

Faith & Flourishing Neighbourhoods Network (FFNN)

A project of  William Temple
Foundation

Community, what Community?

Part II: Case Studies for Community

Thursday 25th February 2016, Diocese of Birmingham Offices

The second event in our 'Community, What Community?' series for the Faiths and Flourishing Neighbourhood Network, focussed on five compelling case studies of present day community and place making in which the role of religious faith and other forms of belief was explored and examined.

The first case study, from Mike Pears, a Baptist minister, looked at the work of a small intentional community called the Households, who had lived on an outer Bristol housing estate for the past 30 years. Mike outlined the stark boundaries of separation that had been built into the fabric of the estate, but which were also replicated in the relationships (or 'soft' architecture) of the estate. From its very early inception in the 1920s, the estate had the sense that it had been set apart culturally and socially from the rest of the city. The residents, Mike said, had grown up with a stark sense of themselves as 'insiders', and anyone else as 'outsiders', including the Households who had lived on the estate for many years. The culture of the estate was therefore inward looking and defensive, with high levels of injurious social indicators such as poor health, high crime and poor educational attainment.

The aim of the Householders was to try and create 'spaces of redemption': Jesus-shaped spaces where new life, new hope and new confidences could emerge. One such space focussed on a brand new café associated with a new health centre built on the estate. The café was created and staffed by two professional chefs from Bristol. It was well patronised by middle-class workers on the estate who enjoyed the minimalist ambience and healthy food. But Mike observed that the body language of local residents indicated that they felt ill at ease in this new environment. They were often disruptive and loud in the way they sat and use the tables – for example asking for food that was not on the menu, complaining about its non-British origins, or bringing their own food because the menu was too expensive.

A symbolic flashpoint seemed to be the serving counter in the café behind which the gleaming professional kitchen stood. The counter, said Mike, epitomised the hard barriers that were woven into the fabric and ethos of the estate between outsiders and insiders.

In response to this sense of alienated space, a process of consultation, initiated by the Householders between the chefs and the local residents resulted in an initiative called the Bread Café (now called Rising High). This was a bread-making club that met every week to teach residents how to make their own bread. The symbolic spatial turn created by this club, was the opening up the barrier and allowing residents past it so that they could use the facilities of the new and professional kitchen. The move, said Mike, quickly removed physical, social and emotional barriers as the residents and professionals shared 'a circular table' to eat together and plan menus together. These were spaces of 'newly-configured proximity' which allowed the softening of hard-edged barriers into more porous channels of exchange that over time dismantled mutually-held stereotypes. Many of the residents referred to a new sense of

confidence, purpose, physical and emotional resilience. The chefs meanwhile were attuned to a deeper understanding of the multiple challenges facing some residents in their struggle for a sense of worth, autonomy and dignity.

Mike said that crucial to the reformulation of this space, was the practice of ‘face-to-face’ negotiation rather than ‘across the counter’. Mike referred to these practices of ‘negotiation’ as ‘a critical tool for exploring and forming the new place’ [of the Bread Café] in which ‘the inter-subjective relational characteristics were increasingly in evidence’. This has encouraged personal journeys and spaces of ‘personal and social transformation’. From a Christian theological perspective, Mike said, these spaces can be seen as a form of prayer for the coming of the future Kingdom of God into the here and now – the material present.

Chris Gaynor, an Anglican priest, has worked for the past 13 years in a new exurban estate on the edge of Banbury. These types of ‘community’ are expected to expand in the next 10 – 20 years as new towns and town extensions are built to accommodate growing populations at a level not seen since the post-war period. Chris’ initial aim as a Church Army Officer was to ‘build a worshipping community’ in the heart of a new 1,000 home development (i.e. a community of 3,000 – 4,000 people). The public amenities provided for this new community was a school, a community centre, a pub and a small parade of local shops. But no formal space for religious activity was provided.

