

## Can we have a Good Society as well as a Big Society?

Members of the Social Responsibility Network tackled this question from a number of different aspects during the annual conference, joined by Church Urban Fund staff and Diocesan Link Officers for the second day. The conference was held in October 2011, at Arnos Manor Hotel in Bristol. Delegates were welcomed to this historic building by Forestdale Hotels Regional Manager, Garry Milward, who gave a brief introduction to Arnos Manor – after which we looked at the ceilings with more interest! Meals in the Cloisters restaurant and meetings in the Chapel Lounge were reminders of its past as a convent – built for a wealthy Quaker industrialist in the second half of the eighteenth century, it has also been a reformatory school for girls (run by the nuns), a casino and disco before being restored to its present status as a hotel.

During the conference, there were presentations by local practitioners and some from further afield, a ‘speed dating’ session for SRN members to find out more about each other’s work and interests, information about Acts435 (a contemporary way to give to local people in need), the SRN AGM and a special session for CUF Diocesan Link Officers. Morning and Evening Prayer and the Eucharist set the discussions in a context of worship, and a guided walk round Bristol on the middle afternoon gave a small group the opportunity to see for themselves some of the sites mentioned in the presentations and to enjoy the fresh air. A brief summary of each session is given here; follow the links to listen to the recordings.

Three personal reflections on ‘A Good Society’ looked at:

**‘That they may be one.**’ Inclusivity and integration, reflecting the texture and attributes of God through celebrating our differences within unity, as a society and as one human race (Barry North from Chichester Diocese, SRN and CUF DLO)

**‘Life in abundance.’** Equality is key to a fair and good society. Inequality is unfair, unjust and literally a matter of life and death – the gap between the most deprived and the rest of the Wirral had increased and the difference in life expectancy 14.6years for males and 9.6 for females. ‘The Church must respond.’(Bishop of Birkenhead) The Life Expectancy Wirral Project partners churches in different areas of the peninsular to encourage interdependence, mutual wellbeing and sustainability for a good society. The programme has five steps – listening to the world, listening to the Bible, exploring the neighbourhood, making connections and responding together. It has raised awareness and created a framework for joint action which are seeds for a more equal, good society. ‘We rejoice in small signs which are the signature of God.’ (Janice Mason from Chester Diocese)

**Riots and the Church.** Reflections on a meeting arranged by CUF for clergy whose parishes had been affected by the riots in the summer, to talk about their experiences, the causes of the unrest and stories of hope. Questions were raised about whether the gift of prophecy has been lost, how the Church can respond and how the local church models community. Responses to the riots include building relationships rather than ‘throwing money and stuff’ at young people, providing frameworks to establish moral codes, opening up celebratory events to the wider community, crossing boundaries, arranging free events to counter and challenge consumerism and acting as ‘critical friends to police and statutory agencies. We can’t do everything, but can be confident in the uniqueness of our Christian offering and role. ‘What we are about is the business of human flourishing.’ (CUF)

## **Regeneration's lost opportunities and why we are paying for it several times over**

Jari Moate. Author ('Paradise now'), organiser of Bristol's first Festival of Literature, freelance in urban regeneration.

Jari gave a brief overview of Bristol's history and the way it had been shaped by the river and trade, including the slave trade. Clarkson's research in Bristol contributed to the abolition of this trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The centre of the city had been obliterated in the Second World War and redeveloped by 1960s planners. A regeneration project at Cabot Circus demonstrates lost opportunities to create a better future for a local area through socially responsible planning and investment. The shopping centre overlooks two high priority wards but offers nothing for local residents apart from some part-time retail jobs. In general, the more remote investors are from a local area, the less they are responsible and responsive to local needs in pursuit of financial gain. Ethical investment can work with planners and developers to create and build places that contribute to the quality of life and create local community. The 'Paintworks' development is a good example of this, where oil-backed money worked with a developer to provide a mixed-use community where local traders have a place. Socially responsible property investment is still a niche market, but there are signs of change, such as Aviva's Igloo Regeneration, which recognises that buildings and public spaces contribute to the quality of life in communities and ties investment to specified social goods. Local authorities have a responsibility to get 'best value' but this should include the creation of local jobs, mixed use sustainable developments, good quality homes and ways to develop and link communities as well as looking at the financial benefits. We can ask companies and local authorities to make better use of our money in regeneration projects that create a better society.

