

KEY FINDINGS:

POVERTY AND FRESH EXPRESSIONS

EMERGING FORMS OF CHURCH IN DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES

Working in deprived areas, many Christians have often tried to set up initiatives and projects that support people materially and also seek to connect people to God and the wider church. Church Urban Fund and Fresh Expressions Ltd commissioned a study into how this was being outworked. This report summarises the key issues facing emerging forms of church in deprived communities:

- **Faith in white working class culture** To what extent are the groups supposed to accept the culture within which they work and show the gospel through it? Is there a role for challenging the culture or is that to impose values taken from a more prosperous lifestyle?
- **Indigenous versus incoming Christians** How permeable are the boundaries of these communities? Can they accept incoming leaders or is it essential to develop local leadership?
- **Mission as presence and empowerment** Long-term presence in these communities was essential to establish credibility but all these groups moved beyond presence to engage people in conversations about the meaning and value of their lives.
- **Relationships with parish and diocese** The initiatives had varied relationships with local parishes, depending on the style and attitude of the local vicar and the expectations of local congregations.
- **Supporting appropriate models of leadership** Leadership was often team based, with a much more blurred sense between lay and ordained. How can the traditional church leader model be integrated into a much more informal and complex scenario without damaging the local leadership team?
- **The reality of reflective practice** All groups valued the catalyst of an outside facilitator. However many struggled to spend time on action/reflection due to work and time pressures. In stretched and stressful areas, how are people able to free up time to recharge, reflect and learn from their work?

BACKGROUND

Church Urban Fund helps to support a network of church- and faith-based voluntary groups in England's most deprived areas. As Christians have worked in deprived areas, many have often tried to set up initiatives and projects that not only support people materially but seek to connect people to God and the wider church. Some of these have intentionally been Fresh Expressions of church, others have grown organically. However all are dealing with the issue of expressing a Christian community in areas of high deprivation and large unchurched population. Six groups were brought together to see what reflections and themes could be shared with the wider church.

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The projects involved in the research are:

- **The Garden Café, Newham, London** – A longstanding (since 1994) community café which runs activities as well as being a place for people to meet, eat and build relationships.
- **The Lighthouse, Hartcliffe and Withywood, Bristol** – In 2002, a group of Christians set up a fresh expressions community by building relationships through running social, prayer and discussion groups in their houses.
- **Oaks, Skelmersdale** – A fresh expression of church set up in 2003 working out of a specially refurbished and remodelled council house.
- **Hull Youth for Christ** – Since 1997 a team based on the principles of committed, long-term incarnational presence has been living in Boulevard area providing youth and children-focused projects.
- **The Ark, Hull** – Starting in 2000, this is based in two adjoining council houses providing refuge and resource to young women and their families.
- **Paul and Barney's Place, Quinton** – A church plant in a deprived estate which has been running a Community Café since 2002.

Paul and Barney's Place – A Place for Hospitality and Listening

Paul and Barney's Place is a community café and meeting space set up by the church plant in 2002. Unusually for a café it only serves drinks buying in sandwiches and hot food from the Bakers in the same parade of shops. This had the advantage of supporting a local trader and freeing up staff and volunteer time to build relationships. The story of the café is one of sustaining relationships with people who are isolated, had physical or mental health problems or who were in search of a sense of belonging. The policy of using only Christian volunteers has led to the shop being a focus for spiritual and prayer support.

1 FAITH IN WHITE WORKING CLASS CULTURE

Most of the groups were working in white working class communities with high and persistent levels of worklessness, often inter-generational. Many people lead chaotic lives with no set pattern to the day or week. There is also a wariness of public buildings and authority figures. The traditional church, patterned on the working week, has struggled to engage in these communities. The initiatives were often set up partly in response to the fact that local people struggled to engage with traditional 'Sunday church'. However, in trying to be more culturally appropriate, how far should the church accept or challenge the culture that had grown up around worklessness.

2 INDIGENOUS VERSUS INCOMING CHRISTIANS

Within the groups, there was a wide variety of opinion. Long term residence in the community was seen as vital by some – experiencing all that other residents experienced by way of facilities (e.g. schools), crime and isolation. Even ordained clergy who moved into a parish for five years or so were seen as transient and not belonging to the community. However, others viewed that exposing your family to long-term residence in very deprived neighbourhoods was too high a price to pay. Resilience could only be sustained if there was regular respite. Also having relationships with people from outside the area broadened social horizons and helped tackle issues of segregation.