Chris negotiated the use of two rooms in the local school via the head teacher who was sympathetic to the plan. Both he and the head teacher recognised that they were new to the community and had a public role to fulfil. The original plan was to create a weekly drop-in coffee and activity morning called Encounter, and a sacred space. Initial take up was very slow and Aesop’s fable of the sun and the wind came to Chris and his wife’s mind. This reinforced an ‘incarnational approach’, gradually warming up the atmosphere so that people took off their coats and felt at home (almost without realising they had done it). Chris summarised the situation: ‘We learned that people were OK with coffee and donuts and not the religious stuff that went along with it.’ Thirteen years later the project is still going and many life-long friendships have been formed, but it has also evolved as a platform for other community-focussed initiatives including community-wide Christmas and Easter events, holiday clubs, fireworks parties, carol singing in the pub, dads’ clubs and so on.

During the early phases of this work, people referred to Chris as the ‘Common-Law Vicar’ – i.e. someone not quite official but who nevertheless was identified as having a commitment to the community. The mission statement of the Christian core group (called that That God Thing) that nurtured and curated these early attempts at place-making and root-making was the ‘four F’s’: Food, Faith, Families and Fun. It was apparent that these were the affective knots round which new strands of community could be woven. Chris then pursued the path to full-time ordination and has ended up as vicar of the village church onto which the new development abuts. He has now therefore become a ‘Properly Married Vicar’ and his role and people’s expectations of him are now more bounded and ‘official’.

Chris paradoxically reflected at the end of his presentation, that the energy and creativity that emerged from the time when the boundaries were more blurred and porous is in danger of being lost under the new, more formalised arrangements. As he said, ‘I am not a common-law vicar anymore, but I remember that encounter as if it were yesterday. It has stayed with me over the last 12 and a half years. It reminds me that community engagement is vital and that sometimes the boundaries have to be blurred and that the best form of mission is incarnation.’

Following two Christian-based case studies, the afternoon session featured three case studies from other faith traditions. Abdullah Rehman, CEO of Balsall Heath Forum recounted his sense of place from the perspective of his own life narrative. Abdullah is a second generation British Muslim whose family originally migrated from Pakistan. Abdullah has lived all his life in the locality and witnessed its steady decline in the 70s, 80s and 90s as a post-industrial inner-urban community which was also riven by high levels of drugs related, crime, trafficking and prostitution, as well as corporate corruption. There was also considerable physical dereliction.

Things started to change in the early 2000s when Abdullah reached out to other faith communities (including Christians and Sikhs) and 'gently reproached' them for being too timid in their faith in relation to standing up for their values and for example, not singing Christmas carols publically at Christmas.

Emerging from that joint carol singing event came distribution of Christmas food hampers to elderly and vulnerable residents, and joint land-clearing and litter picking campaigns with Christians and Muslims working together. This practical work happened alongside shared celebrations of Christmas and Eid in the form of communal meals that attracted 300 local 'heathen' citizens. This groundswell of shared activity led to the creation of a Balsall Heath Forum, a multi-agency partnership that continues to transform the heart of the area through physical and community regeneration schemes, including its own annual carnival, allotments, 'Britain in Bloom' type competitions and its successful application to become a local housing provider via the establishment of a community trust. Balsall Heath now tops local surveys in terms of liveability, satisfaction, trust, community safety, and local autonomy.

Whilst many partners are now involved, Abdullah's intuition that uniting faith communities could be a major potential catalyst for community regeneration was the decisive factor in halting and then reverting a vicious downward spiral. A report written by a local academic charting the transformation of Balsall Heath challenges existing assumptions. 'Can the State hear the message from Balsall Heath about the vital role of faith in renewal and replicating it widely? Can it acknowledge and broadcast the fact that Muslim newcomers from Pakistan have helped to define that role and reminded Christians of its importance? Can it initiate and contribute to a prolonged national culture-changing debate in which the role of faith is placed at the very centre of social life'. Abdullah concluded his vivid presentation with what struck everyone present as a profoundly important truth. The art of community development he said was to make 'places loveable again'; to treat them as if you were trying to turn round the life of a friend who had fallen on hard times.

