

How is volunteering interpreted and enacted within different faith groups and what are the ways forward to improve closer working between faith communities and local/regional volunteering infrastructure organisations?

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Introduction

Religion, charities and volunteering have been intertwined for a long time and this relationship is of continuing interest to government and the secular state. Evidence suggests that a growing number of the UK population are people of faith: the 2001 national census puts the percentage at 77% and many scholars predict this will be higher at the next census, continuing in an upward trend as has been the case in countries such as the US and Europe more generally if we look at longitudinal studies (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Habermas (2006) argues that we are increasingly living in a 'post-secular society' in which religion is once again gaining influence in the public sphere. According to the Home Office survey of 2003, religion is the fourth most important arena for civic and social participation and volunteering in Britain, and its importance appears to be growing. Those who actively practice a religion are known to be more likely to volunteer in a 'formal' sense (Low et al 2007: 21) and the collective endeavour of faith-based organisations is significant.

This paper is based on a research project undertaken by the Centre for Social Action and commissioned by Volunteering England, with the support of V through its Modernising Volunteering work (part of Capacitybuilders' overall improving support programme). The aim of the research was to gain a better understanding of faith based volunteering, the needs of faith-based organisations and how these needs could be understood and met by volunteering infrastructure organisations and also to consider the role faith volunteering plays in enhancing community cohesion. We used focus groups and interviews with a wide-range of faith groups (including Baha'i, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, Quaker and Sikh) and also spoke with infrastructure organisations both voluntary and faith based ones. We spoke to people in a number of locations in England for example Derby, Leicester, London, Northampton, Cambridge, Birmingham. In total we conducted 12 focus groups and 25 interviews and spoke to 89 people.

Research Findings

Motivations for volunteering

Despite the influential role of faith in inspiring and supporting voluntary activities, the range of motivations expressed by the research participants shared significant features with the wider world of volunteering. In our research participants who were involved in a range of volunteering activities presented their motivations for volunteering broadly in the following terms:

- Giving something back to the community
- Helping others, expressing solidarity
- Responding to a need, seeking change and speaking up for oppressed groups
- Gaining skills or enhancing personal profile

Strong 'world views' associated with the different faiths were sometimes, but not always, powerful factors in shaping the motivation to 'get involved' in voluntary activities for many of the people we spoke to, although the ways in which this inspired them differed noticeably. For some, volunteering was a natural consequence of their beliefs and was simply a way of expressing these. For others, the sense was rather of volunteering being a 'duty' and something that is expected of them by their faith traditions. In other instances, this was less grounded in beliefs as it was a consequence of belonging to a particular community or group. These differing aspects of faith-oriented motivations did not appear to be concentrated especially within any particular belief system, although for some it may be the case that it is integral to their entire way of being, and cannot be separated from what might be viewed as secular activities.

'At the end of the day we are all human beings and wanting to do the best we can do for whoever it is we are working with. I don't think it has got a lot to do with faith, I think its about human beings.' (Int 14; Jewish)

Work in the Community

Many faith organisations provide services, help and support in the community. This kind of work, regardless to whether being solely within the same faith or welcoming people from other sectors of the community can be seen as contributing to community cohesion in the sense of promoting social inclusion, social justice and enhancing life opportunities. Whilst being a faith based organisations they do not 'promote their religion'. Sometimes the work for the community is seen as the chore of the organisation or as part of their overall mission.

Some of the faith groups would mainly provide services for their own 'congregation' or people with the same faith, but would not turn other people away unless the organisation would not have enough resources to do so. These organisations might prioritise people from their own faith but also be open to other members of the community. Whilst sometimes this work is done within the faith organisation it should not be seen as 'not contributing' to community cohesion. It is important to note that contributing to community cohesion is seen as emanating out of the cohesiveness of the faith organisation within itself. This relates directly to the notions of bridging and bonding social capital. Strong bonding ties between members of an organisation can lead to building bridges with other communities within an environment of respect, support, common aims and the equal access to resources.

'I think Baha'is have a huge impact in community cohesion because they are a cohesive community themselves. I think that idea of punching above their weight is something that is really important for Baha'is.' (Int 30; Baha'i)

Representing the Community

Organisations made an important distinction between being representative of a community in terms of faith or ethnic composition or in terms of being embedded in the community, working with the community and having a strong local knowledge. Some organisations felt that inclusiveness was achieved through giving local people ownership of projects they run, and thus attracting a range of different people from the community. Embeddedness in the community was seen as important to understand different people and to open up to different groups in society.

'I think it makes us understand other people's needs, their views, it makes us learn to respect other people's views, cultural views, educational views, any sort of views. Even people from other religions, other backgrounds and religions, it makes us more open to dialogue. OK you come and share your views with us and we will share our views and we will meet at the meeting point, you know. So it helps in that sense quite a lot.' (FG 20; Muslim)

Shared values via personal and community development

Some of the faith organisations work with other faith organisations because they perceive that they have more values in common and this promotes more dialogue and understanding within the faith groups. In other instances the work with other faith groups and within the community aids a better understanding of the community and the diversity within the community. It is interesting to note here that working towards stronger cohesion might be done by recognising diversity and working with that diversity to show the richness of the whole community and enhancing bridging social capital.

'I think the main thing that springs to mind is that there would be more cohesion across the board. Because if there are different faiths all working within voluntary capacities the people get to know each other and that's spreads, and it's like ripples in a pond. So more people know and understand what different faith groups are and how they work and how they exist. And it makes for more human cohesion.' (Int 13; Pagan)

However there are also instances where some of the faith groups feel that other faith groups appear uncomfortable with their faith. Sometimes this might be because of a lack of understanding, but at other times it has to do with the faiths themselves and long standing historical relationships. It can also be because of coming from different points in history and different strands of belief, as highlighted in the following account, these differences happen on different levels, from personal to more institutional ones. Interestingly it shows that often these differences can be overcome through finding common grounds or not stressing too much on the faith in itself.

