

## **Faith Communities Added Value**

*Faith communities' unique moral force often makes them go the extra mile to deliver neighbourhood regeneration. Chris Baker explains the spiritual dimension that adds value to what they do:.*

From the government's perspective, faith groups are a key component of local communities. Faith communities have been subject to a whole raft of research and policy scrutiny in recent years and are deemed to provide key resources with respect to pressing political agendas such as social cohesion and active citizenship.

### **Social Capital**

Social capital refers to the sets of relationships in any organisation or community. Its theory suggests that the benefits of these relationships – networking, support, trust, information - can be stored by individuals or groups as a resource for when they need it, but can also be used to contribute to other groups and organisations.

### **What is spiritual and religious capital?**

Recent research by the William Temple Foundation (funded by the Church Urban Fund) looked at the way nine church communities engaged with regeneration in Manchester and came to the following definitions of spiritual and religious capital.

*Religious capital* is the practical contribution to local and national life made by faith groups.

*Spiritual capital* energises religious capital by providing a theological identity and worshipping tradition, but also a value system, moral vision and a basis for faith. Spiritual capital is often embedded locally within faith groups, but also expressed in the lives of individuals.

Spiritual and religious capital is thus similar to social capital because it's a resource based on relationships that individuals and faith groups can access for their personal wellbeing, but can also 'donate' as a gift to the wider community.

### **Spiritual and religious capital in action – a Manchester perspective**

A Christian organisations the foundation has worked with over the past three years shows the practical impact of religious capital, informed by spiritual capital: Community Pride Initiative

#### *Community Pride Initiative*

*The Community Pride Initiative (CPI) was established under the auspices of Church Action on Poverty, a national Christian charity, and has a portfolio of partnerships across Manchester and Salford. It seeks to address issues of disempowerment arising from inequality in the distribution of information, and lack of availability of public spaces where information can be locally shaped and challenged.*

*The sheer diversity of groups and networks that Community Pride directly resources is immense: local community networks, new deal for communities programmes, a gender and engagement project, tenants' associations, local churches, café projects, leadership programmes for young people, national programmes on active citizenship, disability networks, as well as hosting three annual conferences on local democracy. To resource a client group as diverse as this requires an extraordinary range of skills and competencies .This is a powerful*

*example of social entrepreneurship, but with added value. That added value is directly linked to what CPI calls ‘a desire to make real the values of the Christian Gospel’.*

*A report by the European Institute for Urban Affairs, published last year, identifies the following distinctive elements to CPI’s modus operandi based on interviews with users and partners:*

- *a firm value base that allowed it to ‘go the extra mile’*
- *a moral force and impact beyond its number*
- *a commitment to trailblazing and identifying needs that are not otherwise being met*
- *creating self-sustaining structures, not dependency*
- *creating a niche market of operating that mixes both analysis and group work skills*
- *recognising the significance of power structures*

### **How do you work with spiritual and religious capital?**

But not all concepts of social capital are uncontested. Recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation research rehearses several objections to it, including unease at the use of economic language to describe social networks, and potentially conservative notions of volunteering and community which paper over issues of power and the abusive side of community life. Faith groups can contribute as much social division as social cohesion, separating themselves from the rest of the world and asserting their distinctiveness in a way that can be destructive.

Whilst recognising the divisive potential of faith activity in communities, our case studies show the close and dynamic link between values, motivations and practice. Spiritual capital is not afraid to talk about the importance of values and motivations that underpin regeneration rhetoric and practice. Values and motivations (even spiritual ones) are held by most people. If they are not allowed expression, apathy and disillusionment soon sets in.

Religious capital (the practical contribution of faith groups to local and national life) is often flexible and pragmatic, even dynamic and innovatory, while rooted in a long-standing knowledge of and commitment to local communities. Public and voluntary agencies working in partnership with this kind of religious capital have learnt to allow this innovation and energy to bubble through, and shown a willingness to learn and change their views of faith groups as a result. It is therefore important to allow faith groups as much autonomy as possible provided what they offer respects the contributions of others and adheres to good practice.

### **Triple devolution – can spiritual and religious capital create a deeper local politics?**

David Miliband, in a recent speech outlined the importance of developing contracts with the voluntary sector which stress broad outcomes that can be achieved rather than detailed outputs, thus allowing what he calls the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’ a chance to breathe. Spiritual capital and religious capital take this important discussion of ‘how’ and ‘what’ one stage further by talking about the ‘why’.

Irrespective of whether one defines oneself as religious or even spiritual, the growing significance of the faith sector reminds us all of the importance of not only listening to, but harnessing the energising power of values and motivations when it comes to creating sustainable localism.

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