Next up was Penny Faust from the Oxford Jewish Congregation. Penny started by setting the work of Oxford congregation in the national context of British Jewry and Jewish history. Within Jewish theology and spirituality, faith and place go hand in hand, in particular through the experience of both the Exile and arriving at the Promised Land; the constant tension between stability and establishment and the up-rootedness and wandering. Historically there are four strands to British Jewry: Orthodox, Liberals and Reform and Masorti. Oxford's Jewish congregation is unique in the UK as a congregation that shares a single building with all four traditions. There is no rabbi, but all services and ceremonies are held under the traditions of each branch.

The present synagogue and Jewish centre was constructed round three residential houses in the late 60s and then expanded in 2000. The centre takes an active role in the teaching of Judaism across the city as part of the RE syllabus, hosting school visits and enquiries into Judaism. It has been actively involved in interfaith work in Oxford for the past 40 years and has

been instrumental in contributing to major initiatives and events such as Holocaust Memorial Day, Asylum Welcome and City of Sanctuary.

The unique structure of the synagogue, born of a radical and creative spirit of hospitality and mutual respect, Penny believes, has radiated and modelled the following things to the wider city: the virtue of tolerance and interfaith co-operation; social cohesion and dialogue; a Jewish perspective on the social and cultural issues affecting Oxford and the country as a whole (e.g. religious education, migration and refugees); religious literacy; and an historical place in the life of Oxford.

The final case study featured Gillian Ellis from the Bourneville Village Trust, who explained how the beliefs and values of George Cadbury whom she described as a 'Quaker, businessman, philanthropist, teacher, father of 11 children' came both to be embedded in the planning and construction of Bourneville and its ongoing and future life. The village was established in 1900 in order to provide for the 'amelioration of the condition of the working class and labouring population in and around Birmingham and elsewhere in the Great Britain by the provision of improved buildings, with gardens and open spaces to be enjoyed therewith'. The Trust acquired 330 acres of countryside four miles south of Birmingham in order to provide space for the 'erection of Places of Worship, Hospitals, Schools, Libraries, Recreation Halls', and a tenth of the space (exclusive of roads) was to be 'laid out and used as parks, recreation grounds and open spaces'.

However, although places of worship have pride of place in terms of the amenities provided, in line with his Quaker roots, George Cadbury was very keen that schools and institutions needed to be constructed 'so as to exclude sectarian influences'. Meanwhile, the administration of the Trust 'shall be wholly unsectarian and non-political and there shall always be a rigid exclusion of all influences calculated or tending to impart to it a character sectarian as regards religion or belief or exclusive as regards politics'.

The trust interprets these beliefs in the modern age with reference to four ideals: Passionate about people (i.e. investing in community-led welfare and services); dedicated to distinctive development (building new sustainable homes and communities); committed to quality (building and maintaining high quality homes and services); proud of our heritage (allowing the heritage to inform service delivery today). Gillian offered case studies from the current Bourneville Village Trust ranging from the planning and building of a new satellite suburb along Bourneville principles called Light Moor in Telford, the planting of new community orchards, and the unveiling of a large dementia-friendly housing development designed to offer support to sufferers and their families. This was an impressive commitment to the 'cradle to grave' welfare of existing residents, although some in the audience drew attention to the lack of apparent ethnic and social diversity in Bourneville Village. This is due in part to the lack of affordable housing as market pressures intervene to potentially undermine the 'spiritual capital' upon which the original mode village was predicated. Indeed, Gillian concluded her talk with a candid admission that 'keeping the faith' with regard to the ideals upon which Bourneville was founded, was more difficult in a fast-changing and increasingly privatised world.

Conclusion

We were challenged and inspired to hear and discuss such different examples of place making in a variety of such different settings: Inner-urban suburbs, garden suburbs, outer-urban housing estates, new exurbs and provincial cities.

During this rich day we had several examples of how religious and other beliefs contribute to place making: as a founding vision; as a space of temporary ritual and belonging; as spaces that model tolerance and radical hospitality; as bridge-builders between entrenched communities; as spaces of knowledge exchange and learning; as communities committed to ownership of the community (but not in the 'right-to-buy' sense). And many more! Our thanks again to our contributors and the members of the FFNN network who contributed so fully in response to what they heard, as well as from their own experience.