It was highlighted that interfaith work might not be accessible to all groups, especially those who are smaller. It is important to note this, because whilst some groups might appear more insular this could be not because of inward looking attitudes but because of the lack of resources and time to allocate to go to events which promote interfaith dialogue. Promoting shared values via interfaith work should not only be approached by stressing the need for openness and better understanding. Whilst this is an essential need, it also has to be recognised that resources to develop this type of work are needed. Smaller groups should not be labelled as segregated without an understanding of their circumstances and the recognition of the lack of resources.

Working together

In our research we did not come across any groups who said that they did not want to work with other organisations because of their values and norms. Difficulties were attributed more to personal issues and a lack of understanding. One of the most significant barriers identified by several groups was around misunderstanding and mistrust towards faith organisations from funders or secular organisations. There were some inevitable examples around misconceptions of the faith or in other instances where groups face discrimination but it is difficult to know whether it is because of faith, ethnicity or culture.

'I think you can have a wariness and you have to sort of put people at their ease. I sometimes don't tell, I have two business cards, on one of them I am the Reverend [name]. So I have business cards with the organisation and a business card for me and I make a decision on which one I am going to use.' (Int 11; Anglican)

'Some people still think that we kill babies and eat them, it is that kind of perception that certain groups or certain people have, which is ridiculous.' (Int 13. Pagan)

It is important to highlight that this weariness does not only come from secular organisations but also from other faith organisations which sometimes stems more from a doctrinal point of view.

Most of the groups we met were clear that they were very much part of, and engaged with their local communities, and that they held a recognised position as part of the resource base in their neighbourhoods. In this sense, they may be said to play a 'natural' role in contributing to social capital and community cohesion – the question which needs to be asked is: what would it be like if they weren't there? Or, could anyone else carry out this particular role effectively? There was plenty of evidence, too, that they were making active efforts to avoid being exclusive or unavailable to certain community members.

The need for a more informed and strategic approach by volunteering infrastructure organisations was mentioned by some of the faith and interfaith organisations. Whilst some organisations mentioned the good managerial and organisational support they had received, they also perceived a lack of knowledge and understanding coming from the volunteering infrastructure organisations. Volunteering infrastructures themselves might see that their major role as giving more organisational support; however they might rely on organisations approaching them and using their resources rather than seeing themselves as going out into the community.

The lack of knowledge and understanding highlighted by some faith groups has also been recognised by some representatives from the volunteering infrastructure organisations we interviewed. In order to change this, there were examples of good practice, proactively seeking to have trained staff who can build relationships of trust and better understanding.

Faith and secular: a false dichotomy?

In some instances organisations felt that other secular organisations would not work with them because of their faith or simply because of being perceived as a faith organisation. Other faith organisations feel that they are being kept at arms length by volunteering infrastructure organisations. There seems to be a lack of openness about faith issues and especially some of the smaller faith groups might become isolated and 'insular' through this process. This seems to be a quite important aspect to be considered because it highlights that insularity can be a cause but also an affect of poor working relationships.

It seems that this is especially the case with smaller faith organisations and linked sometimes with relying on volunteers who themselves come from more deprived backgrounds, not having the knowledge and social capital necessary to tap into the workings of larger infrastructure organisations. Some of the volunteering infrastructure organisations are seen as exclusionary to smaller organisations which may lack of knowledge about how these bigger organisations operate and do not have the necessary financial and human resources to be part of the networks. Time and availability of volunteers are a key issue within this.

Sometimes infrastructure organisations are perceived to show a lack of understanding and engagement with faith issues. Coupled with this lack of understanding is a perception from part of some faith organisations that they are part of a tick box exercise which fosters a managerial output and outcome driven culture but not a process of true understanding, mutuality and trust which is important to enhance social capital. Some of these challenges and barriers might specifically relate to faith or the perception of faith organisations but volunteers and workers highlighted that there are equally barriers between secular organisations. These differences tend to come to fore when working together. Within this, the duality between faith and secular organisations was questioned. Quite a few of the faith group volunteers were either currently, or had been involved in the past, in 'secular' volunteering groups too. Groups often seem to evolve from responding to a local need of the faith or other community (working with faith volunteers), to becoming a group involved in social action work more widely where they accept all volunteers.

Engagement with the local level

The need to engage with the organisations on the ground was highlighted by several volunteering infrastructure organisation. A distinction was made between leaders talking to the faith leaders and talking directly to the faith organisations on the ground which was identified as the best strategic way.

The scope and reach of regional bodies was questioned with some participants feeling that regional structures do not necessarily cater for local needs. Rather than a regional approach, the view was that there is a need for better understanding and interaction with groups with a more bottom up approach and reaching out to faith groups. Also a longer term resource allocation was seen as crucial.

'Well it is yes and those regional bodies I have questions of how effective they are. I know because I sit on the boards of some of them! So I don't think they are desperately effective... they are so bound up in trying to work regionally that they lose sight of the aims and objectives of working locally. And so they are not the most effective way of working.' (Int 27; Anglican)

Good understanding, openness to local issues and a well resourced strategy were highlighted as actual existing examples of good practice. Secular principles and secular bureaucratic structures might hinder infrastructure organisations reaching out in an effective way to faith organisations especially those who are not embedded within bigger networks. Independent groups might find these systems as incompatible or inaccessible.

References

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