## **Building a good society: a rural focus**

A discussion between Canon Professor Michael Winter (Director of the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter, and a board member of the Commission for Rural Communities, previously the Countryside Agency) and David Maggs (Chair of SRN and SR Officer for Bath and Wells)

This was a wide-ranging discussion, including questions and comments from the floor. Michael Winter began with an overview of the rural South West, where 3% of the population are employed in agriculture, rising to 10-15 % in Torridge, North Devon (compared to 1% overall in the UK). The geography of the region is diverse. Average wages in the local population are low, with Torridge having some of the lowest wages in the country. Higher-earners commute and take up housing, or retire to the area. The make-up of an average village is similar to an average urban community, with people employed in finance, the professions, service industries etc, and a high proportion of small businesses, self-employment and small-scale manufacturing.

Pressures on rural communities include transport, fuel prices (especially for low earners) and access to services. Affordable housing is a long-standing issue: community land trusts and use of sites such as glebe land may help. The UK has the lowest tradition of local participation in Europe: civic engagement is needed at the local level rather than just adverse reaction to planning issues, and localism may give opportunities here. The Regional Development Agencies have now gone: although their regional spatial strategies had problems, especially over what should be included in 'sustainability', nothing else is yet in place to avoid a policy vacuum in this area.

Sustainable development in rural terms includes long-term survivability, with the right social, economic and environmental conditions, access to food, water, energy and transport to work. The report on 'Food 2030' from the previous government had been continued under the coalition. Farming is diverse and resilient, and needs the old skills of husbandry as well as innovation in thinking and working on the land. Food production is critical both socially and theologically and there has been a significant increase in the number and variety of local food projects. In some areas (such as Surrey) farming land has been bought up for recreational purposes or 'hobby farming' rather than agriculture and food production. The countryside should not be 'preserved in aspic' but allowed to change and develop appropriately as living communities. Land is managed and influenced by human activity and different interests and views have to be balanced.

Other issues discussed more briefly included the exclusion of those people who are perceived to be different, such as the traveller community, fuel poverty amongst the 'asset-rich' with little income, and links between urban and rural areas. The Church has a key role to play with the innovative use of rural church buildings as well as providing sacred space and a repository for local memories.

### **Blueprint for Ageing in a good society**

Ann Morisy, community theologian, writer and Development Officer for PSALM ('Taking ageing and faith seriously')

The new map of life has raised issues about an appropriate response to ageing. Too often the Church has looked at pastoral care, spirituality of later life and mission to older people, but has not stepped back to look at the politics of ageing, which is admittedly difficult terrain. Demographic changes in the UK mean that there are now more people over 60 than young people under 16 and new ways to navigate increased longevity are needed. The 'baby boomer' generation is now approaching retirement, having had a life that was significantly easier than that of their parents and probably than future generations will enjoy, and the issue of fairness between generations is a matter of justice both now and going into the future (similar to the justice issues raised by climate change and sustainability). Facts and figures lead us to ask if we are looking at a 'worst case scenario' or a 'perfect storm', with potential for resentment and bitterness between generations.

Discussion raised issues about how to challenge perceptions about older people, how we talk to and about each other and the significance of language, and whether we are mature enough to reflect on generalisations that can be questioned by particular anecdotes. In the competition for resources, there is a potential alliance between non-economically active people – the young and older generations, and this emphasised the biological and social significance of grand-parenting. The dynamics of anxiety (between generations or of 'incomers' taking over) can lead to resentment and there is need for 'compassionate intentionality' in finding outlets for the human urge to see to the welfare of the next generation. The Gospels challenge the habit of blame and scapegoating and following Jesus gives an alternative to resentment and a way through the complexities of these issues.

Each generation ages in its own distinctive way. We need a new view of 'elderhood' which is willing to risk compassion, recognises that the quality of life depends on how we share with others and knows that wellbeing requires a sense of purpose and generosity of spirit in giving rather than grasping.

*Ann is willing to lead sessions on these issues. Contact her through PSALM [www.stpancraschurch.org](http://www.stpancraschurch.org) or on [morisy@btinternet.com](mailto:morisy@btinternet.com) for details and charges*

### **Trash the church!**

Revd Canon Nick Ralph, Head of Mission and Society and Social Responsibility Adviser, Diocese of Portsmouth and Leigh Rampton, Consultant

A new approach to SR work has been undertaken in Portsmouth Diocese, and was subject of a fringe meeting at the York meeting of the General Synod in July 2011. CSR (Council for Social Responsibility) is a separate charity with its own funding and work within agreed parameters. Leigh Rampton, a social business consultant, has been working with CSR to build up the added value of SR in the diocese, increase the impact of projects and make a difference in local communities. A three-year business plan has enabled CSR to be sustainable, identify projects for parishes and enable them to make the most of opportunities through the Rapid Parish Development Project. This aims to re-energise parishes that are considering a development project to engage with their local area and helps them to re-think priorities, re-position themselves and release resources in serving their communities. CSR has also been working on the Good Neighbours support service, a leadership and enterprise programme and a community bond to invest in viable social enterprises. The success of the programme has led to contracts to deliver it in other dioceses, and it is being rolled out further in association with CUF.

