The Church & Community Work ~ Critical Partners are the Best Partners

As a Church of England Bishop in the East of England Region, I write from that limited perspective, and yet the Church of England perspective is one which has sought to play its part through many generations in creating, with government and other partners, the sort of society we believe God wants to see. The Church of England has always been a global player through our world-wide Anglican Communion but today we have the added advantage of living in a time of rapid advancement in multi-faith and ecumenical understanding and partnership. For myself, I started actively participating in community development work in the nineteen sixties and have been reflecting on my continued involvement, both in this country and in the United States, until today. So, what have we been learning?

Primarily, we have learnt that getting involved with community social action projects is worth while for faith groups, despite the difficulties we sometimes encounter. Our wish to become involved arises from a number of factors. First, these places, many deeply deprived, matter to us because we live in them. Indeed, the Christian church has almost certainly been evident in each community since its formative history. Furthermore we believe God is deeply concerned with human flourishing and well-being and from this basis people of faith have a mandate to engage in the sustaining of community life and the development of societies where human beings can reach their fullest potential. This engagement is underpinned by moral and ethical frameworks which have been developed from practice over centuries and which offer us a firm basis for our current projects, programmes and engagement. Our very deep respect for the environment derives from understanding God as creator, whilst appreciation of God as judge of all demands of us fairness, responsibility and courage to commit ourselves to others in community, especially communities of the poor. This is why so many key features of care in our society were originated by the Church – witness the schools, hospitals, hospices, probation and personnel services of our nation.

Christians derive from their belief in God as Trinity (the united relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit) a firm basis for understanding reality as relational – so demanding that faith is not merely personal and private but has to be worked out in community and relationship. Partnership is therefore a key theological word, in the same way that much of the vocabulary of today's community development work is derived from theology – not least the word 'regeneration' itself.

However, it has to be admitted that our experience of partnership has not been altogether positive. Through the seventies and early eighties the Church often committed its energies and financial resources to youth projects and community centres in partnership with local government. It was largely in this way that the Church of England became the largest provider of youth work in England. But as time went on we found political climates changing and other areas of need being targeted in preference to youth and community work. Health and children's provision became the attracter of funding and investment in youth and community was reduced – and the church was often left holding the baby, much to our financial cost. On reflection, we had often also been prompted by local government partners to build oversized projects, on the promise of continued support, which in the event proved not to be forthcoming.

Another difficulty which the Church has had in partnering other organisations is that our own original aims can become skewed by our partners' own agendas. This is well and good

when in partnership, for each of the partners must be prepared to bend to the needs of the other. However, we have sometimes found ourselves with partners who are largely directed from a distant centre, in which case the local needs and peculiarities are in danger of being ignored. In more recent years, it is clear that 'ticking boxes' in order to gain funding can move a project away from what the local people know to be the best way forward for the community and towards something which cannot deliver in a way which is acceptable to the locality. Nevertheless, despite these failures, some sensitive partnerships have issued in exemplary community development.

Another worry which besets the Church is that the partners with whom we often find ourselves working do not actually live in the area being addressed. They are coming to it from outside, with agendas formed in an altogether different place and culture. How helpful it is therefore when a partner shows proven local and long-term commitment.

On the other hand, we can fully understand why many groups and authorities find it difficult to work with us! First, we can appear quite amateur in the way we go about our involvement. We do not know the proper jargon or have the expertise required to engage at a professional level. This is sometimes borne of lack of application, but more often it is a symptom of the fact that our prime concern is to be of the people and not just representative of them. Working particularly with the powerless, it is so easy to impress them with alien skills and acronyms, and not listen and learn from them. By seeking this deep sensitivity however, and especially when done over many decades, the Church takes on a culture of seeming amateur-ness which is more deeply rooted in the locality, having won trust and respect through its committed listening. The trick is to stay true to that sharing of marginalisation while at the same time learning the skills of advocacy and community action.

Second, others may find it difficult to work with the Church because we, like other faith groups, are often perceived as working from a proselytising agenda – trying to make converts to our faith. This indeed can be the case with some, but more often it is more a matter of our faith presenting us with a series of values which we simply cannot ignore and which prompt us to ask questions which may prove uncomfortable for our partners (just as they are uncomfortable for ourselves!) Let me offer now some examples of how our faith values raise up questions in the face of current regeneration and development issues.

Example One: *Safety and Sustainability*.

Maximum choice and convenience hemmed around with safety and security. To jump in your car and arrive at the shopping mall or work with the minimum of fuss. This is so often the prime concern of planners. But does a Christian believe that a proper degree of risk is necessary to human flourishing? Are the risk-averse environments now being built fostering sterility, since they leave little space for trying out alternative ways of being together. Eric Kuhne, architect of the Bluewater shopping mall, has spoken for example about his endeavour to introduce question and challenge into its design, in order to attract and entice people to reach beyond the given.

