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Community, what community?

**Third seminar of the Faiths and Flourishing Neighbourhoods Network
18th October 2016**

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Professor Chris Baker (Director Wm. Temple Foundation) welcomed the three speakers and other participants:
Katie McClymont (UWE Urban Planning)
Michael Heaps (Littlemore Outreach Worker)
Lynne Norman (Methodist Church community development)
Shahin Ashraf (MWN UK Project Manager and Chaplain)
Will Jones, Andrew Bevan (FFNN steering group)

By way of introduction Chris offered a brief re-cap of the two previous meetings; the on-going debate was necessarily multi-disciplinary, exploring the role of belief and values in shaping spaces and vice versa.

The first meeting had a theoretical bias. We outlined the historical roots in the parish system and local government illustrated by a vignette from Littlemore on the edge of Oxford. Tina Hearn explored the results of globalisation and religion (both good and bad), how boundaries are reinforced or collapsed. Chris Baker introduced post-secular thinking, inter-connectedness and the changing nature of public space, and the re-emergence of public religion.

The second meeting earthed the conversations in 5 case studies: Mike Pears described an intentional Christian community on an established estate; Chris Gaynor worked on a new estate; Abdullah Rehman represented inter-faith urban regeneration where Muslims had encouraged Christians; Penny Faust explained how space is shared by one congregation comprising several Jewish traditions; Gillian Ellis told how Bournville Village Trust tries to continue Cadbury's vision for housing provision in that particular area.

The main purpose of this third colloquium was to generate ideas to take forward: visions, agendas and strategies.

Clara Greed (UWE Emerita Professor of Inclusive Urban Planning)
Planning is rooted in a rational, secular, scientific approach which tends to ignore human beings: focussed on *people-less* space, male-oriented, not reflecting diversity, ethnicity, disability, social issues. Religion is not a planning 'category' under 1947 Act: there is no requirement to survey church building needs.

This poses difficulty planning places for worship now and in future with increasing demand from Pentecostal, Muslim and Hindu congregations. Development is problematic where existing buildings are outgrown: often congregations are 'pushed out' into industrial units away from town centres. There may be negative perceptions of fundamentalism or cultural conservatism, and 'invisibility' of non-white or minority groups; 'planning' reasons for refusal include excessive noise, and transport and parking limitations. One church in East London had to move because of development associated with the 2012 Olympics.

Clara handed out a toolkit of questions to address the issues raised and, also, a comprehensive paper which includes the toolkit and the research and examples alluded to in her remarks:
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http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/29024/1/PF589555Christianity%26PlanningSecure.pdf

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Comments

Peter's experience was less negative but no-one is debating the need for religious buildings (for example Bicester, where there are 6,000 new houses but no church involved.

Clara reflected that in 40/50s it had been assumed that social infrastructure included church whereas now it was subsumed and had become secondary.

Katie reported a similar shift since 80s with cemeteries – it is a systemic issue: planning is too focussed and instrumental, and not holistic.

Clara concluded that planning reflected the commercial imperative/spirit of the age – perhaps planners have lost faith in planning with devolved control and more discretion.

Peter Deeley (Managing Director Deeley Group Limited)

Peter distinguished two markets: big areas released with allocations for housing needs and urban regeneration. He spoke about plans for a redevelopment including a 1950s church in Coventry. Development then had been 'boxy', divided into areas, whereas now a lot more mixed use was required. Peter remarked that in his experience it was difficult to engage education because schools are not interested in what goes on outside. S106 potentially brings in big money from developers but community influence needs to be brought to bear by meeting and communicating with planners.

The 50s church building is no longer fit for purpose although the church is thriving with an enthusiastic vicar: there is a coffee shop and computer centre run by volunteers, an ESL group, and community use as well as use for worship. There is a community centre just across the road, which is also old and unfit for purpose. There is a need to generate funding and the plan is to bring them together in some way, combining church and community use in a new hub on one site. Peter raised some questions regarding this plan: what are the ground rules; how do we deliver what the community requires; how much should a church be a social centre? The plan is complicated because the site includes a library (previously LA) now run by volunteers and an existing community centre with an entrenched management committee.

Comments

Peter's presentation stimulated a lot of discussion: the location was amidst 1950s housing where people used to walk to work in the local factory which is now closed; the vicar is contributing to the community but the building is no longer fit for purpose.

Rachel inquired whether the community had been asked what they want and Michael asked whether they had responded?

