et al 2002). Whether social capital is mobilised as a resource for governance depends upon a variety of factors other than the level and intensity of social capital itself.

The formation and mobilisation of social capital is best understood in the context

of a *two-way* relationship between civil society and the institutions of governance (Lowndes and Wilson 2001, p 631). As the British political scientist Ken Newton (1999, p 17) has argued, social capital is also ‘affected by the policy of governments and by the structure of government itself’. There are top-down as well as bottom-up processes at work. If governance arrangements are not *designed* to be accessible and responsive (from the timing of meetings through to the constitutional framework), an active civil society may not ‘produce’ good governance. The social norms and networks created within faith groups can only influence governance in a conducive environment, otherwise social capital may simply be ‘spent’ within communities themselves to facilitate their own activities – both social and religious.

### **Future challenges**

This paper points to the need for research that goes beyond survey data and statistical associations at the national level. We need to undertake local studies that examine, in unique contexts, the inter-connections between church or faith involvement, wider civic participation and the style and quality of governance. We need to talk to church members and those involved in church-related activities and investigate their attitudes to, and involvement in, civic life and local governance. We need to see how these connections vary between different faith groups, different communities (disadvantaged and well-off, white and multi-ethnic, urban and rural), and for different individuals (clergy and church members, men and women, young and old). We are some way off formulating any general theory of the relationship between religious involvement, social capital and good governance. In the meantime, we can

point to a number of factors that appear to facilitate this relationship and which are open to influence by policy-makers, faith groups and community organisations. As Table 1 shows, members of the public are more likely to participate in their communities and in local governance if they can do, like to, are enabled to, asked to, and are

responded to when they do make the effort (see Lowndes et al, 2002). Churches and faith groups can play an important role to play in relation to all five factors – either directly or as a conduit for communication with governance bodies.

**Table 1:** Civil society, participation and good governance: a CLEAR way ahead

KEY FACTOR	HOW IT WORKS	POLICY TARGET
Can do	Individual resources like speaking, writing and technical skills (and the confidence to use them) make a difference to whether people can participate	Capacity building through local organisations and with individuals (e.g. mentoring), which aims to counter-balance socio-economic based advantages
Like to	Participation requires a sense of involvement with the public entity that it the focus of engagement	Civic renewal programmes that nurture local social capital and a broad sense of community, alongside education in citizenship
Enabled to	Voluntary and community groups create an opportunity structure for participation	Developing the civic infrastructure, particularly networks and umbrella organisations that can channel and facilitate participation
Asked to	Mobilising people into participation by asking for their input can make a big difference	Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive
Responded to	When asked people say they will participate if they are listened to, not necessarily agreed with, but able to see a response	A public policy system that can show a capacity to respond

(Source: Lowndes et al, 2002 )

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## Obstacles to Social Cohesion

Helen Cameron

What are the obstacles to a cohesive society and how might they be overcome by people with religious capital? My aim is to label some of these obstacles so that we can debate them and get a measure of their importance in this city. My hope is that those of you who are actors in the life of Manchester will find ever more effective and creative ways of deploying the religious capital which is found here. I'm going to discuss the obstacles to social cohesion using a model of civil society that will group them under four sources: the state, the market, the household and faith communities, including the churches.

### **What do we mean by a cohesive society?**

The phrase 'cohesive society' has come into prominence as part of the government initiatives following the disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in Summer 2001. The national review that followed diagnosed poor communities of different ethnicities leading parallel yet largely unconnecting lives, making them vulnerable to hostile and erroneous representations of each other. The review articulated a complex reality in which some spatial segregation between communities was chosen for cultural

reasons but some was unchosen and due to poverty.

For me this makes 'cohesion' a useful addition to phrases like 'civic renewal', 'regeneration', 'inclusion', 'community', and 'civil society' which have described efforts at urban renewal over the last thirty years. All these phrases contain implicit tensions which need to be

acknowledged in overcoming any obstacles we might identify.

The first tension is between poverty and identity. We know that poverty can affect people of all ethnicities, physical abilities, and both genders. But we also know that people of some ethnicities, the disabled, women and children are more likely to be poor. Civil society organisations repeatedly demonstrate that action to relieve poverty must be relevant to people's particular needs, needs which are often shaped by their identity. In playing to this strength, I don't want to lose sight of the other element of the tension, that a cohesive society is more likely to be one that is economically just. Differences in identity can cause tension but so can the need to share overstretched public services, the need to stay healthy in substandard housing, the

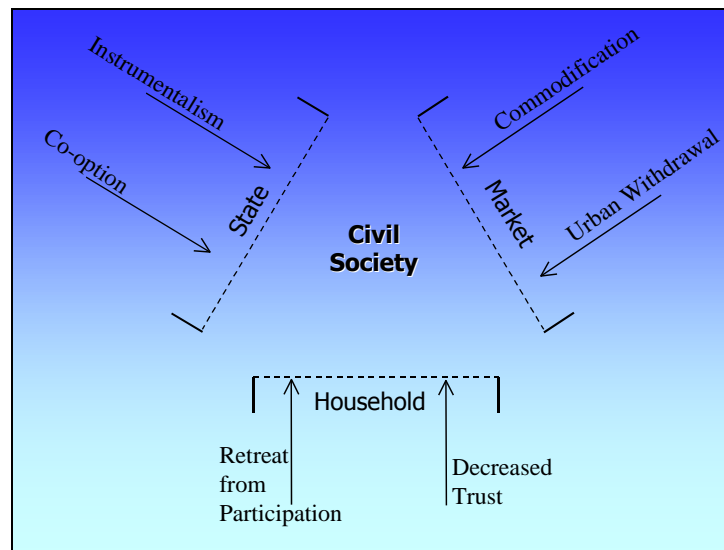


need to bring up children in unstimulating environments.

The second implicit tension in 'civil society' is between neighbourhood and city. When we seek social cohesion, what is the geographical area over which we wish the cohesion to be evident? Is it only the economically poorest neighbourhoods that should be aiming for cohesion or the city as a whole? We are returning to an age when many middle class women are dependent upon the paid work of working class women to maintain

their households – housework, ironing, childcare. Are these bonds of social cohesion? Churches often have a very local focus but belong to denominational networks that stretch across the city. Are these bonds of social cohesion?