We need also to question the sustainability of the urban sprawl which often substitutes for planned growth across the Region. We do not have the natural resources required to see future generations commuting to work and shopping across great distances and yet we are predicating much of our present design on the assumption that there will be an infinite availability of cheap transport. As a nation, we are also now questioning whether our

systems of national and local governance are sufficiently robust to manage the tensions of frustrated aspiration which drive these sprawling areas where only minimal community infrastructure is in place. The estates and communities of the sixties were designed by our predecessors who wholeheartedly believed that they had learnt the lessons of the past and see into the future – but just how sustainable have their designs proved to be?

Second example: *Finding out who we are.*

The built environment plays a large part in forming human identity In any culture, the symbolic nature of our homes and public places is paramount – they help us tell the story of who we are. Yet much of what is currently being built around the UK is based on 'same size fits all' planning – the cul-de-sac suburb or the 'shopping mall' high street. Consumer outlets sell a choice of identities through fashion, sport and leisure life-styles and popular culture. But is all this just a compensation for loss of communities in which people have hitherto found identity? If this is the case, then we must be much more circumspect before demolishing old areas, and before we engineer new developments as a finance-driven exercise. We will pay the price in other than financial terms.

Third example: *Losing the Supports for human flourishing.*

The business practices engaged in by many companies, as part of the need to cut costs and remain globally competitive, involve outsourcing and short-term contracts. This has introduced uncertainty, job-hopping and location change within a working lifetime. We see change in the family unit from the extended, locally-gathered model to one where the unit size is much smaller and dispersed. Our planning is accepting and enabling this to occur with increasing ease. But is this pandering to the further disintegration of communities? Are we designing suburbs which are making it even more difficult to learn what social and local responsibility might be? Is it necessary for human flourishing to learn the skills of real-time rather than virtual community living, for if it is, we seem to be tacitly negating that possibility. The churches offer local opportunity to learn and affirm these skills and to distinguish between mature and immature forms of dependency. This is a skill we bring to any partnership.

Fourth example: *Planning for misery*

Having moved deliberately to a newly built area to escape the fear of crime and insecurity, another more internal insecurity raises its head for many. Mental heath research here and in the USA suggests that some form of 'new town blues' is again rearing its head from beneath the surface of a comfortable and 'successful' urban-sprawl lifestyle. With debt, commuting, and ever longer work hours to sustain the new life-style, would it have been better to help such folk learn to enjoy the contested space of the city? Shamefully, our default response is merely to appeal for better mental health care in new developments.

All this is to say nothing of those who are displaced by or abandoned in favour of the new developments. Often they are excluded from access to work, services and decent housing. In some cases the 're-development' of older areas is attended to merely by appending or 'bolting-on' new areas in the hope of some trickle down of benefit accruing to the older run-down area. Thus far we have seen no good evidence of this treatment meeting with success. Indeed, many new developments are built now right alongside older areas with substantial walls or 'fire-breaks' built in to the plan in order to maintain the distinction between the areas, and hence uphold the prices of the new.

The stress is felt not only by the populace but also by the natural environment. In the Thames Gateway large housing estates are even now being built right under forests of electricity pylons and over heavily toxic post-industrial land. Further down the Thames estuary, as elsewhere, the anxiety of living in estates built in dangerous flood plain localities exacerbates the stress.

Example five: *How difficult it is to build community*

Newly-built areas have to invent a new history to call their own, encouraged by community newsletters, local radio, festivals, and so on. Churches know how to be incubators and promoters of this social capital, but it requires investment of people, buildings, finance and energy. Other agencies have similar investment needs to make community happen. Where is this ongoing investment coming from and how have the developers/planners guaranteed it? Even in the well-supported projects, funding usually is only offered for a meagre three year period.

In addition to the foregoing we could offer many more examples of the way in which the Church of England, and I'm sure many other faith communities too, would wish to bring the values deriving from their belief and faith mind-sets to bear upon the practice and issues of development today. For each example we could offer a theological underpinning from which derives a strong concern and commitment to getting it right for the people of our Region. Our stated concerns are borne of the experience of living as and alongside people in some of the most deprived as well as the well-heeled of the Region over many generations and engaging with many partners through those years. Whilst asking deep-rooted questions, we seek to be of service primarily to the populace rather than to our partners and ourselves.

This can make us difficult partners with which to work but we believe that the best and most creative partnerships are with critical friends.

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