

DEMOS

HOLY
ALLIANCES:
CHURCH-SECULAR
PARTNERSHIPS FOR
SOCIAL GOOD

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the decade following the 2008 financial crash, there has been a widely acknowledged growth in church social action, as well as a much less acknowledged rise in partnership working, as churches increasingly link up with non-Christian organisations to meet social need. This is driven both by the 'pull' of austerity and the 'push' of a social theology.

Our survey finds that churches are most likely to partner with **non-faith voluntary organisations** (23%), **local authorities** (17%) and **schools** (17%), with some also partnering with businesses, health organisations, non-Christian faith groups and the police. **Food poverty** and **mental health** were the most common challenges addressed by these partnerships.

Based on a survey of church leaders and ten case studies, this report finds a number of key benefits to partnership working. These include **unlocking resources** (financial and otherwise), **boosting impact** (e.g. by offering more sustained and holistic support) and administrative support and assistance **finding and targeting the right group**. Difficulties around partnership working include (the fear of) proselytism from religious partners and a lack of

acknowledgement of the religious motivation of church volunteers from secular partners. Funding and resource constraints are also recurring issues, which can put a strain on partnership working.

The research also highlights the crucial role 'broker organisations' can play in mediating between churches and secular organisations. These groups often **offer practical and organisational sophistication**, an ability to **'translate'** between the Christian partner and non-Christian partner and the chance to **combine local impact with national advocacy**. Whilst some churches prefer to undertake partnerships on their own, the growing importance of 'broker organisations' suggests an as-yet untapped potential, which deserves further research and support, particularly on the pressing social issue of loneliness

Finally, this report finds that church partnerships are sustained by a dense network of organisations, often partially funded by the state, which might be imperilled by further cuts in Government funding. Churches, therefore, should not be seen as an alternative to the State but rather as a key 'spoke in the wheel' of vibrant communities.

CHAPTER 1 THE SHAPE AND SCALE OF CHURCH-SECULAR PARTNERSHIPS

In the decade following the financial crisis of 2007-8, there has been a widely acknowledged growth in church-based social action. A biennial national survey conducted by Jubilee Plus showed that church volunteer hours spent on social action had risen by almost 60% from 2010-2014, reaching an impressive 114.8 million hours per year.¹ The Cinnamon Network's Faith Action Audit in 2016 valued this volunteering effort at over £3 billion per year.² The Church Urban Fund found that over 90% of churches in 2014 were addressing at least one social issue in their local area, whilst a ComRes survey two years later estimated that 10 million adults in the UK used church-based community services.³ This data chimes with the 2013 Demos report Faithful Citizens, which found that religious people in the UK were more likely than non-religious people to volunteer regularly in their local community.⁴

Whilst the scale of church-based social action has received growing attention, what hasn't yet been studied as much is **how** these churches are going about trying to change their communities, and particularly how they might be working with secular organisations to do so. Based on the available evidence, it appears that the growth of church-based social action has been accompanied by a concurrent growth in the number and range of partnerships involving churches and secular organisations working together for public good. And if it is true that churches are often not going it alone or simply working within the Christian community on social action, then the nature and operation

of these partnerships becomes a topic of some importance for anyone interested in social change and community cohesion in the United Kingdom.

Getting a clear empirical grasp on the scale and nature of church-secular partnerships is an elusive task, since many of these relationships are often fluid and hyper-local. Methodologically, this project is based on a survey of church leaders, 10 expert interviews and 12 case study interviews. Although the survey does not claim to be fully representative of UK churches, it does nonetheless reveal a thick web of connections between churches and a range of secular organisations spanning every denomination and area of the country, and focussing on a wide variety of issues and activities. And our case studies suggest that many of the high-profile examples of church-based social action such as food banks and work on debt are increasingly involving partnerships with secular organisations. The survey shines a light on these partnerships, finding:

- Churches work with a range of partners, charities (23 per cent), local authorities (17 per cent) and schools (also 17 per cent).
- 19 per cent were focused on food poverty and 13 per cent on poverty. Next were mental health at 11 per cent and loneliness at 10 per cent
- Almost four in five (79 per cent) respondents had two or more partnerships suggesting a more holistic entanglement with the local community. Almost a quarter (23 per cent) had five or more.

See Figure 1

1. Knott, G. (2014). Investing more in the common good. Shrewsbury: Jubilee Plus. Retrieved from <https://jubilee-plus.org/docs/Report-National-Church-Social-Action-Survey-2014-Executive-Summary.pdf>
2. Cinnamon Network (2016). Faith Action Audit. Retrieved from <http://www.cinnamonnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Cinnamon-Faith-Action-Audit-Report-2016.pdf>
3. See Church Urban Fund (2015). Church in Action. Retrieved from <https://www.cuf.org.uk/church-in-action-2015> and Spencer, N. (2016). Doing Good: A Future for Christianity in the 21st Century. London: Theos. Retrieved from <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/Doing%20Good%205.pdf>
4. Birdwell, J. (ed.) (2013). The Faith Collection. London: Demos. Retrieved from https://www.demos.co.uk/files/DEMOS_The_Faith_Collection_-_web_version.pdf?1379811908

So why might church-secular partnerships have grown in recent years? One factor almost universally cited in our research was the withdrawal of state and other actors from work in local communities due to austerity. This has created a 'pull' factor of increasingly visible need - as one survey respondent put it, "the challenges of community breakdown, loneliness, mental health are far too great for traditional avenues of statutory and third sector support to cope with". Rodie Garland from Faith Action explained that in her view the rise of church social action is "definitely driven by the austerity agenda and the state rolling back. I don't think it's necessarily that churches feel they **have** to pick up the pieces, but it's that they notice needs in their communities and feel a moral obligation to try and meet needs wherever they can." Of course it's not just secular organisations who have struggled for resources in recent years, and for those churches experiencing a decline in numbers and power, partnership working is also a way of maintaining impact and presence in the community.

See Figure 2

At the same time, many have noted a shift in church attitudes which has made them more receptive to partnership work. This could be described as a theological shift from a more personalised faith to a more community-based faith, from 'preaching the good news' and 'saving souls' to 'the social gospel' and 'transforming communities'. One of the most

prominent advocates for church-secular partnerships in the UK, Steve Chalke from Oasis, ascribed the rise in this way of working to "churches being driven by social justice more than ever before". This was certainly a strong theme in our survey, with one respondent saying "take every opportunity to work with all organisations that can help church outreach make a difference in your local area – they are only 'not yet' Christians and every witness is used by God in some way", and another arguing "It is perfectly possible and actually, beautiful, for churches to work with non-Christian organisations. Without always needing to vocalise it, our faith is our witness and it speaks volumes in many different ways." This is perhaps no surprise given the message coming from the top of various church denominations, with Justin Welby and Pope Francis outspoken in recent years on the need for church engagement in society and the importance of working with others outside of the faith for social justice.

Whatever the reasons, the UK seems to be experiencing something of a boom in church-secular partnerships. At a time of such economic and social uncertainty, with food poverty, homelessness, mental health and other problems on the rise, we would all be wise to pay close attention to how these partnerships work and where they might be able to create the most value.

