# Church and Community Transformation

Victoria Ashdown: Mission Enabler Communities (2022)

## Background

When the Faith in the City report was brought to Synod in 1985 it brought to the table the importance of community engagement in UPA’s (Urban priority areas), The report concentrates substantially on the culture and socio-economics of these areas and noted that ‘Poverty is the root of powerlessness’. Poor people in UPA’s are at the mercy of fragmented and apparently unresponsive public authorities. They are trapped in housing and in environments over which they have little control and often lack the means and opportunity which so many of us take for granted of making choices in our lives. (Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on UPA's, 1985)

The report also states that the Church of England’s organisation and ministry have been so completely middle-class that working-class expressions of religion have not been encouraged. Thirty-six years later, not much has changed in the church, with some larger well-known evangelical churches personifying middle-classness. Meanwhile, the poverty gap has widened to extend not only into areas designated UPA’s, but into almost every town and village in the UK, Central government funding has been unable to keep up. Benefit systems are not fit for purpose, and communities are faced with rising food and fuel costs and an increasingly failing NHS.

The evidence for secularisation, or at least for the declining importance of Christianity, is compelling. Christian affiliation in the UK fell from 66 per cent to 38 per cent over 25 years, with Anglicanism accounting for the sharpest decline in affiliation. By 2018, only 12 per cent of the national population identified as belonging to the Church of England or its sister churches in Scotland and Wales.

Any residual cultural affiliation to the Church of England appears to be in freefall and is likely to accelerate. Surveys show that as few as 1 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds now identify as Anglican. Likewise, attendance at Church of England services has fallen significantly in recent decades, down to an average weekly attendance of 57 people (Rich, 2020)

The Plunkett Report commissioned by the Heritage lottery fund in March 2017 ( Rebecca Payne, Gill Withers, James Alcock , 2017) showed that Churches that have some kind of social enterprise are more likely to have a sustainable income and survive as a place of worship, to increase their volunteering and to have improved community cohesion. A by-product is that they grow disciples.

The Report by Bob Jackson ‘What makes Churches grow? (Jackson, 2015) shows that an incarnational ministry fosters growth. It can also deepen faith because it brings congregations into meaningful relationships with those with whom they would not otherwise have come into sustained contact. This offers a challenge to the way we often view the connection between social action and evangelism. (Rich, 2020) By working in the community we benefit those whom we seek to serve and we ensure sustainability for ourselves and the life of the Church. Since the end of the second world war when the government took over social welfare from the churches, the Church of England has tended to look inwards rather than outwards. Faced with declining attendance, it could be tempting for church communities to take a step back from their social action and outreach and focus instead on evangelism. After all, in the face of economic difficulties, the state’s response in the last decade has been retrenchment and belt-tightening. However, research indicates the contrary possibility - that growth lies in increasing social engagement alongside evangelism, rather than withdrawing from it. (Rich, 2020) We need some good theology and a methodology to encourage a church back into Community Engagement and an enabling strategy from our diocese.

## Theology

As people of God, we care for and love our neighbours. As followers of Jesus we look for Him, discern His purposes and work with Him in our communities to transform them into places where everyone can thrive. This is our Missio Dei,

*It is not the church of God who has a mission , but the God of Mission that has a church* (Dearborn, 1998)

*The Church is a sign and disclosure of the Kingdom of God, The Kingdom has certain clear qualities – its breaking of social boundaries, its hope for the poor its message of God’s welcome for all, focussed in Christ* (The Mission Shaped Church working group, 2004)

Jesus said ‘*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*’ John 10:10

Unfortunately many of us look around our communities and see that our people are not living a life that enables them to live abundantly, but instead they are weighed down by poverty, ill health; mental and physical, addictions and abuse. What then is the Church’s response?

Christian community is built by being incarnational. It is being a church that changes and listens to the times and changes with the seasons; a church that looks outside of itself and meets the people where they are. Being incarnational means moving into a community as friend and neighbour as Jesus did when He moved from heaven to earth. It’s about being integral and intentional.