### **Every church in every community tackling poverty together**

A presentation on CUF's new strategy by Tim Bissett (CEO) and CUF staff

The Church Urban Fund is part of Church of England's mission and ministry and particularly concerned with its response to poverty. It has a simple Gospel-centred approach – all human beings are individuals in the sight of God and engaging with people who are disadvantage and living in poverty is a Gospel imperative. CUF was formed as part of the Church's response to the report 'Faith in the City' and has supported and initiated many projects over the last twenty years. It is now looking at new ways of working. The organisation has found that Church, Urban and Fund are not always helpful terms and is currently working under the strapline 'Tackling poverty together' which more accurately reflects its mission to engage in meaningful relationships with individual people and churches throughout England to bring about transformation in their local areas.

CUF research has looked into understanding of poverty in the context of the work of the Church. Poverty is not just about a lack of resources although economic inequality is associated with inequality in other aspects of human wellbeing. Poverty of identity and of relationships contribute to a complex web of inter-related issues that underlie many of the presenting problems. There is an urgent and crying need to tackle these issues. Relationships within churches are often effective and act as an anchor for regular pastoral care, visiting, etc which spills out into the wider community through random acts of kindness, volunteering and finding ways to meet identified local needs.

CUF believes that every church in every community can work together to tackle poverty, through giving time, money, prayer and action. There has been a major programme of communicating this vision through presentations to Bishops, dioceses, deanery chapters, clergy conferences etc. The

next challenge to is reach the 1.7 million people who make up the congregations in Anglican churches in England. Articles and adverts have been placed in Church Times. The website provides a forum for individual supporters to join the stand against poverty and will provide a base for wider communication. Training is provided for voluntary speakers for CUF, and ways to link giving to local action are being developed.

Churches and funders are becoming more sophisticated about their giving and want to engage more actively with how their money is being spent. CUF has been working with selected dioceses on joint venture charities to enable work to be done together more effectively. This follows the pattern of Near Neighbours, a separate charity which draws on the expertise of CUF in a programme that works in four areas, with social interaction enabling social action between people of different faiths.

The solution to tackling poverty is through the local church, working in partnerships to transform their local community. CUF can play a role in bringing people together and sharing its research, experience and expertise in ways that are appropriate for the local situation.

### **Active Citizens organising communities – how can local churches be involved?**

Stephen Kearney, Chief Executive Officer of Re:generate

Re:generate is a social action charity with a history of building trust, respect and relationships through community organising programmes. The ‘Root solution – Listening matters’ programme engages with people by listening to their concerns, then drawing together a network of individuals who meet together to share assets, energy and skills in tackling issues raised in and by the community. Animating action in the community is based on ‘building on what you love’, using concerns to motivate and mobilise and developing ideas to tackle concerns and realise dreams. Local action groups have been able to transform structures and bring about changes in their neighbourhoods and delivery of public services. Through the programme over 5,000 people have experienced intentional listening, 3,500 customers and clients have been served and over 1,500 people have voted for the first time. The current political landscape provides a window of opportunity for this kind of community engagement, and the National Lottery is funding projects that deliver the long-term impacts that Re:generate can demonstrate. The organisation has recently been awarded a contract to deliver training and strategy for the Office for Civil Society’s Community Organisers programme.

### **The worst cuts I have seen.** A discussion led by members of CUF.

CUF is currently engaged in research into the impact of spending cuts and creative responses. Of 160 respondents to the survey, over half receive government funding and others are indirectly affected by spending cuts, with greater competition for grants from trusts and a decrease in private donations. Everyone is finding it harder to predict income over the next few months, and there is an increase in fund-raising activities. Respondents reported that local churches have been most helpful to them, and working in partnership is being encouraged for shared costs - and consortia of voluntary organisations are more popular with funders. The full report will be available later in the year, and a further survey to chart changes will be undertaken in six months.

Impacts mentioned in discussion included:

- Cuts can lead to a period of grieving and attempts to replicate what has been lost, but it is better to use the opportunity to reflect, return to core values and find new ways to work.
- Small groups are usually more vulnerable: the strong are able to survive but the weakest close.
- Provision for early years, youth work and libraries are being cut in most areas which will have knock-on effects.
- It can be difficult to know who to contact to raise concerns about cuts. Local government and public services are suffering from low morale and increasing workloads, which can lead to paralysis. Deeper cuts are expected over the next few years.
- There is an assumption that churches and other voluntary organisations will be able to deliver services but local authorities lack the capacity to liaise and don't always have a good understanding of the pressures that the sector faces.
- There are opportunities to offer community chaplaincy to those affected by the cuts, and specific projects eg with asylum seekers and ex-offenders, microfinance.