See Figure 3

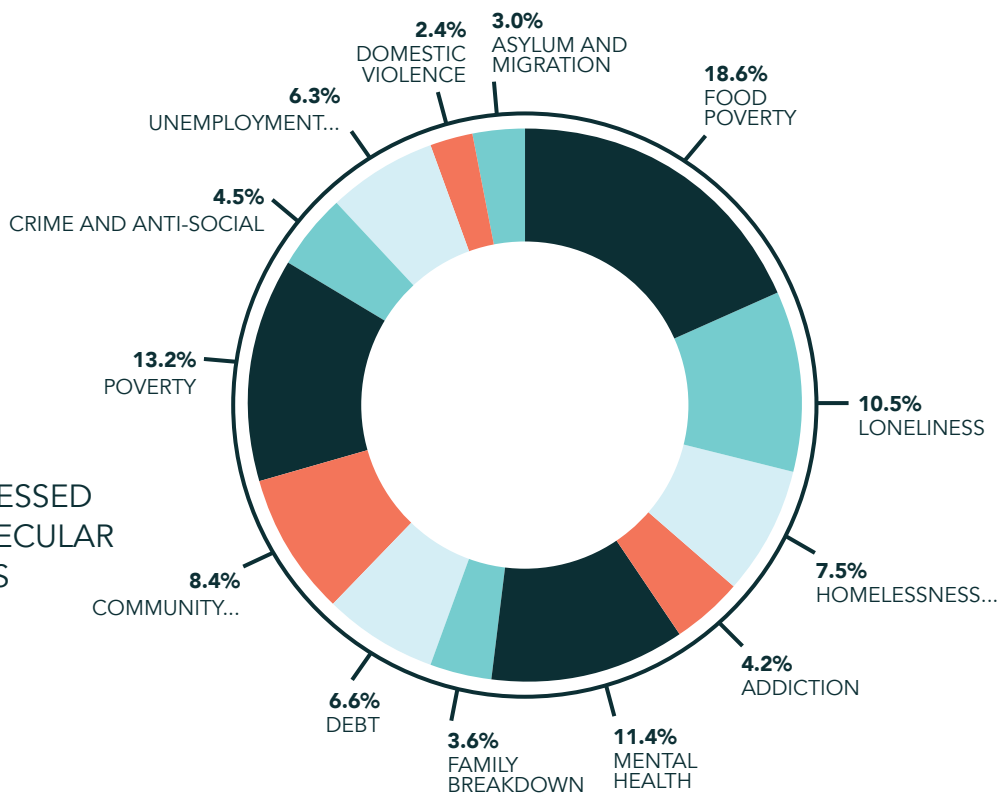


FIGURE 1.
TOPICS ADDRESSED
BY CHURCH-SECULAR
PARTNERSHIPS

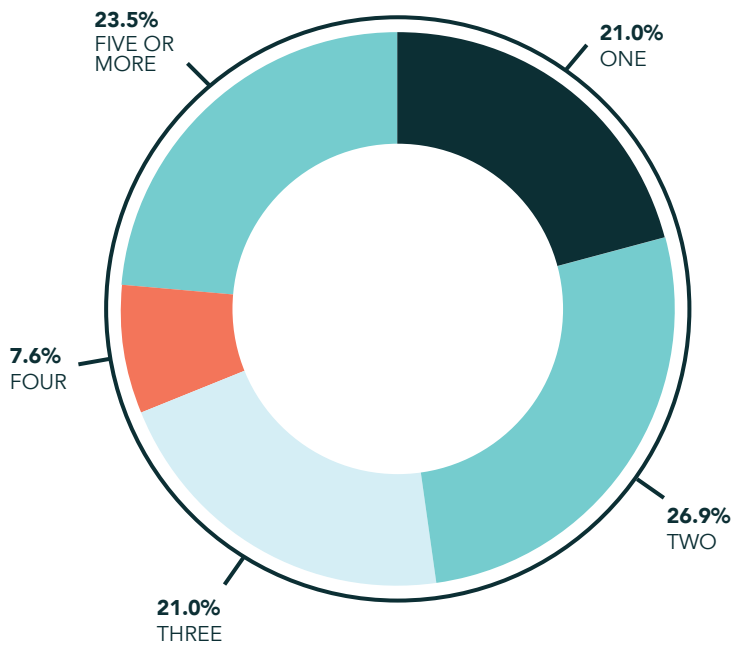


FIGURE 2.
NUMBER OF
PARTNERSHIPS PER
PARTICIPATING CHURCH

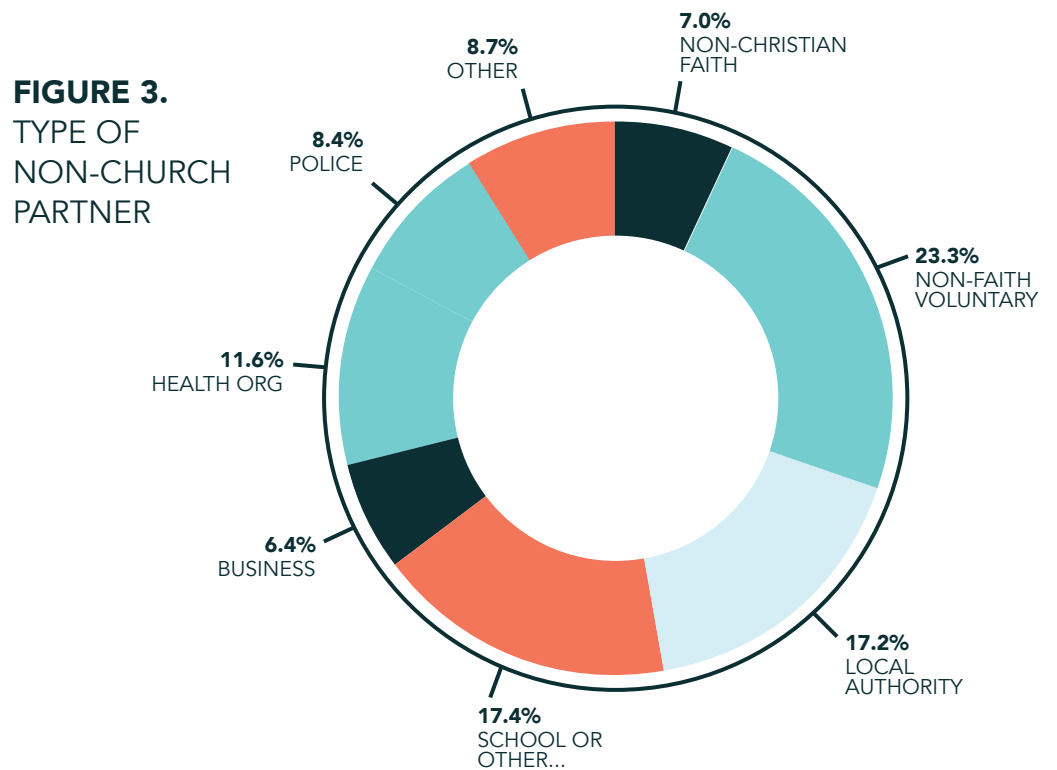


FIGURE 3.
TYPE OF
NON-CHURCH
PARTNER

CASE STUDY: ST AUGUSTINE'S, CAMBRIDGE

In a residential suburban Cambridge street sits St Augustine's Church. Opened in 1898 as a school, the church has recently undergone a renovation leaving it resembling a modern café, with a light and welcoming interior. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning, the locals of the neighbourhood assemble around freshly brewed coffee and homemade cake. All on a first name basis, this café provides a point for residents to meet and talk, all with an aim of combating loneliness within the local community. The group includes people of different faiths and backgrounds. Janet Bunker, the vicar, laughs and says, "I don't care what you believe as long as you buy a coffee."

