

ASSETS for LIFE: community development work as mission & evangelism

I. INTRODUCTION

But why community development work?

Many churches today live under the familiar pressure of dwindling congregations and falling revenues. Their members are perpetually involved in the time-honoured work of pastoral service, Sunday observance and the maintenance of church buildings. Why, then should congregations become involved in community development initiatives? Why should they devote time, effort and money to people they don't know and who would normally have no contact with the church?

We believe that there are at least three strong reasons why the Church should always be outward looking to the wider community. Firstly, it is part of the traditional mission and social teaching of the church to serve all the community, not just its own members. Secondly, the church is part of the world, not a separate entity - its buildings are a constant geographic presence and its congregations mix with the people of their neighbourhoods. Thirdly, the Church has unique advantages over secular organisations in bringing about improvement and change.

It should also be remembered that this sort of engagement is taking place in a generally favourable political climate. Policy makers have come to focus increasingly on community development and participation in the face of the decline of traditional forms of civil society such as the trades unions, political parties and local associations. The church - as this document illustrates - can provide a focus for new community development initiatives that reflect the mood of the times.

Mission

Involvement with the community is an important part of the Church's mission alongside pastoral activities. Engaging with community issues builds on a gospel requirement to proclaim our faith and serve our neighbour. In the New Testament, reference is made 'to serve'. (see Mark 10: 42-45) The point of service is to identify with, become involved in and live for the good of all people, not just with people the same as themselves.

Over the past twenty years there has been a resurgence of commitment to the idea that God has a special concern for those who are pushed to the margins of society - the shanty town dwellers of the developing world, and the homeless, the mentally ill, the lonely and the socially-excluded in our own society. The former Anglican Bishop of Liverpool talked of Christians having a 'bias to the poor' and the Catholic Bishops of Latin America adopted the term 'preferential option for the poor'. This stance indicated solidarity with groups pushed to the margins by prevailing social and economic structures. It meant working alongside these people as opposed to a paternalistic approach of providing charitable gifts and little else.

Since the 1980s many churches have responded to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers and have become involved in campaigns such as Church Action on Poverty, aimed at tackling the structural causes of poverty and influencing policy. There has been a shift from working mainly with people from our group (Christians) towards active collaboration with people from different faiths (and no faith), lifestyles and backgrounds.

The Church is part of the world

The popular and enduring image of the Church today is that of the largest building in the neighbourhood which is sometimes used for weddings, funerals, Thai chi classes and jumble sales. But both the physical buildings of the churches and the congregations that gather in them

are an integral part of the neighbourhood in which they are situated. The Church includes professionals, workers, volunteers, senior citizens, the well off and not so well off. All are affected by what goes on in the wider world. We have a duty to speak up for what is right and just, and for things that will improve our neighbourhoods.

In addition, the need for community, belonging and spirituality in our diverse and sometimes fragmented society clearly still exists. Cosmopolitan magazine has recently appointed a spirituality editor because its young women readers have started to think there is more to life than sex, fashion and celebrities. The Church can respond to this situation by facilitating community development, by helping to build social relations between people and between communities. The development of social relations has two important aspects: it gives excluded and marginal communities a voice in changing structures and policies which affect them and it also gives people a sense of belonging and community.

Unique advantages in bringing about change

The Church has unique features, which gives it advantages over secular agencies in initiatives designed to bring change and improvements to neighbourhoods.

- **A physical presence.** The Church has a physical presence in most neighbourhoods. Its facilities can be used for community activities.
- **A full-time presence.** Unlike government agencies, church personnel do not leave at night but have a continuing presence.
- **Constant core values of social justice and hope.**
- **Geographically based social organisation.** Individual churches are able to relate directly to the people living in a geographical area and build up a knowledge of needs and resources
- **Spiritually based groups.** Local churches can offer support to members of the community at times of crisis - bereavement, illness and financial hardship.
- **An inclusive approach to worship and community service.** The Church is accessible and inclusive to those of no faith who are searching for a sense of community and a spiritual dimension to life.

But a word of warning. Anyone who has been involved in community development work will know how slow progress can be. Sometimes it is difficult to overcome the initial inertia and lack of confidence that many people feel when it comes to changing their situation. Community development work is not an easy option. Rev Malcolm Brown, formerly of the William Temple Foundation, illustrates the modern picture of community in the following way: *'there will of course be people, and they will embody much diversity; no community now lives by one story.....The church will be there, neither dominating the scene nor an irrelevance; the church building is only the outward sign of a community-within-communities ... it is for the peoplepart of the fabric of their lives, but having no oppressive claim on them'*.

In conclusion, there is also good evidence to show that churches that actively engage with the surrounding community are much more likely to see growth. Churches should always look outwards. They should become centres of hope, solidarity and life rather than fortresses to protect the faithful. The *Assets for Life* resource pack provides stories of an outward looking Church that is making a difference to people's lives.