The third tension is between unity and diversity. Recent media debates about the term multi-culturalism indicate an ongoing tension between what needs to be held in common for a society to be cohesive and what can be different. We know that the economic success of most city centres depends upon the diversity of the groups that make up the city.



What points of common agreement are needed and how can they be negotiated?

### Evers' Model of Civil Society

Coming from an academic group called the Centre for Civil Society, I've done Evers (1995) has suggested that in any society there are three main blocks of organised economic activity: the state, the market and the household. Depending upon the

my fair share of agonising over how that term can be defined. I want to share a simple model with you and use it to structure this paper.

political arrangements in each country, these three blocks will play different roles and may have different levels of importance. So for example, in America, the market is

the dominant block, whereas in the former Communist countries the State was the dominant block. In a democratic society there is a space between the market, the state and the household in which citizens are free to associate and undertake activity for their own purposes. In the UK, we have this amazing institution called the charity, whereby the state trusts citizens who get together for the public good and gives them tax concessions and public legitimacy. Religious organisations have been beneficiaries of this enhanced social status. However, charitable action is not the only thing going on in this space: it includes informal groups, associations, political parties, trade unions, co-operatives and social enterprises to name but a few. Evers suggests that no society is static and that civil society is constantly being reshaped by the three main blocks and itself seeks to shape the wider society. It is those dynamic forces I wish to consider when thinking about obstacles to social cohesion.

### **Obstacles from the state**

Given the determination of the New Labour governments to tackle social exclusion, fund urban regeneration and promote action around such terms as social cohesion, it may seem unfair to accuse the state of setting obstacles. The recent Home Office review and report *Working Together:*

*Co-operation between Government and Faith Communities* (2004) marks a significant development. However, in its relations with civil society and faith communities there are two behaviours which this government has inherited and developed from the previous Conservative administrations: I'm going to label them 'instrumentalism' and 'co-option'.

### *Instrumentalism*

Instrumentalism is when a powerful institution, like government, treats other organisations solely as instruments by which it can implement its policies. It loses sight of the intrinsic purpose and value of the less powerful organisations and fails to see them as a source of valuable learning about the realities of its citizens' lives. A popular catchphrase for this type of behaviour is 'the Heineken effect' where civil society organisations are valued only because they can enable government policy to reach parts it would not otherwise reach. Reaching the unreachable is a laudable aim for government to have but there is a danger that it becomes a one way street. I recently heard Fiona McTaggart MP (Home Office Under-Secretary) on the radio explaining why the government wished to work with faith-based

organisations in exactly these terms: they were useful rather than prophetic.

#### *Co-option*

Co-option is when a powerful institution, like government, redirects the unpaid efforts of citizens so that public institutions are supported at the expense of civil society organisations. It is common to hear complaints that the churches focus too much of their resources on the local church. However, if we were to add up the time which people in local civil society organisations spend giving unpaid support to public institutions we might be surprised at the sums. I'm thinking of the time spent serving as school governors and magistrates, supporting people in hospitals, prisons, the armed forces, sitting on committees connected with urban regeneration, local strategic partnerships and health trusts. If we believe that public institutions providing services to the whole community underpin the cohesive society then we may feel this time is well invested. But again the question is whether this investment is a one-way street. Does it enable the public institution to take on board the concerns of local citizens? Does it result in meaningful levels of flexibility from the state in their dealings with local civil society? Or does it create a shrinking pool of burnout activists exhausted from serving not only their civil society

organisations but also the latest initiative of the state?

For me the best way in which those with religious capital can resist instrumentalism and co-option is to ensure that all their work with the state is done within robust partnerships that acknowledge the paid and unpaid effort each side is putting in, the agendas of each side and where, from time to time, honest evaluation of what each side is getting from the deal is undertaken. In setting up robust partnerships, we can surely use a public theology that is able to talk to political science academics and that can set up dialogues with national and local politicians.

#### **Obstacles from the market**

Let me turn now to the way in which businesses can affect civil society.

#### *Commodification*

This term can be used in a number of ways but I want to use it to indicate those activities which civil society used to organise on a voluntary basis but which the market has moved in on and turned into commodities that can be sold for a profit - often assisted by media who suggest that the bought product or service has a higher status. Whereas once people swapped seedlings and advice for free on allotments, now they drive to out of town garden centres with budgets of several hundreds of

pounds. Whereas once children wore clothes that had been handed down or knitted by grandma, they now have to wear the right labels or face social disgrace. The exchange of seedlings and children's clothes built social bonds which the market is not interested in replicating. Poor people are further marginalised not because their material conditions have worsened but because those conditions are regarded with even greater disdain by the culture in which they have to hold their heads up. I sense that the commodification of culture may be a source of miscommunication between different ethnic communities and different generations. For some culture is an act of individual consumption, for others it is an act of creative collaboration.

### *Urban withdrawal*

We know that the market will only service areas where it can make a profit. In a polarised city, the market may withdraw from some areas where it cannot make a profit making those areas even more unattractive. This can have a knock-on effect on the transport infrastructure. Such areas have often been served by small family businesses or franchises but increasingly large corporations are making it difficult for these small businesses to survive with their higher overheads. This in turn can create spaces where less scrupulous

operators can move in and offer needed goods on credit.

Those with religious capital have usually been more active in their dialogue with the institutions of the state than with the institutions of the market. However, there is a long history of community based businesses and credit unions which demonstrate that alternatives are possible. Now with the growing policy interest in social enterprise, there is more opportunity for those with religious capital to mobilise support for those who trade with social as well as economic purposes.

Another key role is to monitor the economic impact of public institutions on declining communities – and here I am particularly interested in the impact of universities. Student housing should be deliberately located in declining communities thus supporting their shops, pubs, laundrettes and public transport. Universities should monitor the extent to which student labour is casualising local jobs that could provide livelihoods for people in declining communities. They should not be giving students bursaries or employing them to perform internal service jobs that could provide livelihoods for local people but ensuring that bursaries propel students into service-learning in their local communities. If we want a cohesive society in the long-term,

those three formative years are a golden opportunity to engage with the reality of city life.

In mobilising support for socially responsible businesses, we can surely use a public theology that is able to talk to business school academics and that can set up dialogues with global, national and local businesses. Those public theologians located within universities can exercise vigilance about the impact of their institutions on their city.