Like many churches, St Augustine's functions as a community hall, which is rented during much of the week for classes and events ranging from Korean Lessons to Argentine Tango. The coffee mornings stand out, however, as a partnership with the local Residents' Association and the David Bailey from the Cambridge Older People's Enterprise (COPE), a charity founded with the aim of helping older people participate fully in society. Loneliness is one of the issues the church diagnosed in the local community. "For many of the people who visit the coffee mornings," Janet says, "it may be the only social contact they have that day."

Another church in the Parish, St Giles also noticed problems around drug abuse and homelessness. More and more often, needles would be thrown away on the church grounds.



For this reason, during the colder months the church hosts rough sleepers in the church as well for one night per week. They are given a warm meal and a place to sleep. The local homelessness charity refers the less complex cases to the church, to ensure a safe environment for the church volunteers.

Reverend Janet Bunker believes that the independent nature of the church's partnerships allows the church to be nimble in responding to local problems. "Churches have invaluable local knowledge and roots", she says. "In partnership working, there's a lot to gain and not much to lose." The church chose not to align itself with any larger organisations for fear of increased proceduralism. Even as an independent project, however, bureaucracy has been an issue. Opening a bank account with changing signatories was "a nightmare" and obtaining local council funding and the bureaucracy involved can present a challenge to small, informal local organisations. All involved praised the work of South Cambridgeshire District Council, which offers small community grants with minimal paperwork. Ultimately, Reverend Janet says, the church wants to be able to serve the whole community. "The beautiful thing about the parish system," Reverend Janet says, "is that it immediately imbues us with a community ethos. Our mission is to support the entire parish, regardless of faith or background."

**"Churches have
invaluable local
knowledge
and roots"**

Reverend
Janet Bunker

CHAPTER 2 THE BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP

Driven by the 'pull' of austerity and the 'push' of a more social theology, more and more churches are finding creative ways to partner with secular organisations on social action projects. But how do they experience these partnerships, and what are they making possible that wouldn't happen from churches simply going it alone?

One of the major attractions of partnering with secular organisations for churches is the lure of funding and other forms of resource support. When asked why they chose to work in partnership, 23 per cent of our survey respondents chose 'funding and more resources'.

This has been particularly fruitful for churches running food banks. Many church-run food banks benefit from partnerships with supermarkets which enable people to donate items as they shop.⁵ But food banks also receive other forms of support from secular organisations. As Salford Food Bank explained "we also have a number of businesses supporting us financially, with donations over Christmas. Some of them are smaller, others are multinationals and banks and such. They often have nominated local charities that they support, but we often find on the ground people also want to help local charities, so we get a lot of support from businesses in the area. Mainly they've approached us." In addition, food banks tend to have a wide network of referral partners and sometimes co-locate with various social services, such as debt advice, mental health support or benefits support. For example, nine out of ten Trussell Trust food banks co-locate with other services.⁶

Churches operating in the employability sphere have also found secular partners who can bring valuable resources to their work. St Peter's Church

in Bethnal Green runs the Spear employability programme designed by the charity Resurgo. In recent years they have managed to secure a payment-by-results contract with the local Job Centre, as well as interview support, company visits and job opportunities for the young people on their programme from local employers.

Spear Bethnal Green demonstrates that church-secular partnerships don't simply unlock resources on the secular side. From the Job Centre's perspective, working with Spear makes sense as a way of tapping into the unique relational capital of the church. When meeting with Spear Bethnal Green staff and trustees, a Job Centre representative once said "we love working with you guys, because every time we meet you're telling me stories of young people who are turning their lives around and getting into work". According to Tim Lovell, Centre Manager of Spear Bethnal Green, these stories are only possible because of the personal model of support offered by Spear which is inspired by Christian faith and supported by a network of church volunteers. "Intrinsic in the Spear programme is the value of each person... it's deeply missional." As one survey respondent put it: "Churches are often filled with very willing volunteers who will work their socks off for your social project if you involve them."

This perspective of seeking to unlock the resources of churches through partnerships is increasingly being echoed by local authorities. Whilst often council have been seen as largely hostile to partnership work with faith groups, a number of local authorities are increasingly experimenting with more collaborative approaches which seem to be bearing fruit. In Islington the Council have sought to work closely with churches and other

5. See Tesco (n.d.). 'Making a positive difference in local communities across the UK'. Retrieved from <https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-involved/partner-with-us/tesco/>

6. Trussell Trust (2017). Feeding Britain one year on: Update from The Trussell Trust, London: Trussell Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/01/Submission-to-Feeding-Britain-1-year-on-Trussell-Trust-final-1.pdf>

faith groups in responding to knife and hate crime, but also in tackling payday lenders and supporting community finance organisations. As Andy Hull, Cabinet Member for Finance in Islington Council said, “we recognise faith institutions as engines of social change, [...] they can reach people and places that we find hard to get to.” Emphasising that these partnerships were often built on personal relationships of trust and respect, he explained that for the Council, “we’re prepared to take a risk” on working with churches and other faith groups, because “it can be dynamite when it’s done right”.

Alongside unlocking resources, another significant theme we identified in our survey and interviews was the way in which partnerships enabled churches to be more strategic and effective in having the social impact they desired. Indeed when asked why they chose to work in partnership, 14% of survey respondents chose ‘making an impact’.

Food banks present an important example. There has been an argument that churches running food banks offer a sticking plaster, rather than a solution for the problems that drive people to the food bank. But it seems that by partnering with a range of secular organisations, church food banks are able to overcome this objection and work towards longer-term, sustainable change for the people they seek to help. Battersea food bank has a dedicated Citizens Advice representative available to help people resolve the issues that brought them to the food bank, as well as mental health professionals who visit the food bank and also train the volunteers.

In Preston the food bank we spoke to works in close partnership with a local Children’s Centre. This enables them to turn what could be a transactional experience of receiving emergency food into a longer-term relationship of support. The Children’s Centre would work with families on an ongoing basis and refer to the church where appropriate. Phil Maltby of City Church Preston says, “When people are referred to us by the Children’s Centre, we go visit them at their house. We turn up very discreetly with an Aldi bag or an unmarked bag. Hopefully it’s one less issue for them to sort out.” As an independent food bank, the church can choose to offer longer-term, flexible support.

