



Event Report
Tuesday 24 February 2015

Building a Politics of Hope

Exploring the role and impact of faith-based
leadership in local communities





Introduction

Building a Politics of Hope was held on Tuesday 24th February 2015 at the London Welsh Centre. It was a joint initiative of William Temple Foundation, Church Urban Fund and the Joint Public Issues Team of the Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Churches.

The two main aims were:

- to highlight the increasingly significant role of progressive (i.e. outward looking) local religious leadership for those in government and local authorities. Faith groups are generally one of the most effective and trusted catalysts for progressive social change, especially in communities facing the greatest deficits in public services as a result of austerity politics. Are faith groups now the catalysts for progressive alliances across faith and secular divides? Is this a role they recognise themselves? How might the policy landscape change if this narrative was openly discussed as part of a debate on new forms of political engagement and activism?
- to inspire and create new thinking within faith groups themselves as to the possibility of playing more upfront roles as political leaders and facilitators. This, it is hoped, will enhance their confidence and creativity in the face of misunderstanding and occasional mistrust from some (but by no means all) secular agencies.

Audio recordings from many of the speakers can be found at
williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/multimedia

Many thanks to all of our speakers, delegates and supporters who provided such rich case studies and engaging discussion.

Case Study #1 Al Barrett, Hodge Hill

The first case study was dubbed ‘an innovative experiment in community empowerment’ in the Hodge Hill area of Birmingham; an area of high deprivation and diversity which recently lost its church building when it was demolished. The vicar, Al Barrett pointed out that his parish was full of those ‘others’ so roundly condemned by certain sections of the media and establishment politicians: immigrants, Muslims, single parents and unemployed youth. It was a community used to being ‘done to’ – labelled as dysfunctional and in need of ‘expert’ intervention and surveillance.



The church community perceived the need to change the narrative of those living in the community as a first step to creating a new sense of hope and transformation. This it did conducting one to one conversations and ‘hearing into speech’ the issues and aspirations of the local community. This led to the production of a theatre and culture space and the opening of a new community hub called Open Door which operates according to the principle of the five Ps: place; people; presence; provision and participation.

This highly relational approach has not only shifted the cultural narrative, but also the political one. The initiative has reconfigured the relationship between the community and Local Authority as well as the institutional church who now understands the three key questions emerging from these new processes of co-production and the order in which they should be addressed.

- 1) What can we do with neighbourhood power
- 2) What do we need some external support with?
- 3) What do we need external agencies to do?

Up to now, external authorities would have addressed these questions in precisely the opposite order.

Case Study #2 Mohammed Mamdani, Sufra NW London

The second case study, presented by Mohammed Mamdani, was of a relatively new Muslim-run community foodbank and Kitchen in West London, called Sufra, a word which has connotations of hospitality and dining in many different languages. 90% of the people who access their services are non-Muslim. The provision of food support is not viewed as an end in itself – indeed Mohammed was critical of the proliferation and politicisation of foodbanks as new expressions of institutionalised poverty. Mohammed



explained that the role of Sufra is to reintegrate individuals back into mainstream services and to respond to the underlying issues which put them in the position to come to the foodbank in the first place. In this way, Sufra sees its project as an entry point to accessing other life opportunities. They have also responded and adapted the services they provide according to the needs they experience. One major success of this action towards wider social outcomes is a food academy programme, offering accredited training for 16-25 year olds; not only providing them with cooking skills and budget management, but two of their graduates have gone on to jobs in the catering industry. A couple of newer projects include a vegetable box scheme – providing fresh produce at wholesale prices – and a food growing project. In this way, Sufra is changing the local economy and providing opportunities for healthy eating otherwise unavailable.

Mohammed spoke candidly about the changes within and challenges facing the Muslim voluntary sector. Sufra represents a new space for new generations of British Muslims whereby they volunteer more and become engaged politically and practically to meet the needs of the local community of which they are part, rather than the more traditional route of giving charity to global Muslim projects. Whilst 50% of Sufra's funding and resources come from the Muslim community, they are also dependant on other faith groups including the local Catholic church and Jewish community, as well as a multifaith workforce including people from non-religious backgrounds. In this way, what was once in many ways a stand-alone sector, the Muslim voluntary sector is becoming connected and allied with many other groups.

Yet the creation of this inclusive, entangled space, has not come easily. Whilst the Muslim community responds to a responsibility towards the local community, the wider community does not always react positively. Whilst suspicion may be directed towards many faith-based organisations, the Muslim community perhaps faces unrivalled challenges in this area. Mohammed speculates, if a church set-up a homelessness project, no one would bat an eyelid. But if a mosque set-up the same project, suddenly lots of questions would be raised. Yet Mohammed suggest that his work is not religiously motivated but is primarily humanitarian. In contrast, he raised questions of some organisations mixing mission with services, offering food for faith. This was echoed later in the day by Steve Chalke who lobbied for inclusive service and radical hospitality.