### **Happy City Initiative Bristol – examining what makes communities work.**

Mike Zeidler. Director Modoto Ltd, Founding Director Happy City

Happy City is a small not-for-profit organisation, helping people and their communities to focus on happiness, and put their energy into the things that support and increase it. It works with people across Bristol to share existing sources of happiness and support the growth of new ones, by citizen journalism, workshops, conversations and interviews, sharing good news stories and contributing to the online happiness bank.

Happiness is often confused with short-term pleasure and consumerism. Measuring everything solely by GDP assumes unhappiness as a driver to spending and fails to ask questions about what really matters and how we live together in a way that promotes peace and contentment. The Happy City initiative identifies what is already good in a community or individual's life and celebrates and supports it. Mindsets, attitudes and principles are the roots for systems and structures which lead to actions and behaviours, and it is important to change these mindsets and attitudes to increase happiness.

The Happy City Index is an alternative measure of prosperity that looks at wellbeing. Habits of happiness and skills of appreciative enquiry are based on the New Economics Foundation's five points – connect, learn, be active, notice and give. Happiness is a good way to start conversations even in situations of desperate poverty and doesn't have the 'baggage' associated with other terms. It is a way to live rather than a goal to reach.

### **The Just Church in a Good Society**

Revd Mike Pears. Bristol Baptist College and Urban Expression

How do we understand the territory where we live, and do this in relation to the Gospel? From his personal experience, study and reflection, Mike challenged us to develop a 'third space' spirituality to carry the presence of Jesus into particular places.

There has been a revolution in the way we see place in last twenty to thirty years. Spatial analysis in social geography looks at the meaning invested in space. 'Space is place that has become storied.' This can be linked with the biblical narrative to give a different understanding of story in a specific context. 'In place/out of place' by Tim Cresswell looks at the way space is invested with meaning in the context of power - social space is organised to serve the interest of those at the top of hierarchies who can invest place with their own meaning. People and actions can be 'out of place' - the geographical setting of an action defines whether it is in or out of place, and hence whether it is right or wrong. Space and place structure the normative landscape as defined by 'common sense' but this can be used as a mechanism of domination. Crisis points occur when common sense is disturbed and underlying assumptions are questioned. The powerful have more options to be 'out of place' and to impose their own meanings on space. The recent riots in city centres were attributed to 'marginal people' who were in the wrong place, with media terms related to dirt, disease and location. The city has juxtapositions of people and places which create energy and potential conflict.

These understandings can be used as a tool for a spatial reading of the Gospel as in the work of Eric C Stewart (Gathered around Jesus) and Francis Moloney (Belief in the Word). Studies of Greek and Latin literature reveal a shared understanding of civilised space in terms of territory and geography. Other places and people are defined in relation to their proximity to the central position of the civilisation. The normal patterns of civilised places do not apply in the boundary areas (borderland, waste places, wilderness). There is a lack of control in these places and a new sense of identity has to be negotiated. The Gospels show Jesus creating a new or third space set against both the civilised spaces and the wilderness – he casts out demons in the civilised space of the Jewish synagogue and the wilderness of the graveyard in the Roman territory and has a unique authority in both places. He provides a 'clean space' around himself, humanising, just and peaceful. Shalom (wholeness) depends on the presence of Jesus, as he embraces others, offers hospitality, gentleness, patience and different values and ways of behaving. He invites rich and poor, powerful and dispossessed into his space.

The Church in urban estates needs to reflect this understanding of space and place, to exegete the city as well as the Bible. It is 'present to the other', Jesus centred and place focussed. We confront exclusion not by 'helping' but by embracing, disempowering ourselves to cross boundaries and carry the presence of Jesus into particular places.

### **What shall we do next?**

Plenary session looking at responses to the conference and steps that SRN and CUF can take.

The following ideas and themes emerged from the discussions at tables.

- 'Embrace' – as God embraces us. This can be a new lens for our work as we look at projects and initiatives from this perspective rather than that of integration.
- Sustainability of our work can be enhanced when CUF and SRN work together more often and more effectively
- Communication is really important, especially for those who work on their own.
- Encouragement. Much good work is being done, but we need to share it and our skills to encourage one another.

- The need for reflection on what it would look like to live in Jesus' space in the areas where we live and work (from Mike Pears presentation).
- Social action can be a trigger for church growth – qualitative research is currently underway at CUF and some initial findings should be available by Christmas. An outward looking church is a healthier church and more likely to be attractive. The Mission Theology Group has looked at mission and social justice, marginalisation and dispossession. Their previous project on spiritual journeys is also commended.
- We need to remember white estates, which have consistently been overlooked, and engage with their male populations. Little things can be significant to provide nurture.