Thomas Aquinas said ‘ the image we bear is that of one who communicates and provokes goodness. We bear a likeness to a goodness that is diffusive. We can express that goodness by leading and provoking others to goodness ourselves’ (Andrew Davidson, Alison Milbank, 2010) God involves us in this way, involving us in the humanity around us, We may not be of this world but we are inhabitants of this world and it is incumbent on us to bring forth the Kingdom, both by making disciples and also by bringing forth the promises of God for all people. God’s love is totally free and generous, It never was and never is exclusive.

## Methodology

When a church or project gets caught up in a need-meeting perspective it puts the church and the congregation in a position of superiority. Those ‘out there’ are the ones in need, whilst those within the church have the capacity to help. (Morisy, 2004)

Alternatively an Asset-based approach starts with the positive resources and skills found in individuals and communities, rather than with needs, deficits, or problems. For example, if a local church were to take an asset based approach to improving homelessness in its local area, it might decide to focus on strengthening the things that are already keeping people healthy and homed. This might include assisting with benefit systems, working on social networks and relationships, tackling substance abuse, domestic violence etc – rather than just targeting the problem reactively by, for example, providing night shelters, food kitchens etc. Such an approach transforms the way people are perceived, so that they are seen, not as passive recipients of services and burdens on the system, but as equal partners in designing and delivering services

Church leaders and teams often complain about apathy. However people in communities are motivated to act. The challenge is to discover what their motivation is. People act on certain themes they feel strongly about, such as; concerns to address, dreams to realise, and personal talents to contribute. Every community is filled with invisible “motivation for action,” The trick is to tap into it and to build the church’s social capital in the community by earning the trust of the many individuals and organisations that make up every community. Institutions have reached their limit in problem-solving. All institutions such as government, non-profits, and businesses are stretched thin in their ability to solve community problems. Neither they nor the church can be successful without engaging the rest of the community in solutions.

* Social capital is built on a web of relationships that exist within any given community that allow people to succeed or advance through associating together. It is present in the networks, norms, and social trust inherent in associations whose members work together in concerted collaborative action. In a literal sense, social capital is the store of good-will and obligations generated by social relations. (Collaborative for Neighbourhood development)
* Awakening involves motivating the church to understand its role and relationship with the immediate community. This understanding stirs the church to begin engaging its immediate community, stirring the community to take action to deal with its poverty, and influencing the life of the community, thus truly becoming ‘salt and light’ in the community.
* Church and community collaboration gets the church and community to ‘read’ into their reality and desire to transform it. Through self-discovery the church and community explore the entire scope of their lives – physical, spiritual, economic, social – and begin to determine strategies to transform it.
* Information-gathering provides the church and community with detailed information about the major aspects of their life. Information is power – the information that the church and community gather exposes both the issues that they face and the opportunities open to them to address those issues.
* Information analysis ‘opens the eyes’ of the church and the community to gain a true and full picture of the situation at a deep level. This gets them sufficiently agitated to ‘take action now’ - from an informed position.
* Decision gets the church and community to reach decisions that completely turn their situation around – envisioning a better future, Determining the best options for change, designing the most appropriate actions, and actually taking definite actions to go forward (Helen Gaw, Tear Fund, 2019)

## Churches are not Social Services

We must realise, however, that we are Church; distinctive Christian communities, not a local community social service. Our’ missio dei’ is to the poor and marginalised and to bring in the Kingdom. We want people to have their lives transformed, not just by economic and socioeconomic improvement but by knowing the transforming love of Christ in their lives. This is what God calls us to - to go out and make disciples of all people, not because we want to fill our churches, but because we want all to know the redeeming love of Jesus.

For effective evangelism and community transformation, we must live in that ‘liminal’ space between the two. The existing church must become more disciple-focussed, building our programmes around not just making good disciples that come to church each Sunday, but to help bring Jesus into every moment of their lives; not just within their church, but within their home, their workplace and their volunteering. Without true disciples in the community, how can the community get to know Jesus? Long gone are the days when the church building is a beacon of light, So many others offer that light in the darkness of debt, despair and mental health, that we cannot expect people to be drawn to us if we appear to have no relevance to their wellbeing.

The Potting Shed is being developed to help us think through how we live in the space between church and community, to raise up a new generation of CCT workers, equipped for an incarnational way of life, to be church and to be community.

It is hoped that from this centre further research into CTT, a mixed economy of church and new worshipping communities will help us to revive our churches and to truly hold the ‘care of souls’ in each parish.

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