### **Obstacles from households**

In recent years, I have been studying membership organisations. It seems to me a great irony that at a time when public policy interest in social participation is very high, people's tendency to engage in face-to-face participation outside the home is in marked decline. Data on the Labour Party shows that in 1999, 65% of Party members did not attend any face-to-face meeting of the Party. This compared with a non-participation rate of 36% in 1990.

#### *Retreat from participation*

It is not that citizens are actively deciding to withdraw from public participation: it is rather that home and working life have fragmented in ways that make it very difficult to set aside concentrated chunks of time to sustain civil society organisations.

The churches are only too well acquainted with this change. Because we no longer have secure lifelong livelihoods, homeowners are tempted to focus what little leisure time they have on activities that increase the value of this asset, encouraged by the market and the media. As the house buying TV shows are constantly reminding us: you can do up a grotty home in a good neighbourhood but you can't get a good price for a beautiful home in a grotty neighbourhood. At what point did that become a social truth? The whole point of civil society is that neighbourhoods can be changed.

#### *Decreased trust*

Unsurprisingly decreasing social contact leads to decreasing social trust. People are most afraid of those they never encounter. Inter-generational suspicion is increased when the generations do not meet socially as they once did in churches and local non-themed pubs. The media give an unrealistic sense of the dangers that citizens face and so reinforce the retreat into the household.

How do we lure people out of their homes to see the rewards of face-to-face engagement? What are the creative ideas that will make people want to connect? The Arts have a hugely important role to play. I was talking to a national development

worker for a large charity who had obtained funding for a learning development co-ordinator in key locations. She said that what she really wanted was the same money again to employ a development worker to set up community arts projects. Another key tactic for civil society organisations is to mimic the market by setting up retail environments – the community café, the charity shop, the stand selling greetings cards are all ways in which people can engage on their terms and then discover the social purpose that lies within the organisation.

### **Obstacles from Faith Communities**

So far I have described civil society organisations as the heroes, seeking to resist the obstacles to cohesion placed in their paths by the three major players in society, the state, the market and the household. However, it would be wrong to ignore these organisations' ability to shoot themselves in the foot. I take examples of obstacles coming from Christian organisations because I don't feel I know enough about other faith communities to suggest what obstacles they may be experiencing.

#### *Poor use of assets – buildings and money*

It is customary to speak of the churches as asset poor. I want to suggest that for many of our mainstream denominations, there is an inappropriate distribution of

assets and an emphasis on owning property that is no longer appropriate. I want to commend the Methodist Resourcing Mission Office in Manchester for taking this issue seriously. They are looking some uncomfortable facts squarely in the face. There are roughly 300,000 Methodists and roughly 6,000 Methodist chapels – one building for every 50 Methodists. From what I can work out the ratios are not much different for other historic denominations except the Roman Catholics. This is asset owning on a huge scale – this is living alone in a five-bedroom house in case all the grandchildren want to visit at Christmas. Urgent and energetic action is needed to ensure that the churches in any neighbourhood, and particularly in communities with poor facilities, have between them useful and sustainable premises with sufficient money left over to employ people. If this means sharing one decent set of buildings rather than struggling to keep four or five open then so be it.

#### *Poor use of people*

The church is dealing with a steady decrease in its voluntary workforce, an ageing of its clergy workforce and a trend to scrape together resources to pay lay people to do administration, pastoral work, youth work and social action. Strangely much of the innovative work is done by paid lay people with clergy often

serving the traditional expectations of members for pastoral care. If lay people are to give of their time voluntarily, they are going to be like volunteers in other civil society organisations, wanting to get stuck into the mission of the organisation rather than being secretary or treasurer. More money is needed to pay people to do the organising so that volunteers can concentrate on the doing. Clergy need releasing to be at the cutting edge rather than plugging the gaps.

#### *Weak links between belief and action*

Most major denominations espouse an active concern for economic justice and a desire to maintain a presence in deprived communities. Yet in some denominations the redistributive mechanisms that allow funding to flow from richer to poorer communities are becoming weaker. The grant-making mechanisms that enable work in deprived communities to be supported are getting weaker rather than stronger. How can the links between belief and action be more clearly articulated for the whole church? We can surely use a public theology that is able to talk to academic theologians and set up dialogues with national denominational bodies and local faith communities.

#### **An agenda for those with religious capital**

To summarise: there are a number of obstacles that can get in the way of applying religious capital to the task of improving social cohesion. These obstacles can be tackled by:

- Forming robust partnerships from which faith communities as well as the state benefit
- Supporting viable alternatives to the market
- Generating creative reasons for citizens to connect
- Rearranging the assets of Christian organisations to free up paid staff to facilitate the work of others.

This is an agenda that will involve some complex and difficult conversations to be had. We need public theologians who have a way with words, who are willing to learn academic and policy languages that are not their own, who can express compelling links between belief and action.

#### *From cohesive to adhesive?*

At the beginning of this paper I described three tensions which I felt underlay the concept of a cohesive society. I was concerned that a proper concern with identity is not used to mask real issues of poverty; I was concerned that a proper concern with declining neighbourhoods is

not used to mask the need for social and economic connections across the city; and I was concerned that a proper concern for unity did not downplay the importance of diversity which now often lies at the heart of a city's economic prosperity.

I wonder, tongue in cheek, whether an adhesive society would be a better term? This is a city where people of all identities have a basic sense of solidarity, that their city will be a better place if they stick together; where people in all neighbourhoods recognise their social and economic interdependence and want every neighbourhood to be a place of

livelihood; where diversity is prized and encouraged to flourish because it is the resource from which new ideas can develop. So this is not an adhesive like superglue where to stick together means being stuck – it is more like a post-it adhesive that sticks without getting stuck. The fragments can be rearranged to make sense in different ways.

This is a city where public theology helps conversations happen, opens up new possibilities, asks difficult questions. It is a city where those with religious capital are seen as key investors to involve in every development.