3 MISSION AS PRESENCE AND EMPOWERMENT

Mission was understood in two key ways:

- An incarnational presence in the everyday life of the community
- Engaging with residents to empower them to articulate and begin to meet their needs

Hospitality was the primary means of mission. Two groups ran cafes and three others had a house which people could gather. Hospitality created the sense of belonging together which made it possible to raise questions of belief. Rather than inviting people to church, the groups worked with the idea of a 'third place' (not home or work) where people can meet and relationships of trust would be formed. These 'third places' could be places of belonging without believing where the careful work of restoring the capacity for self-belief preceded the evangelistic task.

"We are a non-residential sanctuary – a place of hope, safety and encouragement and where there is the potential for change. A place where the love of Jesus is shared and nothing is expected in return."

The Ark, Hull

4 RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARISH AND DIOCESE

In the study, the relationship between the project/mission initiative and the local parish church was a mixed and dynamic one. Where the local parish church had been involved in 'planting' the initiative, the relationships were relatively straightforward. However, as these plants have grown and developed, there were issues over whether it would be appropriate for the group to become a parish in its own right or whether this would overwhelm the group. For ecumenical/para-church initiatives, one of the key issues was how to relate to the historic churches on the estate. These churches had expectations that new Christians would join them. When this didn't happen, it was because the new Christians failed to fit in and the churches did not want to amend their practice to accommodate new believers. Another key issue overall was the outlook of the local parish clergy. Where the incumbent understood parish to mean controlling all activities with Anglican affiliations within the parish, the relationship faltered. Where the incumbent valued a diversity of ministries without feeling that their ministry was diminished, the relationship flourished.

- **Oaks, Skelmersdale** – local parish supportive, the problems of the estate long recognised. Presence of a Pioneer Minister creates a profile for the parish in the diocese.
- **Ark, Hull** – a change in incumbent has improved the relationship with the parish. The parish church mainly serves area of newer housing rather than the estate on which the Ark is located.
- **YFC, Hull** – working for a para-church agency makes the relationship with the parish more straight forward – there is acceptance although not always support and understanding.
- **Garden Café, Newham** – at times a very supportive and positive relationship with practical help in seeking funding – now a cooler period in which the café is seen as more distant from the church.
- **Lighthouse, Bristol** – questions about whether Lighthouse is a bridge to local church attendance but without local churches wanting to engage with the need for enculturation.
- **Paul and Barney's** – local parish initiated the plant so they are supportive but a long interregnum drained the resources of the priest for a period.

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5 SUPPORTING APPROPRIATE MODELS OF LEADERSHIP

The Church of England has a clear model of leadership – the incumbent, now supplemented by the pioneer minister. These models focus on one person who is usually trained and supported outside the community. Groups had concerns that the model of leadership present in local church was that of the educated professional and so seemed remote from local residents. The groups involved in the research offer a range of models including partnerships between residents and non-residents, married couples working together, lay workers and volunteer-led groups.

The fact that these initiatives are not based in a church has meant that the distinction between ordained and lay was less significant than in parish life. The creation of Ordained Pioneer Ministers ran the risk, in some settings, of overlaying simplicity and formality on a more complex and informal reality. Where oversight was interpreted as ‘being in charge’ the energies of other leaders could be quenched. Where oversight was seen as integrating a diversity of ministries, it seemed possible to live with messiness.

6 THE REALITY OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Groups valued reflective practice but faced challenges in building this into the way they worked. Meetings often got taken up with providing mutual support and to plan for immediate work. For some, there were no immediate colleagues with whom they could meet to carry out reflective work. The groups valued a theologically trained outsider who could help them make connections with the Christian tradition.

“We work in a desperate dark area with many lost and broken people. We have witnessed deaths and births, tragedies and miracles, pain and blessings.” **Garden Café, Newham London**

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Emerging Forms of Church in Deprived Communities

- To commit to a pattern of theological reflection, seeking the help of facilitator where necessary.

To Church Urban Fund

- To continue to offer a network for emerging forms of church in the most deprived communities

To Fresh Expressions Ltd

- To publish resources that show awareness of the distinctive issues faced by Fresh Expressions of Church in deprived communities

To Dioceses

- To ensure effective communication between those officers responsible for Fresh Expressions of Church and those responsible for social justice work in deprived communities
- To facilitate networks of practitioners for mutual support and train volunteer facilitators who will work with groups to facilitate theological reflection

FURTHER INFORMATION

A copy of the full report is available as a free download from www.cuf.org.uk/research. For more information about this study, please contact Andy Turner at the Church Urban Fund (andy.turner@cuf.org.uk).