

NURTURING SOCIAL COHESION:

*Why it matters and what
your church can do
about it*



Engaging in the Public Square

‘THEOS’

What is social cohesion and why does it matter?

‘Social cohesion’ is not a term we often hear used in church. In fact, it is not a term we often hear in normal conversation outside the church either! It is viewed as the language of policy and politics, particularly associated with how minority groups are integrating, with race relations, and with times of crisis. These issues are clearly vitally important. However, social cohesion is much broader than that.

Fundamentally, it is about which communities we feel part of – locally, nationally, internationally, and even virtually – and how strongly there is a sense of an ‘us’ in how these communities connect with each other. It is about how much trust there is in society, and how fairly opportunities are distributed. It is about whether, and to what extent, we feel we belong. In other words, it is about the strength of our collective relationships – and this affects every aspect of our lives, from happiness to economics, from austerity to elections, from racial justice to keeping each other safe in a pandemic. It is something none of us can ignore.

A cohesive society is one in which people trust, respect and understand one another beyond the groups they immediately identify with. It is one in which local, regional, and national communities work together to face shared challenges, and celebrate shared achievements. **Simply, it is one in which people love their neighbour.**

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“Social cohesion just is the lifeblood of the church. It’s what it does. Because it’s about loving your neighbour, really.”

Anglican priest

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“Jesus brings people together. He’s magnetic. Whenever Jesus appeared in the Bible, crowds would go to him. And there’s something about that, you know? So I feel it is important to bring people together.”

Non-denominational minister

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This is at the heart of the Christian vision for the world – and many churches are already giving huge amounts of time and sustained effort to build more cohesive communities across the country. After all, cohesion doesn’t just happen. But there is always more work to do – and there is a huge opportunity for more collaboration between churches and secular organisations interested in cohesion, who are often having the same conversations without realising it, because they use different language.

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“Social cohesion is a theological task... and it should be about how we live faith. We are aiming to be all children of God, neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, all are together. And so that’s a deeply theological purpose for the church.”

Anglican priest

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This short pamphlet is a practical resource for churches wanting to do more to nurture stronger communities – whether they are doing lots already, or nothing at all. It offers ten principles to help churches promote cohesion, both in their own work and with other organisations. These principles are drawn from the Free Churches Commission: a research project commissioned by the Free Churches Group and conducted by the think tank Theos, which spoke to nearly 400 people across England to find out what churches are already doing to nurture social cohesion – and what they could do better.

Reflections from participants in the Commission research are included throughout, and we hope you find their voices inspiring. As one of our participants reflected, social cohesion is “the lifeblood of the church... because it’s about loving your neighbour”. So, what to do about it?

The final report of the Free Churches Commission is entitled *The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People*, and can be found on the Theos website.

“Jesus said ‘Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’, and so bringing his Kingdom is to me about seeing lives transformed, seeing cities transformed which is obviously an extension of that, seeing communities come together, seeing places become more peaceful, crime drop. You know, kinds of stuff that looks like heaven invading earth essentially.”

Christian radio DJ

Ten Principles for Nurturing Social Cohesion

The following are ten core principles for churches to consider as a way in to promoting social cohesion more effectively in their local communities and beyond.

1

Do what your community needs.

If you are starting something new, listen to what your community needs and what your congregation will support. What is already going on, and what is changing in the community? Are the community's needs the same as they were five years ago? Or even last year? Initiatives that work well in one community may not be suited to others – and there may already be people doing what you want to do, with whom you could connect. This is more effective than reinventing the wheel!

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“I think that’s where it works well, when a problem is identified and people think, “How can we actually work together to solve that?” Sometimes, it’s the other way around, it’s like solutions and then look for problems, or the church is sort of like, “We’re here and what can we do that looks like we’re doing something?” But it isn’t necessarily that useful.”

Police officer

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2

Communicate what you are doing.

Make sure people know what you are already doing. Many of our participants mentioned that there was lots going on in their communities, but that much of it happened under the radar. Good communication makes it easier for those outside the church to find what they need, and helps other groups to understand where the gaps are when planning their own new initiatives. How easy would it be for someone to contact you if they wanted to know more about your church? Who knows that your great event happened? Or that it will happen next week? If you don't already have a website or social media presence, set one up! There is sure to be someone in your network who knows how.

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“I’ve been involved in Methodist Churches for the last 20 years doing children’s and youth work and I only found out about [this project] accidentally three years ago. I knew nothing about it until then. So we do have quite a problem in terms of communication.”

Christian charity worker

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Work with what you already have.

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“We work very much from an asset-based approach, and people say to me but what does that mean? It’s like well, can you talk to people? Yeah. Can you make a cup of tea? Asset-based development, you know. You’re using what you have, to share.”

Church-based community worker

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Your church does have assets that can strengthen your community, no matter its circumstances. Do you have a building? Strong leaders? Broad social networks (including those accessible through a denomination, outside the local community itself)? Willing volunteers? A vision for what your community is, and could be? These are all assets that can be applied to strengthen social cohesion.