Phil Maltby: “The families were also engaging more with the childrens centre because of their partnership with us – they were more likely to be in when the worker called.” In their inspection

report, Ofsted mentioned the food parcels as one of the factors making the Children’s Centre so excellent.⁷ As Phil Maltby pointed out, this linkup leads to much better outcomes than food alone ever could. The church has seen striking examples of its impact. One pregnant woman in food poverty was supported by the church throughout the nine months. She gave birth to a healthy baby - the first of her five children to be born at a healthy weight.

Perhaps one of the reasons churches feel that partnership enables them to be more strategic is that they can avoid doing things which don’t come easily to them or fit with their culture. St John’s Church in Felixstowe noted that “One advantage of partnership working is not dealing with admin [...] Partnership working can take the burden away, allowing you to start doing the stuff.”

In many partnerships, secular organisations can play a ‘vetting’ role for churches. For examples in homelessness projects in Cambridge, the local charity makes sure to refer only less complex cases to the church. In Preston, the Sure Start Children’s Centre identified the families most at risk of extreme poverty. In the Trussell Trust food bank model a wide range of organisations make referrals which allow churches to target support and those most in need. It’s no surprise therefore that ‘Support/training/networks’ was chosen by 25% of survey respondents for why they work in partnership.

7. Ofsted (2011). ‘Inspection report for Stoneygate Children’s Centre’. Retrieved from <https://files.api.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/1991575>

CASE STUDY: BATTERSEA FOOD BANK

On a Tuesday afternoon, about a dozen families make their way into a church building in Battersea. They bring orange referral slips. In the church hall itself, pallets of food in the church aisle are stacked two metres high, weighing in at 1.6 tonnes of food this week. Volunteers dip in and out of the hall. "Can we give an Oyster card to this lady? She hasn't got one and she needs to get back home." Sarah, the food bank coordinator, is walking around the space, talking to volunteers and sorting out issues when they arise. "People often say, give me whatever. But we tell them they can choose what they like. We try to make it as dignified as possible."

Before the church ran a food bank, it already had a Christians Against Poverty debt centre. Speaking to people about their financial situation, Sarah realised that many families were not managing to put food on the table. "We also knew from speaking to local teachers and social workers and speaking to food banks in neighbouring boroughs that actually there was a lot of need. Teachers and social workers were buying food for people out of their own money." Dan, the food bank manager, adds: "There was all this work going unnoticed; cupboards of food in council offices. People knew there was a need and had been doing little bits and pieces to meet it."

Sarah started having conversations with other organisations in the borough to set up a network of organisations that could refer to the food bank, such as charities, the council, social services teams, job centres, disability charities, schools, local mental health services and hospitals. A local GP for example could give a voucher for a food bank to someone they believe to be in need. By the time the food bank was ready to launch, in 2013, there were no fewer than 95 voucher partners. By now, the number has grown to 170.

In the space next to the church hall, people sit down on sofas to have a cup of tea or coffee. On paper slips people can indicate whether they are in need of Weetabix, rice, juice, feminine hygiene products. Volunteers gather food parcels for them and have a chat. Also present is a dedicated Citizens Advice representative to help people solve the issues that brought them to the food bank in the first place. On some of the sofas, volunteers and food bank visitors are discussing the football, but mostly people like to unload about the difficulties they are facing.

"We've been so struck by the feedback loop between mental health and poverty", Sarah says. "Poverty harms mental health and mental health problems make it more difficult to get out of poverty." For this reason, the Battersea food bank invited mental health professionals to also attend the Friday sessions to offer mental health support. Volunteers also receive mental health first aid training. Sarah: "People will quite often tell us about suicidal thoughts.

A couple of weeks back someone came into the food bank and told us they had tried to take their own life the day before." She pauses for a moment. "We want to be the best possible support for people in need. It's much more than just food."



"We want to be the best possible support for people in need. It's much more than just food."

CHAPTER 3 THE CHALLENGES OF PARTNERSHIP

Partnership working between churches and secular organisations can clearly bring a variety of benefits. But like any relationships, they can have their challenges. So what are the common points of concern when it comes to churches and non-Christian groups seeking to work in tandem?

The most common reason cited for not wanting to partner with churches is the fear of proselytism. As the think tank Theos has noted in a recent report, “Even at a time of retrenchment in welfare spending, which has seen more and different groups involved in the delivery of public services, many public representatives and service commissioners still cite religious proselytism as a barrier to closer relationships with faith-based agencies.”⁸ Whilst this word is often used in a somewhat vague way, it is usually related to two specific concerns – firstly that service provision will be **conditional** on religious activity or adherence, and secondly that activities will be accompanied by **coercive** forms of faith-sharing. These concerns may not be entirely baseless, but evidence suggests that are often significantly overinflated. As we have explored in a previous report (Faithful Providers), and as has been noted by Theos and others, there is little if any evidence that faith groups are actually operating in their ways in their social action, and none of our interviewees cited any cases of church-secular partnerships that had suffered or ended due to practices that were perceived to be proselytising.⁹ Indeed in Preston we found that the Children’s Centre working with the church-based food bank was actually enthusiastic about people joining the church as a result of encountering their partnership, arguing that this often led to those individuals engaging more with services and having greater networks of support. As the food bank worker said “They see the benefit of church

attendance and people getting involved in the community. It is a positive for them.”

However, it is worth noting that a number of interviewees raised some degree of nervousness around this issue, suggesting that it could be a barrier the formation of new and stronger partnerships. Some experts suggested that there could be a reluctance from some larger churches, particularly in smaller denominations, to partner with secular groups due to a perception of them needing to become less Christian in doing so. Our interviewee from Salford food bank admitted “I have been cautious with regard to that [sharing faith]...We have received local authority funding. If there had been restrictions then we would’ve turned that down without compromise.”

More than anything there was a repeated theme in our conversations that churches need to be confident and upfront in articulating whether and how they might want to share their faith through their social action. For some churches this will be an almost entirely peripheral concern, as shown by the worker from Liverpool Cathedral who said, “I know for a fact the Cathedral doesn’t care if more people become Christians as a result of the work we do.” For others, social action partnerships can be a way of indirectly sharing their faith by raising their visibility and living out their values. As Revd Andy Batchellor from The Hub, a multi-agency partnership project put it, “For us as a church it’s been a two way thing. We offer whatever support we can, but it also gives us visibility within the community.” And for others still social action can present opportunities for more direct faith sharing, for example in offering to pray for clients or incorporating spiritual elements into their programmes. Theos and the Centre for Theology

8. Bickley, P. (2015). The Problem of Proselytism. London: Theos. Retrieved from <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2015/10/20/the-problem-of-proselytism>

9. Birdwell, J. (ed.) (2013). The Faith Collection. London: Demos. Retrieved from https://www.demos.co.uk/files/DEMOS_The_Faith_Collection_-_web_version.pdf?1379811908

and Community have developed a handy model of 'low fat', 'half fat' and 'full fat' to describe these different approaches to faith sharing.¹⁰

Of course some secular institutions might find the latter category more challenging to work with, and that's why open conversations and clear communication are vital to establishing strong working relationships built on trust. But given the nervousness and suspicion that has existed in the past and which clearly still holds some people back from partnerships, we believe it's important for secular organisations to presume good faith on the part of churches rather than having policies which disallow or discourage direct partnership on the basis of fears of proselytism. Where there are legitimate concerns from secular organisations, these should be addressed from the outset, with clear guidelines agreed jointly.