Beyond faith communities, Mohammed noted the changing relationship between the public sector and the voluntary sector, suggesting a blurring of lines. Sufra volunteers have been trained by staff from the council's housing department, something 'never seen before' in Brent, and a 'radical' change according to Mohammed. Sufra will also be a venue for pre-election hustings, reinforcing the idea that faith-based spaces of welfare are also becoming spaces of political debate and conscientisation.

Case Study #3 Chris Sunderland, Bristol Pound

The third case study focussed on the launch by an Anglican priest, Chris Sunderland, of the Bristol Pound – a local currency initiative. The initiative had grown out of several years of prior community engagement based on the belief that in Chris' view, both the greatest challenges and opportunities facing our political and economic system revolve around our relationship with creation.

To that end he helped establish a number of community initiative that directly addressed this challenge. For example, he had established a community called Earth Abbey which amongst other initiatives, converted a former vicarage garden into a community food growing project. He was also a key player in a city-wide initiative called Chooseday which encouraged car owners to leave their cars at home on a Tuesday in order to reduce pollution levels and other harmful environmental impacts. Over the course of these and other initiatives, Chris had worked with many people who he describes as 'having a spiritual heart' but being 'suspicious of formalised Christianity'.



The idea for a local currency emerged as the next logical step to these diverse strands of activity. This was crystallised into a mission statement that said, 'We need to do a currency that is city-wide and uses both electronic and printed media' This idea 'grew' a team of like-minded people around it who were people from a traditional faith background, but also who would define themselves as 'no religion'. Chris reflected that in his experience it was very hard, in what he called a 'post-Christendom' society, for any project that is actively identified with a faith organisation to become more than a 'niche concern'.

After three years further gestation and including a validation process with the Bank of England, the Bristol Pound was launched in 2012. Currently 700 businesses and 1300 individuals are part of the scheme and 30,000 Bristol Pounds were exchanged over the 2014 Christmas period. Future initiatives include an energy supplier who is seeking to achieve major public procurement contracts in Bristol Pounds, developing a business to business credit facility (in order to liberate much-needed credit for SME startups) and the launch of a new co-operative scheme called Real Economy. This scheme will bring Bristol citizens into touch with local producers to encourage the uptake of fresh food consumption at wholesale prices through the encouragement of buying groups that will be able to order their food using a bespoke webtool. The overall aim of the Bristol Pound thus looks like it is well on the way to being achieved: namely, 'to give people a taste of a different form of money that was embedded in the local economy and could produce a new values-led community of exchange'.

Discussant Alison Webster, Diocese of Oxford

Alison role as the conference discussant was to draw together some of the threads from the day's proceedings as a whole. She located her discussion to the faith groups' contribution to local political leadership through social welfare projects as expressions of subversive power which she characterised in five ways.

First was subversive language. What had clearly emerged from the case studies was a renaming of those who politically carry names associated with stigmatisation and reproach – immigrant workers, single parents, and benefit claimants – what Alison referred to as 'toxic' language. Instead the faith groups, working alongside such

communities, used language of celebration, hope, beauty, assets, potential. Faith groups, when they engage with their communities, deploy their spiritual capital (i.e. their theological values and deep visions for individual and community transformation) and this allows them to imagine political outcomes at a much more symbolic level – using images and metaphors that spring from the wells of different faith traditions. Faith-based places of social care are also places where the narratives of ordinary and often overlooked or ignored citizens are heard, valued, and nurtured into voice – putting their stories into wider narratives of hope and solidarity.



Next was subversive affinities – seeking out new spaces and partnerships of progressive political engagement that often lie beyond the institutional spaces of religion and politics. Faith communities seem to be good at tapping into organic networks and gathering small groups together whereby ‘something different can be created’. The idea of affinities (i.e. loose networks of people who share the same goals but come from different backgrounds) moves us away, said Alison, ‘from the power of hierarchies’ towards more anarchic outcomes and spaces that work out of different logics of power. For example, the notion of giving away food and sharing hospitality (food is central to so much faith-based work) was in itself deeply subversive of current ideas around individual rights and restricting movement and contact with others. ‘A gift economy which arises from unlikely coalitions’ was Alison’s conclusion to this section.

Next, subversive power. Much of what faith groups offered by way of local political leadership was based on the idea of relational power – from city-wide networks like Citizens UK to more local alliances. The credibility of the faith groups’ political power lies in what they are doing ‘on the ground’ in their local communities which gives them an authority based on direct experience.

Then there is subversive hope – i.e. a contribution to political engagement that says that things can be different – that the status quo is not all there is. Alison referred to a striking metaphor coined by Al Barrett earlier in the day when he described the two different logics that often operate between government and local authorities on the one hand and the faith and community sector on the other: The System vs. A Different World. The belief that there is always an alternative logic and reality to the ones that are presented can help faith groups maintain a critical edge when it comes to exploring the root causes of surface realities that, we are told, are the givens and the facts of the situation that cannot be changed.