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## **The work of the Northwest Development Agency** Helen France

### **Does the NWDA need faith communities to help it deliver its strategy?**

Recent government policy with regard to faith communities seems to have two strands. Firstly, there is

*social cohesion*: civil disturbance and its causes are perceived ultimately as a racial discrimination and crime reduction issue, one which raises



legitimate questions, however, as to how minority communities can be granted equal opportunities. Ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in indices of deprivation. This agenda is largely Home Office led but there are economic and employment issues which are the business of the NWDA. The second policy strand is *service provision*. This concentrates on the potential for faith communities to be engaged as partners in the delivery of services to the 'hard to reach'. It acknowledges the considerable social capital that faith communities represent. It recognises the traditional involvement of faith communities in regeneration in its broadest sense, as well as their increasing participation in official government sponsored regeneration initiatives.

The NWDA funded report *Faith in England's Northwest* (2003) attempts to quantify the contribution that faith communities make to the region across a range of activities - heritage, tourism, rural, urban regeneration - service delivery especially to the most vulnerable - culture and sport. It also draws attention to the particular strength of faith groups as a source of *volunteers* within the community, as well issues around *funding* and *sustainability*. The report enables the Development Agency to see for itself the key role that faith

communities play, as well as areas in which their potential might be extended.

I would like to cite two examples of how in recent months the Agency, along with other partners, has engaged with faith communities in the delivery of projects. The first, in Preston, capitalises primarily on the churches' built infrastructure as a catalyst for regeneration. The second, in Liverpool uses the churches' network of parishes and volunteers to roll out a programme of micro-economic regeneration projects and environmental training initiatives.

### **St Augustine's New Avenham Centre, Preston**

Inaugurated in January 2004, this project involves the partial demolition and creative redevelopment of a crumbling Roman Catholic Church, a Grade 2 listed building, as a catalyst for the regeneration of Avenham, a deprived area of Preston, Lancashire. The new building, costing over £5 million, will be a multi-purpose centre retaining the original church's prominent neo-classical towers and portico as a landmark and symbol of the church's continuing commitment to the area. Designed as a multi-purpose sports, family learning, education, and enterprise Centre, the new St Augustine's is to become the

focal point for the delivery of a wide range of community services, providing fitness and leisure activities, business start-up units, a crèche and childcare facilities. It will also be a base for local community and voluntary sector organisations.

Due to open in late Spring 2005, the Centre has attracted some £1.5 million from the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB6), as well as over three-quarters of a million pounds of European Regional Development Funds (ERDF) via Preston's Objective 2 Priority 2 Action for Communities Programme. Other funders include Sports England Lottery (£1.85 million), Lancashire County Council (£250,000), Preston City Council (£150,000), Preston Central SureStart (£125,000), and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lancaster, which will have spent almost £1million in total to realise the Centre.

A significant feature of the project is a close inter-faith relationship with the local Islamic Community. Today nearly 30% of people in the ward are from ethnic minority backgrounds, and the number of people from those communities in the 16-24 age group is 60% above the Preston average. Recognising the diversity that exists within communities within inner Preston, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lancaster has invested substantial resources and effort into ensuring their needs are met by the Project.

Speaking at the launch of the project in January 2004, Patrick O'Donoghue, R.C. Bishop of Lancaster stated, 'This Project demonstrates what can be achieved by faith and community groups working alongside government to provide much-needed support to areas in need. It has shown us how to turn decline and adversity into opportunity'.

### **Operation Eden**

Whilst the Avenham Centre concentrates on a church *building*, Operation Eden brings the church's other primary resource into partnership: its *people*, especially its impressive cohort of volunteers. EDEN is a unique community environmental initiative in Liverpool that has received substantial government funding. Launched in April 2004, Operation EDEN is a £500k three-year project sponsored by the Church of England Diocese of Liverpool with funding principally from the Northwest Development Agency, the Environment Agency and Merseyside Waste Disposal Authority. Two key voluntary sector partners are also involved – Groundwork and Sefton Council for Voluntary Service. EDEN employs a Coordinator, Project Officer and Office Administrator who are working to expand the existing network of over 120 parish environmental representatives into an ecumenical and interfaith

network committed to the regeneration of local communities and the transformation of the local environment through micro-economic regeneration projects and training initiatives. This includes improving the way that communities understand and appreciate their environment. Local Groups will be helped to improve buildings that serve the community, develop local recycling schemes and reclaim and refurbish open space, in urban as well as rural areas.

The Bishop of Liverpool, the Rt. Revd James Jones, has said, 'Project EDEN is one small contribution, bringing together local agencies, faith partners and volunteers to help make local communities better places to live. Christians must work together with others for the holistic transformation of the local environment, spiritually and physically'. Steven Broomhead, the NWDA's Chief Executive has also stated, 'This unique scheme provides the perfect opportunity to engage and empower the region's faith communities in local environmental regeneration projects and initiatives. It will encourage different faith communities to work together on local projects, providing a strong and coherent approach to environmental regeneration and resource efficiency issues. I am pleased to support this innovative new scheme, which will create an improved environment for all Merseyside residents'.

## **Critiquing Regeneration**

Together with the role of the churches and faith communities in social cohesion and service delivery, there is a third area that the Agency wishes to explore which we believe is directly linked to the launch of the Manchester Centre for Public Theology - that is the role of bodies like MCPT in providing an alternative critique to the process of regeneration within the Northwest. It is a role that builds directly upon both its credibility 'on the street' in deprived areas but also on its capacity to reflect on that experience within an academic theological framework. I am not a theologian, but I am told that a feature of contextual theology and liberation theology is that it takes the reality on the ground as its starting point. The first end of year report of the William Temple Foundation project *Regenerating Communities* (2003) is just one example of how faith communities demonstrate their capacity to reflect critically on their engagement in deprived communities. The North West Development Agency is happy to support the launch of this Manchester Centre for Public Theology in the hope that in some way the partnership between the Centre and the Agency can be further explored.