Furthermore, secular partners should be open to acknowledging that churches will often be motivated by their faith to take part in social action, rather than simply treating them as a pool of social capital. This was a complaint that arose in our survey, with one respondent arguing "there is often very poor religious literacy amongst avowedly secular organisations such as local councils. This leads to a lack of confidence on their part that the Church and different non-Christian partners can work together without causing conflict or offence!" Another said "the world needs our work - even if it doesn't always want to acknowledge what we do or why we do it", whilst another argued that non-Christian partners should "realise that faith is often a driver to caring about the common good of all. Churches are committed and compassionate."

Another area of challenge we identified for church-secular partnerships relates to issues of scale and resource. Whilst the local embeddedness of churches can be their biggest asset, some smaller churches can face challenges in maintaining or growing partnership working. In Preston, the church running the food bank told us that a lack of funding has hindered its ability to expand partnership working. This follows the general trend of smaller churches not being able to provide continuity of service because of smaller congregations and building constraints. While their model is potentially scalable, it is difficult without the funding to expand to aid more families. As they said, "We have not been able to do bigger partnerships because we haven't had a church building for a long time, so we could not store food, for example."

Reliance on voluntary work can also present a challenge. Many volunteers, while keen to help, have limited time they can provide to projects. A church-run Jobs Club we spoke to explained that "the only reason we are not doing it this year is the coaches did not have time to volunteer so much anymore", noting also that the project had struggled to build strong relationships with local employers. The Trussell Trust noted that "one of the issues churches often run into is capacity. There is a real onus on people to give their time." And finally a credit union that had worked with churches also expressed frustration that the people involved seems to keep changing, making it hard to have a consistent relationship. Especially smaller, independent partnerships are often very dependent on personal relationships, which is a source of great strength but also vulnerability.

This final insight was interesting because it also came with a recognition that credit unions also tended to be very lean, revealing that scale and resources can be just as much of a barrier to partnership for secular groups as for churches. This was echoed by others in interviews, often in relation to austerity and cuts. In Preston, the highly successful partnership between the church and the Children's Centre was felt to be under threat due to cuts in funding for the Centre, prompting worries about the project's future viability and the strain this would put on other social services.

10. Theology Centre (2013). Keeping the Faith: A short guide for faith-based organisations. Retrieved from http://www.theology-centre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/ProselytismBooklet_V4.pdf

CASE STUDY: CHURCHES AND CREDIT UNIONS

In the summer of 2013 the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby made national headlines with his call for the Church to 'outcompete' the payday lender Wonga through support for credit unions.¹¹ What became known as the 'war on Wonga' touched a nerve not just with the secular press but also within the Church in the UK, and particularly the Church of England, with large numbers of people motivated to take action and form partnerships with their local credit union. Less than five years later Wonga had entered administration, but due to legislative change and compensation claims rather than credit union-related competition, with UK credit union membership rising steadily but unspectacularly from 1.6 million in 2013 to just over 2 million today.¹²

So why have churches, with their nation-wide network of buildings and army of willing volunteers, proven unable so far to give credit unions the platform for significant growth?

The fundamental answer is that the resources of churches make a slightly awkward match with the needs of credit unions. Whilst churches can offer buildings, volunteers and ethical savers, what credit unions really need is a steady supply of creditworthy borrowers, whose interest payments can help cross-subsidise lending to the more vulnerable. But for a Vicar to take to the pulpit and implore their congregations to borrow more money is a tough ask, and as a result there has been plenty of church-credit union activity which has failed to have a truly transformative effect. As one credit union put it, "Churches are not looking for loans. If they want to join and save with us they'd be counting towards our membership numbers, but there's no point in having all this money we can't spend. That message is quite difficult to get out there."

A church we spoke to in Scotland had wanted to work with a credit union. Inspired by a desire to tackle poverty, they approached their local credit union and set up a mini branch in their church building staffed by volunteers. But with almost no take-up, the project was abandoned after a few months. Reflecting on this, a church member involved said "It never really worked. I don't think we ever broke the barrier of being in a church building that people felt they could walk into, or the barriers to the products that the Credit Union had. Two of us would sit in this room twice a week, and very few people would come in."



"Two of us would sit in this room twice a week, and very few people would come in.."

11. Grice, A. (2013, July 25). War on Wonga: We're putting you out of business, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby tells payday loans company, The Independent. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/war-on-wonga-were-putting-you-out-of-business-archbishop-of-canterbury-justin-welby-tells-payday-8730839.html>

12. Bank of England (2018). Credit union annual statistics - 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/statistics/credit-union/2017/2017>

CHAPTER 4 THE ROLE OF BROKER ORGANISATIONS

As church social action has grown, there has been an equal rise in organisations with a mission to help churches undertake projects in their communities. Sometimes these organisations work within a particular denomination, such as the Caritas Social Action Network in the Catholic Church or the Church Urban Fund in the Church of England. Others focus on a particular location, such as Christian Action Bristol which seeks to co-ordinate church social action in the city. Still others have a more thematic focus, such as Christians Against Poverty (debt and employment), Oasis (education), Resurgo (employment), Street Pastors (community safety) and the Trussell Trust (food poverty). Often the primary purpose of these groups is to develop a particular programme or set of programmes that they encourage local churches to run, providing some mixture of financial and technical support to do so. In the course of this research it became obvious that these organisations often also have a secondary, as yet underexplored role as a broker, giving local churches a platform to create new partnerships with secular organisations through their activities.

One of the key elements of this platform is usually a level of practical sophistication which individual churches would struggle to create and maintain on their own. The churches we spoke to who were running food banks highlighted this as a key element in their decision to work with the Trussell Trust. In Battersea they said “We really liked the Trussell Trust model. We like the fact that it is a social franchise thing, so we can take procedures off the shelf. We could build on the expertise they already had. So we could hit the ground running.” Our interviewee in Salford explained “I know that the team looked up into a number of different options [including] the idea of setting up an independent food bank, but

I think when the Trussell Trust person came to visit them, and explained the process it was felt that it would be a much easier way, rather than setting up something from scratch with no expertise at all.”