Finally, there was subversive identities. Faith identities, Alison reflected, are subversive in two ways. First, they are often subverted themselves when citizens who define themselves as religious get engaged in messy and complex politics. A faith identity is not a rigid structure that then interprets all that is happening from that perspective. Rather a religious identity is constantly being ‘framed and reframed’ by the experiences of community and political engagement. Our engagements can take us out of our comfort zone into a new emotional, spiritual and intellectual space where we are challenged about what we think about the Divine or humanity. But faith identities are also subversive in the

deep difference they can make to the lives of others and communities when lived out in risky, hospitable and progressive ways. Alison concluded that the final question left for her to take home and reflect further upon was 'What does it mean to have a faith identity in the different contexts in which we are living and engage?'

Keynote lecture Steve Chalke, Oasis UK

As we look towards the upcoming general election, Steve Chalke started his lecture by reminding us that five years ago, similar conversations were happening around faith groups and civil society. The buzz word then, was 'Big Society'. Five years later and the Big Society has come and gone; yet we are still here. Perhaps now more than ever, these conversations are increasingly significant. Yet many politicians and policy-makers are still struggling to fully engage in these kind of conversations. Steve talked of a recent political meeting he'd been invited to which started with a leader stating that the fact they hadn't organised such discussions before, and the fact they had organised it now, had nothing to do with the election. This was met by knowing laughs both in the meeting, and by the conference audience.



Steve centred his argument on the notion of being in a post-welfare state. Drawing parallels with a pre- and eventually post-Christendom society, Steve argued that as we move into this new era, things are not the same; vestiges are left behind, both helpful and unhelpful. But we need to find a way to move forward and to create a system where high-quality public services are the same in every area. In order to do this, we don't simply need to ask what will replace the welfare state, but, Steve argued, we also need to ask, how can we revive democracy? Our democratic system is increasingly imbued with cynicism, whilst respect for our Parliament is rapidly ebbing away. To address this situation we need strong representative democracy to sit alongside strong representative democracy. In other words, communities need to be active, to be both responsible and responsive. Active communities must inform and hold accountable its representatives.

A key point, strongly emphasised touched on the matter of motivation, asking similar questions as those posed by Mohammed Mamdani earlier in the day. Steve was adamant that as Christians, "we come unconditionally to serve everyone". His second key phrase here was, "faith is our input; it is not an outcome". The matter of motivation should not be mixed with manipulation.

Steve suggested in the lecture, and his organisation Oasis UK stands as an exemplar of this, that the future of welfare relies on partnerships, accountability, capacity building and solid infrastructure. Whilst these aren't rousing subject matters to motivate to action, they are essential for the creation of meaningful and sustainable projects.

Conclusions

These 'spaces' of engagement, often based on affinities and networks and beyond the reach and approval of institutions (such as political parties and religious institutions) are 'cross-over spaces' of engagement between all faiths and none. Old binary ways of looking at the world based on rigid demarcations of religion, ideology and ethnicity (such as in the multicultural politics of the 80s and 90s) seem remarkably outmoded and irrelevant to many citizens who simply long to reconnect economics and politics to things that really matter. Two urban critical geographers, Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont, define the growing significance of these new spaces of engagement as '... a coming together of citizens who might previously have been divided by differences in theological, political or moral principles – a willingness to work together to address crucial social issues in the city, and in doing so put aside other frameworks of difference involving faith and secularism'.

The common narrative or political philosophy that lies at the heart of all these projects; namely a radical and relational hospitality by which these new affinities and networks of action and outrage can be nurtured into a new spaces and practices of hope. Key to this radical hospitality and openness is the idea of 'hearing into voice' those of our fellow citizens who have been marginalised but in ways that totally negates the 'Why me?' victim mentality on which much of the current anti-politics is based. Here, in these new spaces of political conscientisation and progressive citizenship the emphasis is on relational belonging and solidarity, not stigmatisation and technological fixing outside of a moral framework.

The growing evidence of the ways on which these new practices of hope and ethical citizenship are feeding back up into the political and institutional chains of command, thus forcing institutions like local authorities and churches for example, to rethink their priorities and make them more responsive and effective for those on the ground.

As one respondent in our conference pointed out, faith-based welfare and social justice programmes not only articulate an alternative vision of society; they practically show what it can look like, and invite others to join them. There is ample evidence to suggest that this is in fact what more and more of our citizens are doing: looking for new local solutions to enduring problems in way that express a deep moral pragmatism.

As is inevitable at these kind of events, as many questions can be raised as answered. Time will tell as to how new forms of engagement and solidarity epitomised by these case studies can help identify the path ahead for a progressive localism that seeks to create flourishing and resilient communities for all. Or whether the goodwill, hard work and creativity of both the faith sector and wider community and voluntary sector be cynically co-opted by both the state and the market as a way of providing social care on the cheap, and which leaves fundamental structures of inequality unacknowledged and unchallenged.