*Helen France is Executive Director of Development and Partnerships in the North West Development Agency.*

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## **The work of Wythenshawe Voices**

Claire Kerfoot

Wythenshawe Voices works with voluntary and community groups and anyone living in Wythenshawe who wants a say about things that affect them in Wythenshawe. We do this by establishing communication between key organisations and groups; providing opportunities for Wythenshawe people to get involved in decisions that affect them; and securing two places for Wythenshawe on the Community Network Strategy Group. Wythenshawe Voices is working with people (not for people) to enhance a community that is

rich in assets and skills. Wythenshawe Voices grew out of the Wythenshawe

Community Forum (WCF) was established around 1997 in response to a wish among voluntary and community sector groups to work together to increase their influence. However, the group found it difficult to secure funding and become sustainable. Around 1999

the committee at that time stepped down, and other community members were invited to a public meeting to examine the way forward. From this meeting Wythenshawe Voices was born. The new Wythenshawe Voices group decided that membership would be open to all individuals living in Wythenshawe as well as those representing voluntary or community sector groups. There was also a strong commitment at this time to the group setting their own agenda, rather than just responding to initiatives around them. One of the issues for the Wythenshawe Community Forum had been the demands of engaging with the Single Regeneration Budget programme in the local area (East Wythenshawe was the subject of an SRB programme between April 1997 and March 2004). Over recent years, Wythenshawe Voices has been able to establish its own identity, and has developed more positive relationships with the local regeneration partnership, to a point where the group is represented on

the Executive Committee. A significant step in the life of Wythenshawe Voices was the employment of a Development Worker and an Administrator in 2002. This has supported and strengthened the work significantly and has enabled us to be more effective in outreach.

### **Social Cohesion**

In response to Helen Cameron's paper, it is encouraging to realise that the work evolving out of Wythenshawe Voices addresses three of the four challenges to social cohesion in her model.

#### *Creating Robust Partnerships with Statutory agencies*

Like other local community groups, Wythenshawe Voices has experienced 'instrumentalism'. We work hard to ensure that we are not exploited by outside agencies as a replacement for consulting the wider community. We have developed a positive relationship with Wythenshawe Partnership (the Area Regeneration Team of Manchester City Council); we have worked with them on a number of projects. Currently we are contributing to the development of something called the 'Wythenshawe Strategic Regeneration Framework'. We are trying to improve access to ward coordination processes (on a local level and through an initiative

entitled CN4M (Community Networks 4 Manchester).

#### *Creative Connections*

Voices have been working to harness community media as a tool for people in Wythenshawe to participate in community activity. It is our priority to follow a community led regeneration model. We want to give people interesting relevant ways to contribute to local culture. Wythenshawe Voices has set up a working group, which includes people already involved with Information and Communication Technology projects across Wythenshawe, learning and skills agencies, existing community media and community TV. Voices has the support of groups such as CATS amateur drama group and Friends of Baguley Park.

#### *Viable alternatives to market forces*

Although Voices has not directly contributed to the setting up of social enterprise in Wythenshawe, we do work with and are supported by groups who are successfully building social enterprises in Wythenshawe. The United Estates of Wythenshawe, a tenants' group based at Brownley Green Methodist Church, have won 2 awards for social enterprise; they have a café, gym, hairdresser, aromatherapy and are building a cinema. The 'Tree of Life' based at St Mark's Church in

Woodhouse Park has a successful community shop and community café, plus massage and reflexology services. Both these are extremely well supported by local people.

## **The way ahead for social capital and good governance**

### *Capacity Building*

In partnership with Wythenshawe Partnership, Surestart, Scarman trust, SM Healthy Living Network, URC and Kelloggs, Wythenshawe Voices are putting in an application to fund a capacity building team in Wythenshawe. This team will be led by a community steering group and will be made up of people employed from the local community.

### *Strengthening infrastructure and inclusion*

As the geographical network for Wythenshawe for CN4M we work with communities of interest across Manchester, bringing them to work in Wythenshawe. This begins to address the conundrum of geographical area in relation to thematic interest groups. We

*Claire Kerfoot is Wythenshawe Voices Development Worker*

### *Further links:*

Brownley Green community organisations:

<http://www.wythenshawe-oasis.org.uk/brownley.htm>

Community Networks 4 Manchester:

<http://www.communitysafetynetwork.org.uk/index.php?page=pages&menuid=9>

Wythenshawe Partnership:

continue this work by linking Wythenshawe to 7 LSP thematic partnership boards.

### *Responsive, accountable decisions*

We are working with Wythenshawe Partnership and with the various consultants to have some influence on the Wythenshawe Strategic Regeneration Framework. We put together a report addressing the initial proposals put forward in the Framework's 1st stage brief. Our report is a local version of the Manchester Community Engagement Strategy. We also work citywide through CN4M to influence LSP.

### **Summary**

We can do this work due to the commitment and vision of local people. Although we have a long way to go we are trying to make the most of the rich potential of social capital in Wythenshawe in a way that matches people's needs and fits with the way they live their lives and how they want to participate.

<http://www.manchester.gov.uk/regen/pships/wyth.htm>

Wythenshawe Voices:

<http://www.wythvoices.org>

## **VORTA and VWHAT**

Claire Staniforth

On the 11<sup>th</sup> August 1997 I lived on a Manchester City Council Estate known as Openshaw Village. At that time it was a wonderful estate, crime flourishing amongst its hundreds of derelict houses and flats, dotted between beautiful grass verges knee high and filled with a variety of fly-tipping and litter. Nobody, including the council and the police, cared. It was a haven for the underworld and decent people wanted to escape as quickly as possible. But then a handful of people realised something; why escape? Why not make the authorities aware of such a wonderful place to live? Why not tell them about a dream they had? Other estates did it – why couldn't they? That handful of people got together and planned a way forward. Together they created a voice for the people; VORTA (the Village of Openshaw Tenants and Residents Association).

At first it was an uphill battle to convince the authorities of their dream. There was a future for the village and its people. But there was no money to finance this dream. Then along came NDC (New Deal for Communities) and another battle had to be fought. East Manchester, including Openshaw Village, had to be recognised, which took months of bidding to get our reward of £51.7 million. New Deal for Communities East Manchester became a reality two years later. Five years on, the battle still continues.

Regeneration of East Manchester brought many changes which made those dreams become a reality at last, with environmental and social improvements to all the estates, the village being one of them. Gone is the council's control of housing, replaced by a new social landlord. Gone are patches of dereliction, replaced by tidier green patches, community gardens and much needed social centres. Slowly the

crime reduces, not yet fast enough for some. The dream of our existing homes being improved and brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> century becomes a reality as new schemes are underway. Many still wait in anticipation with a few technical nightmares along the way. The battle continues and always will.