These systems and processes are obviously helpful in delivering the primary activity of church social action, but they also create the possibilities for partnership. The Trussell Trust’s voucher referral system, which sees mostly secular partners giving vouchers to clients enabling them to access the food bank, is only possible at the scale at which it operates because of the widespread trust in the brand and systems of the model. The Trussell Trust also recently announced a multi-million pound partnership with Asda, which will enable them to expand the range of activities that local churches and other food bank providers will be able to undertake.¹³ A spokesperson for Asda said “Given the size of the problem and our locally-led approach to community activity, we needed partners who could work at scale, but who could also have a tangible local impact.” The Trussell Trust’s infrastructure and systems will therefore see hundreds if not thousands of churches in the UK resourced by and working alongside a major supermarket, something that would be unthinkable were those churches left to try to set up partnerships on their own. This ability of broker organisations to help churches access secular funding was mentioned by a number of interviewees, with one pointing out that public funding in particular usually requires robust accountability structures which can be evaluated and monitored – something which faith-based organisations at a local level often don’t have.

The other thing which the scale and systems of broker organisations brings to local churches is the ability to engage in policy discussions with power-

13. Trussell Trust (2018, Feb 8). ‘Asda, The Trussell Trust and Fareshare launch £20 million partnership to help a million people out of food poverty’ (press release). Retrieved from <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2018/02/08/asda-trussell-trust-fareshare-launch-20-million-partnership-help-million-people-food-poverty/>

holders. Again the Trussell Trust provides the most obvious example. As a member of their policy team explained, "We have data collection systems in place at all our food banks. With the data we can see how many people in a ward are resorting to food parcels and we can try to make out patterns. Academics at the University of Oxford analysed the numbers for us." This ability to aggregate and analyse the experiences of local churches on the frontline of a particular issue brings an opportunity to speak into more systemic debates. This was highlighted as a positive by those running local food banks, with one saying "the other advantage is the data and the research work they do. So we can feed into a national picture and contribute to advocacy work." The Trussell Trust have been outspoken and often effective in public debates about Universal Credit, backed up by their own evidence that, for example, for every ten sanctions in Jobseekers' Allowance in a given area, five more people in that area will use a food bank.¹⁴

One of the reasons why broker organisations are able to play this role is that they can often play a translation role which recognises faith-specific motivations but can also speak in a way that secular partners understand. It is notable that many of the broker organisations we identified were set up by Christians and are often imbued with faith-motivation themselves, giving them a credibility with local churches. As one interviewee put it, "The Christian bit of Christians Against Poverty is very important", whilst our interviewee at the Trussell Trust quoted from the Bible when asked about why they had strong relationships with local churches. But when speaking to existing or potential secular partners, these organisations are able to adopt the necessary language to build strong working relationships, whether with CSR managers or local authority officials. This can allow them to tackle common misunderstandings between churches and secular groups, such as those surrounding proselytism.

Faith Action are an organisation that works across different faith groups, helping them to engage in community action across the UK. In 2014, in partnership with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, they launched a 'Faith Covenant' which provides a set of principles for faith groups and local authorities to sign up to in order to build trust and facilitate common working.¹⁵ This has since been signed by 13 local authorities covering over 5 million people in the UK. This is a prime example of a broker organisation mediating

the language and cultures of faith and secular groups in order to facilitate more constructive joint working. This is also highlighted in the survey, where one respondent said: "Depending on the level of experience and awareness, it may be helpful to use a link organisation (like Cinnamon Network) to help work through any cultural differences."

Of course broker organisations do not provide a perfect, 'one size fits all' model for church-secular partnership. As some churches we spoke to noted, being in a close relationship with a broker organisation that runs a particular social action 'franchise' can limit the independence of local congregations to meet the particular needs of their communities in the most effective ways. There is also a risk that social needs that are not currently being addressed by a broker organisation fall by the wayside. But for those churches without sufficient resources and scale to go it alone, or who want to set up more formal partnerships with larger secular organisations, the services provided by broker organisations appear to be a critical factor in enabling successful joint working. And with our survey finding that 80 per cent of church-secular partnerships are currently not mediated by any broker organisations, it seems that there is still considerable space for these organisations to grow and develop. Indeed the success of broker organisations on issues like food poverty and debt give rise to the question of whether there are other issues facing the UK which merit new or expanded broker organisations to unlock the capacity of local churches. Perhaps the most obvious possibility is loneliness, which is often now described as being an 'epidemic' in the UK.¹⁶ With the recent appointment of a Government Minister for Loneliness, the time would seem right to expand the currently embryonic infrastructure enabling churches to take an evidence-based and strategic approach to tackling the issue in their local community.

There are already various organisations working on loneliness, through befriending programmes, social activities and buddy schemes. But perhaps a broker organisation could help churches develop programmes on loneliness the same way organisations working on food have for combating hunger - offering an 'off-the-shelf' model, collecting evidence on the state of loneliness, and connecting local churches to funders who want to fund both locally and at scale.

14. Trussell Trust (2016, Oct 27). 'Strong link between increased benefit sanctions and higher foodbank use, says Oxford research' [press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/10/University-of-Oxford-foodbanks-sanctions.pdf>. For the original research see Loopstra, R., Reeves, A., Taylor-Robinson, D., Barr, B., McKee, M., & Stuckler, D. (2015). Austerity, sanctions, and the rise of food banks in the UK. *BMJ*, 350

15. See APPG Faith and Society (2014). 'Faith covenant'. Retrieved from <https://www.faihandandsociety.org/covenant/>

CASE STUDY: ST PETER'S BETHNAL GREEN

In 2014, a member of the congregation at St Peter's Bethnal Green heard about the work of the charity Resurgo in helping churches run the Spear employment programme. Upon visiting another church-based project she was inspired to bring the model to East London for the first time, and with the support of the Vicar and other church members, Spear Bethnal Green was soon born. The Spear programme is run exclusively in partnership with local churches, who create individual charitable trusts which fundraise to employ a small team of coaches. These coaches are then trained and resourced by the central Resurgo team to run the year-long Spear curriculum, which involves an intensive 6-week course followed by one-to-one support to help 16-25 year olds get into, and stay in, work. After this year, over 75% of young people on the programme have successfully found and maintained employment.¹⁷

Partnership working is built into the DNA of Spear. Recruitment to the programme often happens through local Job Centres or by referrals from a range of local public sector and charitable services. Whilst on the programme, participants take part in a workplace visit hosted by a local company, and are given a mock interview by professional volunteers. In Bethnal Green, Spear has developed such good relationships with local businesses that many have become repeat employers



of their young people, including a financial firm in the City where Spear graduates now amount to over 10% of their workforce.

Such a range and depth of partnerships is only possible due to the unique combination of strengths found between the local church and Resurgo. As Centre Manager Tim Lovell explains, the church provides a sense of local rootedness and permanence which partners like the Job Centres find very attractive. "A lot of the relationship is based on the fact that we're not just a flash in the pan, that we're here for the long-term". But at the same time, the rigour and success of the programme, which Tim largely attributes to the culture and skill of Resurgo, makes Spear Bethnal Green an attractive partner to many. "When you meet a Work Coach or someone who is a decision maker and they've had a customer, as they call it, who has participated in the Spear programme and really been transformed, that's gold."

"When you meet a Work Coach or someone who is a decision maker and they've had a customer, as they call it, who has participated in the Spear programme and really been transformed, that's gold."