Peter said that young people had responded to the vicar taking an interest and Michael observed that starting with children could lead to engaging their parents; he went on to ask how practical needs such as employment and countering poverty were met: something free/low cost that people could benefit from. Peter referred to a food kitchen in Smethwick run by 20 volunteers used by 500 – 600 people each week.

Peter stated that the issues to be resolved included capacity of the building, its fitness for purpose and funding; more generally location, whether central or on the edge of town, whether or not to move: planners tend to be supportive if they can see a working church on the ground.

Will referred to location, moving out of town, raising the matters of distance and access. In the hub design in Peter's diagram the church became invisible: a hall or multi-use space which could raise issues around consecration – had the DAC been consulted? Lynne identified the challenge to traditional ideas of what church is and asked whether other faith communities had been involved? Shahin asked about ethnic representation and, also, that we consider the generational impact: what might be the shape of religious practice in the future? She also cited the need for access for women to safe religious spaces and pointed out the different experience of 2nd generation whose parents who had migrated, who had been educated and tended to move out.

Chris asked if the sense of sacred in constructed spaces was being lost; also what narrative of belief: inclusion, welcome?

Rachel Perks (Senior Neighbourhoods and Skills Worker, Ashrammoseley HA)
Rachel presented on behalf of Margaret Wilkinson (responsible for training in this method of participative planning, called Planning for Real) based on her experience of using it at Bordesley Green Micro-neighbourhood Project. The method was first used in 1977, to challenge the traditional process of white men telling rather than asking communities, drawing on the knowledge and experience within neighbourhoods: they already *know* and are 'inside experts'.

Discussion and ownership is generated by building a model on a map using polystyrene. The process is started in schools because children go home and tell their parents/carers to get involved. Facilitated teams build the model which is then 'taken on the road' to as many local groups as possible at different times/places. Flags on cocktail sticks are used to secure input from people who might not speak and would otherwise not be engaged – results are recorded in writing by the facilitators.

The next phase is prioritisation because many aspirations cannot ever happen, usually due to cost constraints. Expectations with community groups have to be managed and agreement obtained as to when 'outside experts' should get involved. An action plan is drawn up identifying resources, timing and themes by 'inside' and 'outside' experts working together. Additional tools are available to help build consensus and tease out more details.

The method supports asset-based community development in contrast to a process informed by demographic and deprivation data. People are listened to rather than done to and Planning for Real may help where communities have been 'over consulted'. It is non-confrontational, not about talking and public meetings.

Comments
Lynne asked about Community Champions. Rachel said P for R complemented that.
Clara asked about the inclusion of religion. R replied that there are many templates and possible flags to accommodate religion in the consultation process to build a model of the area people would like.
Will asked about outputs from the process such as reports. R confirmed that findings are summarised and communicated in reports: there are lots of examples on the website:
<div align="center">www.planningforreal.org.uk</div>
Peter reported that he had found teenagers more helpful than older people at exhibitions to consult on planning: more willing to share and offer feedback.
A diversity of meetings is important, also getting out and about e.g. school gates.
Shahin asked about stay-at-home mothers and where ESL was a barrier? R agreed with Peter's earlier remarks that it is difficult to engage schools.
Will asked about who commissions P for R: it is a business/how funded? How is buy-in secured; how does it mesh with neighbourhood planning?

Andrew Bevan
October 2016

Faiths and Flourishing Neighbourhoods Network - Ways Forward and How

1) **Develop understanding of best practice in relation to space sharing** between worship and community use in new faith-based hubs – and how belief structures can be seen to be influencing and/or engaging with the ways people use and construct meanings around space. (For example, is there a spectrum or typology around 'wholly-controlled by faith groups'; shared/civil society; state controlled?)

2) **Develop training and resources/toolkits** to enable people in faith communities to be actively engaged in planning but also enabling planner and developers to understand the importance of beliefs and the worldviews and practices associated with them in the way that neighbourhoods and localities can be developed.

3) **Facilitating Lobbying** – how might the voices and perspectives of the faith community be more effectively used in relation to the proper needs to faith groups being proactively recognised and valued (mainstreamed) within the planning system.

4) **Inspiring creative imagining** of a public sphere where the religious and the secular can co-exist to produce flourishing and resilient communities – for example what does a 22nd century mosque look like?

5) **Developing standardised research** that can be used for lobbying, research, advocacy and campaigning – what level – local, regional, national?

The how (i.e. priorities and more detailed strategy) to be taken forward at a lunchtime 3 hour planning meeting in Birmingham in early 2017.