The people need a clear voice for now and in the future. That handful of people who started out with a dream have become social educators rather than activists, their time now

*Claire Staniforth, together with husband Roy, was a founder member of VORTA and VHAT.*  
*Further links:*

<http://www.communitypride.org.uk/area/eastmanc/eastmanc.html>

[http://www.neweastmanchester.com/pages/contacts\\_and\\_links.html](http://www.neweastmanchester.com/pages/contacts_and_links.html)

### **The Monastery of Saint Francis and Gorton Trust David Gray SSF (T)**

#### **How an inspirational building has become a catalyst for rebuilding a people**

We have been exploring the role that local churches are playing in the regeneration of East Manchester. I have been asked to offer a slightly different angle on this topic, one which highlights the part that all people of faith can play in uplifting the communities in which they live.

In 1989, my family and I came to Gorton in East Manchester as refugees. We had lived for some time in North Manchester, but the National Front made it impossible for us to stay in that part of the city at that time. With hindsight, the persecution we experienced was to

devoted to teaching the people how to keep what they have and play a key role in maintaining it for the future. VORTA had to change : the dreamers became realists. A new organisation was born to replace it and take a more real, active role in providing a voice for the people. VORTA was a committee of dreamers. Now 'VHAT' is an action team devoted to creating more *people involvement*. No more committees: now it is neighbourhood groups who have taken control of their future.

our long term benefit, for as well as being the place where my wife Elaine grew up and where members of her family still lived, Gorton was to prove the place where our lives would be enhanced in unexpected ways.

Gorton is a community made up of several smaller neighbourhoods. As the Ordained Local Ministry curate at two Gorton parish churches, Emmanuel and Saint James, I am also a recognised and regarded Methodist minister within the Manchester Circuit. Already a tertiary in the third order of the



Society of St. Francis before becoming a priest, and having supported the Monastery of St. Francis and Gorton Trust since its formation, I was fortunate enough to be invited to join their staff team at the beginning of this year.

I must stress that Gorton is not a 'declining community' but a recovering one. Its wilderness years following industrial collapse were marked by population dispersal, high unemployment, some of the worse health problems in Europe and increasing levels of crime and anti-social behaviour. With the demise of the once world-leading local railway industry in the 1960's, people left Gorton to seek jobs elsewhere. This migration had become a route by the following decade when the infamous slum clearance programmes were affecting communities across Manchester. Looking back, the slum clearances had similar effects to the Highland Clearances of previous centuries: skills that once held the community together in common purpose became dormant, leaving a once proud workforce feeling deskilled and powerless. With unemployment came other crippling effects of poverty: depression, low income, poor diet and escalating ill health.

People were dropping out of learning, too. A few years ago, a young man I talked to about his school attendance told me: 'What's the point in school

anyway? They say it's to prepare you for working life – but that's a big lie. My granddad was made redundant, my dad was thrown on the scrap heap, what bloody chance do I have?'

For a while, Gorton lay like a victim awaiting those with power and resources to heal it, but in time people realised their well being was not in the hands of politicians, planners and other professionals. Once Gorton people understood that the only authentic expert on a life was the person or community living that life, they stopped looking outside the community for solutions. The future, they now knew, lay in their own hands - outside professionals were needed only if they were willing to get alongside the community. With so many hurts in its body, belief in the community was a daunting task for the few local people who still had confidence in Gorton. A focal point was needed to inspire people, around which they would rally in readiness for the struggle of raising up the quality of life again for everyone in Gorton.

St. Francis Monastery on Gorton Lane was one of the few familiar and beloved landmarks of happier days. Its splendid architecture recalled times when the community's forebears had, after long working days in the factories, worked freely late into the evenings to turn E. W. Pugin's magnificent gothic design into a living reality. For more than a century the monastery supported,

educated and nurtured the Gorton community. Then in 1989, the monks, too old and frail to sustain the building now that more than three quarters of the Gorton community had gone, made the painful decision to leave Gorton themselves. The building fell into a disuse that symbolised what was going on around it. The stripping of its most valuable assets and its suffering at the hands of vandals were a mirroring all that had been taken out of the lives of ordinary people.

Then, seven years ago, while on a train journey through Manchester, businessman Paul Griffith saw the state of the monastery at which he had been a choirboy. Like St. Francis before him, he sensed a calling to rebuild the church. Also like St. Francis, Paul initially misunderstood that calling. It was only as he responded to his inner conviction, inspiring his wife Elaine to lead the drive to reclaim the monastery, that it struck Paul that his call was less about re-laying the stones of a building, and more about rebuilding a people. Today, the Monastery Trust has a small staff working out of a house behind the Monastery. In addition, the trust employs artists and trainers who work in local schools in an effort to ensure that emerging generations gain a sense of belonging to a community that has much to offer them in return for what they are willing to invest in it.

Through the trust's links with local adult education providers, it is able to offer courses in art, stonemasonry, in running a committee, child protection, first aid – and a whole range of subjects that will give people the confidence and skills to play their own part in rebuilding their community.

Initial steps taken by a few local people are beginning to open up pathways into training, employment and more fulfilling lifestyles for many more. A Community Choir started by the trust in partnership with Community Arts Northwest has attracted members from most of the smaller neighbourhoods that make up Gorton. This exciting enterprise has already enlivened the Easter experience of one local church, from whence the choir went on to sing in a local care home for the elderly. The choir has helped break down some of the turf mentality that has long been a thorn in the side of community cohesion and, after only a couple of months singing together, members are ready to perform publicly. There are plans for an album in time for Christmas, too.

The Monastery trust also played a big part in bringing people together for a very successful Gorton Festival last September. Building on traditions such as the Whit Walks and the Rush-Cart ceremony, during which, until just a few years ago,

Morris Dancers led the local populace on a hearty annual pub crawl. The festival took over Gorton Park for a whole day of events and activities. As well as a football tournament, there were two stages of music and entertainment – one showcasing local talent, stalls, fairground rides, stilt-walkers and clowns. In the evening, the work of our artists paid off wonderfully when children from all the Gorton primary Schools and Rainbow groups merged from their own neighbourhoods in a lantern procession that symbolically brought light, hope and togetherness to the whole community. The procession came to an end in Gorton Park, where the evening was closed with a fabulous fireworks display. The festival committee is already planning this year's festival. Local business, voluntary and residents groups are keen to get behind an event that in its first year attracted more than 3,000 people.