16. See Easton, M. (2018, Feb 11). 'How should we tackle the loneliness epidemic?', BBC. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42887932> and Smith, H. (2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/loneliness-lethal-condition-therapy-psychology-cox-commission-ons-health-a8311781.html>

17. Resurgo (n.d.). 'Our impact'. Retrieved from <https://resurgo.org.uk/impact/impact/>

CHAPTER 5 CHURCH PARTNERSHIPS IN THE WIDER SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

In some areas, church partnerships have been so successful - providing food, counselling and welfare support all in one place - that they come to resemble an alternative social safety net. This triggers many difficult questions for both church leaders and for policy makers. This chapter zooms out, to look more abstractly at the role of church partnership in the wider social ecosystem.

SYSTEM PRESERVATION OR SYSTEM CHANGE?

In taking on roles that previously would have fallen to the state, faith-based groups run into various dilemmas and difficulties. These can be divided into roughly three categories: preservation, co-optation and escalation. Some fear that by taking on welfare provision, churches might unwittingly preserve a dysfunctional system. Abby Jitendra of the Trussell Trust said: "We don't want to become part of a negative feedback loop. Earlier on, it was really about meeting need and covering gaps. But now the focus has shifted to system change. Because at what point are you really just propping up a dysfunctional system? We have been here for such a long time. How can we really challenge hunger?"

Salvation Army officer Nick Coke shares these concerns. "I do worry that by just filling the gaps we sometimes allow injustice to continue. When I see MPs visiting food banks for photo ops, as though they are a good thing, it makes me feel quite sick. Instead of paying such visits, the MPs should be doing something about the food crisis." In theological terms, he called this the tension between justice and mercy. "I think it's easier to do the mercy

bit, and it makes you feel great to help this person in need. But actually, once you start talking about justice, people tend not to like you so much, so we tend to shy away from that. But unless we hold the two things together, I think we probably are probably not following the gospel."

COOPTATION

This is closely related to the second difficulty: cooptation. Nick Coke encountered this dilemma especially when the Salvation Army was working with the Home Office to help resettle refugee families. On a single day, he might be protesting outside the Home Office, calling on them to accept more unaccompanied minors, only to walk into the building for a meeting about community sponsorship a few hours later. These partnerships come with ethical questions. Coke: "I worry sometimes that we just become an arm of the state. That's not the job of the church. I think you should think carefully about what you are being co-opted by. Are you being true to who you are and your values? You can only work that out in the doing. I don't have the answer to how you manage that tension. It's one you sort of just have to work through." Here, the advocacy function of broker organisations can also be useful. By leveraging aggregated data for political change, individual churches can tackle not just the symptoms but also the root causes of social issues.

ESCALATION OF NEED

When social need rises, however, it can become difficult to work towards bigger goals or system

change, especially for smaller organisations. When the state retreats further, churches and charities suddenly face an escalating spiral of need. Paul O'Brien, who runs a small employment charity from Liverpool Cathedral, finds himself having to help people meet their basic living needs. "Everytime [a participant] gets sanctioned it makes my job harder. Instead of me supporting that person back into employment, I'm supporting that person to survive. It also makes people depressed, anxious and ashamed. More and more often, we find ourselves ticking the mental health box when we register people in these situations."

Welfare state retrenchment can also make it more difficult for churches to continue their social action projects. Sometimes directly, for example when local authorities quit giving out grants for local projects, but also indirectly. Many church projects are dependent on partners, who are in turn dependent on the state. Food banks are largely dependent on statutory organisations referring to them. Phil Maltby, of City Church Preston, runs a small food project in collaboration with a local Sure Start Children's Centre, who refer to the food project and provide ongoing support for families in need 'beyond just a handout'. "The big struggle is the massive funding reduction for the Childrens Centre", Maltby said. "Their ability to identify families and engage with families is really reduced. There may come a time when the childrens centre simply does not have the capacity to engage at all." In the long run, this is a costly development, as more children may need to be placed into care without the support of the Children's Centre and the food project.

EXACERBATING INEQUALITIES

Even where partnership projects are successful at meeting need, as many clearly are, there are difficult questions about the way the reliance of church social action affects inequality. In some cases, church social action has created more inclusive and more socially diverse church communities. But at the same time, it appears that the most disadvantaged areas also struggle the most to find volunteers and institutional access. Some of the most successful church partnerships rely on volunteers with extensive bureaucratic knowhow who are willing to invest significant amounts of time in the project. Sarah Chapman and the other founders of the Wandsworth food bank had set up meetings and subsequent partnerships with no fewer than 95 referral partners before the food bank even opened.

This is an incredible achievement, and one that more disadvantaged communities might struggle to replicate.

Another partnership project was lucky to have a congregation member and former civil servant from the Department for Communities and Local Government, who was happy to write grant applications. When asked about the grant applications he shrugged and smiled. "It's something I know how to do." This is a big advantage in a time when funding for local initiatives is increasingly on a project-by-project basis. However, the time, social connections and bureaucratic know-how required to make it work are not spread evenly across communities. "In areas of the highest need, there might not be enough people with the spare time to volunteer in a food bank", Abby Jitendra says. "That is another reason why food banks are an inadequate response - we are not an adequate replacement for a safety net. In a sense, there is no such thing as a successful food bank."

CHURCHES IN THE WIDER SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

Many places have seen community organisations disappear over the past decades. "There aren't many left", Salvation Army officer Nick Coke says. "We've got sports clubs maybe, but what is a sports club's intention? It's really to play sport. Maybe the pub, which is a nice place for community, but even they're in decline. We see the decline of institutions, whether it be the local union branch or the conservative club - there are so few places left. Whereas the church has a sort of long-term presence in communities." Abby Jitendra of the Trussell Trust makes a similar argument. "As one of my colleagues likes to put it: churches and faith groups want to be one of the spokes in the wheel of the local community. Now, slowly all the other spokes of the wheel are coming off."

The increase in partnership working is in part a response to austerity, but it is also threatened by it. When social services and local authorities are cut, we cannot assume that the church will simply step in and take on the tasks. In fact, many church-based social action projects rely on a web of partners (many of whom are supported by the state), for funding, vetting and support. Several church leaders expressed concern about further cuts to local authorities and welfare provision, which might endanger the viability of partnerships. The challenge is not just to promote church partnerships, but to create strong communities in which these partnerships can thrive.

CASE STUDY: ST JOHN'S, FELIXSTOWE

When Reverend Andrew Dotchin went around Felixstowe in 2015 to introduce himself as the new vicar, he encountered Level Two, a youth project which had stepped in when statutory provision disappeared. Dotchin introduced himself and offered to help in any way he could. "I said to them 'Hi I'm local vicar, I've got a good track record of being open and welcoming to young and LGBT people. You might not always find all churches welcoming, but please use me. It took a year of people trying to find out if I was true to my word. And that's how the partnership came about."

