



faith in the community

the contribution of
faith-based organisations
to rural voluntary action

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executive summary



Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

Introduction

In recent years the role in public life of faith-based organisations has become a strong theme in government policy, in particular in relation to local regeneration and civil renewal, community cohesion and integration, and public services.

This has particular relevance to the needs and concerns of people living in rural areas. Given the decline in basic services, faith-based organisations may be well-placed to fill this gap. The church itself has for some time recognised the particular role it has within rural communities, with 60% of churches based in rural areas. Recently a DEFRA-sponsored study found that faith institutions in rural areas make a substantial contribution to the life of their community. They do this by supporting and sustaining social networks and activities that impact on local people, not just those who attend worship, as well as on village life as a whole.

This report, *Faith in the community*, examines the contribution of faith-based organisations to voluntary action and community life in rural areas. It also considers the relationship between faith-based voluntary action and the wider voluntary and community sector. The research on which it is based was conducted by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) in 2006. In order to draw on the experiences of those working in the field, NCVO held focus groups and commissioned case exemplars.

The findings give a picture of the contribution that faith-based organisations make to rural communities and show that whilst distinct in some respects, faith-based organisations share many common features, interests and challenges with the wider voluntary and community sector.

Research Findings

The research focused on faith based groups that are Christian because of the demographics of rural communities. It is therefore unsurprising that, in common with previous studies, findings from this research highlight the central role that the church can play in rural communities. It has often been said that in rural areas the church belongs to the people, whereas in urban areas people talk about belonging to the church. The focus groups and case exemplars confirm this. Tradition, family memories and community celebrations were all mentioned to explain this 'special' link between church and the rural community. The link is reinforced when churches are used by the wider community for activities and services not directly related to their religious mission. In some places the church acts as a hub for a range of social, recreational and cultural activities. In many rural communities it is not unusual for the church building to be the only communal facility available.

Activities

While some activities organised by faith-based organisations focus on faith, others are more about supporting the wider community. So, in addition to worship and faith teaching, the research found that the local churches and faith-based organisations made the following key contributions to rural life:

- Providing services
- Fundraising – for the fabric of the church or wider social welfare
- Advocacy and campaigning – on behalf of the church, or particular people
- Infrastructure support, giving information, advice and training to other faith organisations.

The case exemplars reflect the diversity of contributions, including: a ‘meet and eat supper’ for older single women; an organisation providing support services for the farming community; a church-based farmers’ market (raising funds for farming charities operating in the UK and the developing world); a campaign on environmental issues; and a campaign for improved services for migrant workers.

People

Despite falling numbers, and loss of status, the clergy is still seen as a major resource and as having a unique position within the community. Members of the clergy who participated in the research felt they were very much part of the community and had duties and responsibilities towards it. They were expected to be there for it, particularly in times of need or crisis, as shown during the foot-and-mouth outbreak. Lay members of a church also play a critical role in church initiatives and activities as volunteers.

Often activities are church-led but secular in nature and aimed at the wider community. Indeed, the faith dimension of volunteering is often invisible. Some people of faith were involved in non-faith activities but equally people who were not of faith participated in activities organised by faith-based organisations. The research shows that individuals are driven by a range of factors, faith being one. Community is also an important factor and the two can go hand-in-hand.

Links with other organisations

Participants suggested that faith-based organisations could work collaboratively with other faith-based and secular organisations, depending on the nature of the activity. For example one group worked closely with the Citizens Advice Bureau. In another area the diocesan association for family support worked closely with schools, health visitors and social services. Another church had worked closely with the parish council to extend the usage of their building and define the priority needs.

Often, however, the links with non-faith based organisations are more informal and rely heavily on the overlapping membership of individuals. In some cases these links are very limited. More common are partnerships or joint initiatives between different churches and denominations. For example it was mentioned in one focus group that several churches had jointly established a charity to provide youth services and others were running a helpline in partnership.

A distinctive role

When asked how they are distinctive from secular organisations, research participants identified a number of features. The physical presence of the church building has a strong symbolic value with the sentimental and historical attachment that ceremonies and rituals help to maintain. These contribute to people's sense of place and belonging. Faith-based organisations are felt to be distinctive because they address people's spiritual needs. They are viewed as being more long-term in their commitment. And participants also identified faith, and the values and beliefs associated with it, as providing a distinctive motivation for the voluntary activities of faith-based organisations: it was seen as a source of energy and inspiration for involvement.

Challenges

Participants were asked to reflect on the changes and challenges that their organisations face. Their responses highlight the following areas of concern:

- Pressure on existing resources as a consequence of ageing church buildings, fewer rural clergy, and falling congregation numbers;
- Changes in the wider society, including changing social attitudes and expectations, such as patterns of migration, the availability of local employment and housing, and greater geographical mobility, meaning participation in locally based activities is becoming less important for many people;
- Formalisation of procedures and ways of working, such as Criminal Records Bureau checks, health and safety at work regulations and demands for greater transparency and accountability;
- Changes arising from the implementation of government policy, such as the risk of co-option and mission drift;
- Access to funding – some local authorities were seen as particularly reluctant to fund faith-based organisations because of fears of proselytisation.

The research found that many organisations have responded to these challenges with creativity and innovation. In particular new patterns of ministry have been developed, in which lay church members are playing a more active role. The use of church buildings beyond faith-based activities and their transformation into community buildings is expected to become increasingly necessary and to develop further. There are also some very positive messages about regeneration, empowering communities and people, and giving people the scope to develop activities and services best suited to their needs.



Conclusion - Key issues for the future

Faith and a concern with spiritual needs distinguish faith-based organisations from their secular counterparts. But there are striking similarities in terms of their functions and areas of activity; the importance of their values to their ways of working; and the challenges they face. Closer collaboration between the two in future would bring real benefits to both and to the individuals and the communities they serve.

In many rural areas the church may be the only community asset. As such, local people feel ownership of it whether or not they are church members. It is a hub for local activities generally, not only those that are faith-based. Government policy is focused on devolving power to the local level. But there also needs to be support for organisations such as the church which help to define a sense of place and contribute to community well-being.

The Government is currently looking at ways of transferring assets from the public sector to community ownership and control. However, this research suggests that existing community assets, including church buildings where they have this role, need to be adequately supported. Access to external funding will be essential.

In some areas local churches are working with other stakeholders to transform church buildings into community buildings, or community anchors. Some churches have been very innovative in developing these resources and could provide models of good practice from which other voluntary and community organisations can learn.

Government support has created many more opportunities for voluntary, community and faith-based organisations to take on a wider range of roles, for example in relation to service delivery and local governance. Although participants were primarily concerned that such projects take little account of the faith dimension of their work, their fears that working with government will lead to co-option and mission-drift are equally held by secular organisations. Faith-based organisations, like others in the voluntary and community sector, need to take responsibility for their own objectives and mission and ensure that they focus on these, working in partnership with others where there are shared objectives. Where they provide services under contract to government, they need to negotiate and agree the terms and conditions under which they do so to preserve their integrity and independence.

There may be considerable benefits for faith-based and secular organisations to share their experiences, learning and infrastructure support in relation to issues of common concern. Yet this research suggests that there is relatively little interaction between faith-based organisations and generic infrastructure bodies. There is a need to consider how both can work together to build capacity across the board. Faith-based organisations should consider how they can access and contribute to existing resources in the wider voluntary and community sector in addition to their involvement with specialist faith-based infrastructure organisations. At the same time generalist infrastructure bodies should consider how they can reach out to faith-based organisations more effectively and work to promote better collaboration and shared learning on issues of common concern, such as the relationship with government.

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