Over the next few years, the six acre site around the monastery will be developed in ways that will promote the Gorton economy and the well-being of local people. The prospect of turning a derelict area into a complex incorporating a dance-floor, gymnasium, health-care, training workshops, artist's studios, a concert venue, conference centre, a bank, community store, visitor's centre, a restaurant and more is just part of the exciting challenge we have set ourselves. Three local prisons and the Inside Out Trust are working with us to develop a restorative justice scheme, giving prisoners an opportunity

to invest in the community they have previously offended against. Already, some two hundred chairs made in prison workshops have been distributed around church and community centres within Gorton. Trust staff work with prisoners and the community to assist in a process of healing via which remorse and forgiveness can be expressed in equal measure. Already, this is helping reduce both crime and the fear of crime. Our monastery allotment plot will soon be in a position to help school children explore where food comes from and learn about healthy eating, as well as offering classes in horticulture to new social housing tenants, refugee and asylum seekers and other adults.

The Oasis drop-in run by Gorton Evangelical Church offers much more than a meeting place for asylum seekers and refugees. Monastery artists help the project to provide creativity workshops alongside ESOL classes, allowing traumatised children and adults to give expression to painful feelings arising from their flight from terrible suffering and to give shape and colour to their hopes for a better life. Aware that Gorton's past greatness was built on the hard work of an immigrant community (Irish Catholic in the main), one can't help feeling a little excitement when considering the contribution these new neighbours might make to the increasing fortunes of everyone who lives in Gorton. Out of the fires of their suffering, a Phoenix is rising that could bring healing to themselves and their adopted community.

As editor of an inter-faith newsletter for MENSA members, I am especially keen to see a multi-faith facility in Manchester. A small start has already been made: talks between faith leaders from Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Paganism are helping to shape a vision of creating a sacred space for mutual contemplation, prayer and worship within the complex that will rise up around the monastery. The opportunity for people of all faith backgrounds to share common ground from which to express their compassion, optimism, commitment and belonging to each other holds much potential for spreading a balm that could be, perhaps, capable of healing many of the wounds in today's society.

Just to remind us that communities are made up of individuals, let me mention three people whose contact with the monastery has led to exceptional personal progress. All have won top marks in the adult learning award scheme. The overall winner overcame isolation and depression to achieve IT skills that have enabled him to run our Friends web-site. Close runners up were an octogenarian local history archivist who helped produce a recent book on Gorton Monastery, and a woman once held back by dyslexia who now chairs a committee and co-edits a newsletter. She told me recently that she now believes it is possible for her to achieve anything she puts her mind to. I believe her.

Through music, sport, the arts, learning, healing, training, new apprenticeships, architecture, history, mathematics, archaeology – and a whole range of other expressions of human giftedness – Gorton is tapping into the vital energy that emanates from the source of all life. That energy flows symbolically through an inspirational building, St. Francis Monastery on Gorton Lane, before dispersing throughout the neighbourhood to touch the hearts and imaginations of ordinary people, transforming their lives and changing their fortunes as it moulds them into a community to which each feels they belong.

The story of Gorton and of St. Francis monastery reminds me of Nehemiah, who returned from exile and began the process of rebuilding the fallen city of Jerusalem. Despite the critical scepticism of his neighbours, Nehemiah persevered. Gradually the people caught his God inspired vision. One by one, his critics came to assist him in the task he had undertaken on their behalf. By the time they had rebuilt Jerusalem, they had forged themselves into a society wherein every single member had a role.

The Bible tells us how, by following his calling, the prophet Nehemiah helped a struggling, remnant cluster of people to reform themselves into a community that, from a position of strength, was once again able to welcome the stranger in its midst. It was with great joy that the people committed themselves afresh to each other, their newfound identity cemented under the good law of their loving God. The story of East Manchester is a story of confidence in the face of adversity; hope in a

climate of pessimism. It reminds us how important it is to the well being of human beings that they have a perspective on their family and communal history, that they may sense their own place in the stream of miraculous living energy through which their lives flow from a past studded with the precious gems that were their forebears towards a future that is rich with promise. The story of Gorton reminds us that art and music, sport and learning, are essential to the health and social cohesion of people and that society itself is impoverished when any one of its members is denied access to its hearth-glow. Too, Gorton's particular story implores us to

remember that grand old buildings can serve fine new purposes.

My friends, some things have to be believed to be seen. Believe in yourself, believe in others and believe that there is a higher realm of goodness that is not only worth reaching for, but which is attainable. But on your journey, be sure of this: you may never reach your destination if you seek to travel alone. However, if you can take the weariest straggler with you, you are likely to find that in their company, it is possible to open up a portal that enables you both to gain another world.

*Rev. David Gray is the Community Coordinator of the Monastery of St. Francis and Gorton Trust and a Tertiary member of the Society of St. Francis.*

Further links: <http://www.gortonmonastery.co.uk>

## **About Community Pride**

Anne Stewart

Community Pride Initiative works to improve the quality of life of people and communities living with direct experience of poverty and social exclusion in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Salford and Manchester. It does this by empowering grassroots activists, community groups and faith-based projects to develop their own strategies and solutions and to have more say over the major decisions that affect their neighbourhoods and the future of their cities.

There are three strands to our work: creating *channels* and processes through which people can participate in decision-making; building the *capacity* of both individuals and groups to use those (and other) channels and processes to participate; making *space* for communities to celebrate as communities, to build social capital and to recognise common values.

## **Structure**

Community Pride is a project of Church Action on Poverty (CAP) which is a registered charity. It was established in 1999 by CAP and a group of churches in Manchester. Community Pride is managed on a day to day basis by a

Co-ordinator. There are a further ten members of the staff team (five full-time and five part-time). The Community Pride Management Committee has representatives from the communities of Manchester and Salford, voluntary sector organisations, some of the churches that supported Community Pride's establishment, and CAP.