Now the church hosts weekly meetings for LGBT youths in collaboration with Level Two. There is counselling and support, but it is mainly a social group, Dotchin says. "It's a group of LGBT young people who want to be together with other LGBT young people in an open space, where they know they will not be questioned." Most sessions will see about a dozen teenagers turn up. The partnership was possible because Dotchin was very upfront about the values of the church, and his support for LGBT inclusion more specifically. This is communicated consistently and continuously by the church, for example by flying the rainbow flag most Saturdays. "That might get up some people's noses, but I don't want any more young gay people to commit suicide."

Dotchin is referring, in part, to the case of Lizzie Lowe, a 14-year old girl from Didsbury, near Manchester, who committed suicide thinking her parents and her community would not accept her as a gay Christian. In the wake of her death, her church decided to change its approach. Lizzie's vicar, Nick Bundock, said: "[Previously] I felt, wrongly, it was better not to stir up a hornet's nest about sexuality."¹⁸ Now, the church is more explicitly welcoming of LGBT people, even hosting the first-ever Didsbury Pride.¹⁹

The project in Felixstowe speaks to the power of a clear values base, both to the congregation and to potential partners. This applies not just to LGBT issues, but to any values a church might hold, as many survey responses highlight. "Identify shared values and agree a plan that manages expectations", one church leader said. "It's important to know who you are and what your values are and then take a humble and open approach", said another. Dotchin adds to this: "The lesson I'm trying to get across to my colleagues is, 'you know you're an inclusive church but does anyone else?' Sometimes that means literally waving flags."



"You know you're an inclusive church but does anyone else?"

Reverend Andrew Dotchin

18. Abbit, B. (2018, Sep 23). 'Lizzie Lowe killed herself thinking the church wouldn't accept she was gay', Manchester Evening News. Retrieved from <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/lizzie-lowe-death-church-changes-15185483>
19. Bundock, N. (n.d.). 'Why Didsbury Pride? From Tolerance to Celebration – Nick Bundock reflects on a memorable day' (blog). Retrieved from <http://stjamesandemmanuel.org/didsburypride/>

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS

FAITHFUL PARTNERS

- Churches should be open to working with a wide variety of secular organisations, depending on their circumstances and the opportunities available to them. They should approach potential partnerships with openness but also with thoughtfulness, mindful of the benefits and challenges that this approach offers.
- In particular churches should give careful thought to the question of whether and how they intend to share their faith through their social action work, and be upfront with secular partners about this.
- Church leaders should proactively cultivate relationships with secular organisations in their local area as a seedbed for potential partnerships. Those with responsibility for managing or overseeing church leaders should encourage and support them in this, particularly in less established denominations which might be considered 'hard to reach' by secular authorities.
- Denominations and training colleges should include material on church-secular partnerships as part of training programmes for those becoming church leaders, enabling them to engage with the benefits and challenges of partnership working before taking up their roles. Denominations should also offer space for church leaders to reflect specifically on these partnerships as part of ongoing learning and development programmes.

A PRESUMPTION OF GOOD FAITH

- Blanket policies against working with faith groups should be strongly discouraged, and the starting point of engagement should be a presumption of good faith rather than a fear of proselytism.
- Local authorities should build on the good work of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and

Society and adopt their own version of the Faith Covenant.²⁰

- Local authorities should seek to understand and address any practical barriers to partnership working, for example by creating 'minimal paperwork' routes for smaller local organisations like churches to access funding for social action projects.

BROKING FOR BRITAIN

- Wherever possible, churches should seek to come together in their locality and develop a place-based brokering infrastructure to enable larger and more systematic partnerships with secular organisations.²¹
- Organisations working with multiple churches on particular social issues should reflect on the role they play in brokering church-secular partnerships, and invest in developing their capacity to do this more effectively in the future.
- Denominations and senior church leaders should seek to understand the range of brokering organisations their churches are engaging with, and work to fill any strategic gaps - whether at a denominational, place-based or a thematic level.

SPOKES IN THE WHEEL

- As well as being open to the idea of funding local church projects directly, Government should, where appropriate, seek to invest in broker organisations which can unlock the capacity of local churches to act for the public good. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should commission research to scope the range and scale of existing broker organisations, and examine which models of funding could most effectively support them to scale up their activities.

20. See APPG Faith and Society (2014). 'Faith covenant'. Retrieved from <https://www.faithandsociety.org/covenant/>

21. See <https://www.christianactionbristol.org.uk> for one example of this in Bristol

- Politicians should avoid language which sets up a dichotomy between state action and church action, and instead seek to communicate the reality that churches can and should be key parts of local social eco-systems in which the State too will often be a vital actor.
- Local authorities should proactively include churches in appropriate fora for discussing partnership working to tackle local issues - for example including the people who run food banks in discussions about strategies against poverty. Where appropriate they should consider creating specific events and structures which enable churches to come together and develop larger scale partnerships.

A TRUSSELL TRUST FOR LONELINESS?

- Britain is facing a loneliness epidemic. Whilst many churches are already active in tackling loneliness in their communities, there is a lack of joined up thinking and best practice sharing on this topic, and a gap in partnership working between churches and Public Health bodies, the NHS and Government. This gap should be addressed either by a new organisation or by the scaling up of existing provision with the aim of maximising the potential contribution of churches to tackling loneliness, with an explicit remit to develop new and improved partnerships between churches and secular organisations on this issue.

APPENDIX A GUIDE FOR CHURCHES INTERESTED IN PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Step 1. Map local need and discuss within your church community which issues your church could most meaningfully contribute to. Have an open discussion about how addressing this issue relates to the core values of the church. Discuss whether the project will serve predominantly to meet need, predominantly to share the faith, or both. Be open with potential volunteers and partners about your values and your aims.

Step 2. Explore the resources your church can offer in partnership working. This can include a physical space, volunteers and financial resources as well as contacts, expertise and practical know-how. The most successful projects often build on the skills and connections already present within the congregation. Also consider linking up with other churches and faith groups to maximise impact.

Step 3. Reach out to potential partners and/or broker organisations. Start building a wider network of partnerships, or capitalise on existing ones. At this point, prioritise open and frank communication. Share past experiences which might shape your expectations of future partnerships. Discuss what both sides want to achieve with the partnership. Documents such as the faith covenant can also be useful. The non-church partner should operate on a presumption of good faith. Equally, it is important to have a clear agreement on matters such as inclusivity and sharing one's faith. E.g. are both

sides comfortable with the fact that volunteers might offer to pray for food parcel recipients?

Step 4. If setting up formally as a charity, start preparations in plenty of time. Steps like opening a bank account and registering with the Charity Commission can take a long time.

Step 5. Prepare for the project launch. Check in with volunteers and stakeholders and open clear channels of communication to potential visitors/service users.

Step 6. Once the project has started, create space to regularly reflect on whether the partnership is allowing both sides to express their values and meet their aims.

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It has been a true privilege to be allowed to observe the wonderful work determined volunteers in and around churches are doing throughout the country. We dedicate this project to them.

Errors and omissions remain, as always, our own.

David Barclay and Sacha Hilhorst

August 2019

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