### **Recent Achievements**

We have just completed the first year of a three-year business plan. During that year the organisation worked with 420 people, 109 secular organisations and 46 faith-based organisations – across seven geographical areas and four communities of interest (for example, the deaf community). We were able to facilitate community involvement through workshops, meetings and events on 42 clearly identifiable occasions, plus many more on a smaller or more informal scale. We worked closely with 18 people to provide them with at least 30 hours of community leadership training. In June 2003 we held a major event for residents of Salford and Manchester to come together to share, learn, reflect and plan – ‘Culture Clash? A People's City?’

asked whether or not neighbourhood renewal was working for local residents. Just over 100 people attended to debate their actual experiences at the grassroots. We have delivered seminars and workshops about our pioneering work on participatory budgeting, including events in partnership with the Audit Commission, the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and Government Offices. We have played a key role in the development of Community Networks and Local Strategic Partnerships working to build channels so that local people can participate fully.

### **How Community Pride Works**

Community Pride employs a mix of Community Linkworkers and Research and Liaison Officers. This mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches serves to develop capacity and to open up channels – and is unique amongst voluntary organisations. Community Pride works with people from geographical communities and neighbourhoods and also with people from communities of interest such as women's groups, the Deaf Community, people with disabilities. The work of Community Pride is not an abstract exercise but is rooted in the reality of people's real life situations.

*Anne Stewart is a worker at Community Pride Initiative, Salford*

*Further links: <http://www.communitypride.org.uk>*

## What is the ‘Manchester Centre for Public Theology’?

**Manchester:** Context and location matters as the vantage-point from which initial problematics and understandings can grow. The Centre is concerned to identify the peculiarly urban, industrial and post-industrial context of Manchester as the common focus of its core group: as a place which demonstrates in microcosm the major global currents of economic, cultural and demographic change associated with the rise of industrial capitalism, the birth of modernity and transition to post-modernity and their resulting human impact; as the socio-economic-cultural realities of a great city as the necessary backdrop for robust theological reflection; as the context within which new ways of being church and community must emerge. To acknowledge our own context enables us to give a more open account of our own position, the better to engage in dialogue and partnership with those from similar or divergent contexts.

**Centre:** We hope to be facilitators and resources, as a meeting-point between many and diverse participants. Our activities will be structured on a four-fold pattern:

- *Identifying* issues and problems – listening to a range of voices and data
- *Fuelling the debate* – seeking out resources, analysis, ideas and research
- *Facilitating dialogue* – convening conversations, encounters, speakers, events
- *Seeking performative outcomes* – disseminating our findings, putting ideas to the test, assisting best practice.

**Public:** We are concerned with ‘public’ in two dimensions: firstly, with the impact on communities, neighbourhoods, individuals and institutions of broad economic, political cultural, social and religious trends – with the welfare of the public domain and the impact of public policy. But secondly, we are committed to conducting these debates *in public*: in a multi-disciplinary, open forum in which theological discourse is offered as a stimulus for common exploration and insight.

**Theology:** We do not believe that the values of faith can be segregated from the public domain, but equally, beliefs and values need to be integrated with practices and policies. We seek to bring reflection on the ways the received traditions of faith bear witness on contemporary experience. Whilst MCPT has emerged out of the tradition of Christian theology and the Christian churches, we are concerned to explore with partners of many faiths how their ‘theologies’ are articulated in public.

## Where do we go from here? MCPT 2005 - 6

Chris Baker (William Temple Foundation)

The aim of the following programme is to build on the impetus of the launch day by establishing a series of small groups who can take forward some of the key issues affecting Manchester and other UK urban areas. The aim of these small groups is to use existing networks of experience and expertise to do some fact-finding and evaluation of these issues and disseminate their findings throughout the Centre's networks in whatever ways seem most appropriate.

The work-themes for these some of these groups emerged from feedback at the launch day itself and all are designed to reinforce the methodology of the centre; to work in partnership and in an interdisciplinary and participatory way that includes the wider communities in Manchester and beyond. It is hoped that these 'streams' of research and reflection will be one of the ways in which the ongoing work of the Centre is sustained and widened over the next two years. The 5 'streams', some of their aims, activities and their co-ordinators are as follows:

### 1) East Manchester Regeneration/Commonwealth Games Group

(Co-ordinator: Chris Baker [chris.baker@wtf.org.uk](mailto:chris.baker@wtf.org.uk))

- Consider the longer-term impact of regeneration in East Manchester following the Commonwealth Games
- Link with similar groups in London reviewing the impact of the Olympic Games bid
- Feed into wider debates about community participation in regeneration bids
- Examine the role of faith-based organisations in such campaigns

### 2) Commission on Urban Life and Faith

(Co-ordinators: Elaine Graham [Elaine.Graham@man.ac.uk](mailto:Elaine.Graham@man.ac.uk) and Stephen Lowe [lowehulmepa@btinternet.com](mailto:lowehulmepa@btinternet.com) )

- Provide local input into national activities of the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Life and Faith
- Seminar series on 'What makes a good City?' Autumn 2004
- Samuel Ferguson Lectures 2005-6 on interdisciplinary aspects of the debate and role of community voices in urban regeneration
- Collaboration with Meissen Commission for the conference on 'The Church in the City' in Berlin in May 2005
- Series of publications linked to these events

### 3) Political participation and Citizenship

(Co-ordinator: Elaine Graham [Elaine.Graham@man.ac.uk](mailto:Elaine.Graham@man.ac.uk))

- Explore the nature of political participation and especially how community groups are empowered to contribute to urban regeneration
- Examine the implications of declining levels of voter engagement for the future of political institutions at local, national and European level
- Currently linked to Urban Commission work (see above) on political extremism



#### 4) Spirituality and Regeneration

(Co-ordinator: Terry Biddington [terry.biddington@man.ac.uk](mailto:terry.biddington@man.ac.uk))

- Explore different aspects and expressions of urban spirituality
- Explore patterns of spiritual formation and development that are appropriate for urban contexts and urban discipleship

#### 5) Faith-based economics/Investment and Usury

(Co-ordinators: John Atherton [john.atherton102@btinternet.com](mailto:john.atherton102@btinternet.com) and Ian Steedman [ian.steedman@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:ian.steedman@mmu.ac.uk))

- Examine the relationship between theology and economics, especially money-lending, interest, investment and ethics and the ways different faith traditions approach these themes
- Small group meetings are already under way in Autumn 2004

These are just some of the issues being explored by the Manchester Centre for Public Theology. We would value any further ideas for thematic-based and participatory research that you may have. Please contact Elaine Graham or Chris Baker on the addresses printed above.

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Statue next to the altar, Gorton Monastery  
11 September 1999 ©Aidan O'Rourke

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