“I think people assume that the council has loads of buildings that anyone can use, and can just rent them for cheap or for free, and that isn’t the case... If you’re a community organisation or a church or something that might want space to use to do something for your community, it is quite hard to find those spaces I think.”

Council officer

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If you have a church building, consider how it can be used by the wider community.

There is good evidence that negative stereotypes are broken down through sustained contact between people of different backgrounds. Physical gathering is currently restricted because of the COVID-19 pandemic – but long before this, the UK was experiencing a dramatic loss of community space. This has reduced opportunities for social interaction across different groups – and where spaces do exist, they are often centralised in town centres. In contrast, churches are scattered throughout communities. If your building is already being used by the community, are ‘bump moments’ between groups being maximised? What groups are priced out by your rental charges? The pricing structure doesn’t need to be the same for everyone, and new groups or charities may need a lower rate. It is also worth considering how your church building might support congregations without a place of their own to worship.

5

Leadership matters – but engage the whole congregation.

Church leadership is an important asset through which community concerns are championed and individuals are empowered to do more. Formal leaders can be the focus of a wide network of relationships, including those with key local stakeholders. Various participants expressed frustration at systems of rotational ministry where leaders are moved on even when their leadership is sustaining critical community work. Those at a national level should consider enabling greater flexibility around whether official church leaders are relocated after a set number of years. That said, leadership is not limited to a job title! Cultural expectations around the role of the clergy can sometimes stifle the empowerment of the wider congregation. If you are a church leader, invest in the leadership, skills and passions of those without an official role. Encourage others in the congregation – and in the wider community – to do the same.

“We went on a Leaders’ Day together with all the leaders of the churches and... wrote a list of all the activities each of the churches were doing. And between us, we had virtually everything covered. So someone was doing an Alzheimer’s cafe, someone else was doing an hour-long group, someone else was doing mums and toddlers. So within the area, every kind of church activity you could think of was covered by one of the churches, but no one church could cover them all.”

Church leader

“You get a new [church] leader in who says, ‘I’m not interested in homeless people, I’m more interested in evangelism’, well that could be that church being taken away from delivering. And [regional church leaders] don’t place [local church leaders] for that reason, they place people to look after 150 people, and I think of a parish of 280,000 and they think of a parish of 100, and that’s quite problematic.”

Christian charity founder

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Look beyond your church.

Fundamentally, cohesion is about working with others – and that happens at an organisational level as well as between individuals. Interfaith engagement is an important way in which relationships are formed between groups within a community. Also nurture working relationships with secular organisations interested in cohesion – councils, the police, healthcare workers, schools, colleges and universities – and make a conscious effort to ensure that your structures are as simple as possible for these external parties to understand. This can particularly mean investing time to forge relationships with other churches to make sure the churches in an area have an obvious channel of communication with those outside the Church. Ecumenical forums can help amplify and coordinate community responses. Keep an up-to-date list of important community contacts outside the church.

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Dialogue is the foundation of strong community relationships– but doing something together involves more people.

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“You drink an awful lot of coffee if you want unity of the church or faiths, or working with councillors.”

Independent pastor

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Official forums for interfaith and ecumenical dialogue are important jumping-off points for relationship, and often provide the basic framework through which important community networks are developed. However, they tend to involve the same ‘usual suspects’. At a leadership level, reach out informally too – and shared activities and tasks are an effective way to involve the wider community. This doesn’t need to be complicated: several participants noted how successful litter picking initiatives had been at bringing people of different backgrounds together in their communities.

8

Show others that you understand your legal responsibilities.

Make it easy for non-Christian organisations to trust you! Ensure your safeguarding and data protection policies are clearly visible. Draw on the professional expertise of your congregation where appropriate, and show that you are accountable and transparent in everything you do. Be prepared to set boundaries if difficult behavior is risking the safety of your environment for others.

9

Prioritise inclusion and diversity.

Strive to ensure that church spaces are equally accessible to all, regardless of their background. This applies to all church-run spaces – not only in the church itself, but also in any settings where the church is providing for the whole community, such as practical services or education.

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“The thing I would say is... maybe the church shouldn't expect to be asked. I mean, we will ask on occasions. With Tommy Robinson people did ask the church to get involved. And there will be moments where we would ring up and ask and often the churches will respond. But on a more day to day basis, it is possible that we don't ask enough, because we don't want people to feel put on the spot or feel uncomfortable.”

Regional Mayor

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10

Don't just be 'the helper'.

Divisive power dynamics can easily build up around community engagement, especially where direct material need is being addressed through a church-based service. Where this is the case, make a priority of fostering genuine relationship alongside the help being provided. Running events for anyone who wants to join, rather than particular groups defined by need, and even simple practical steps like wearing name tags, can also foster a spirit of shared endeavor which breaks down power dynamics and creates space for genuine relationship.

For more information about the Free Churches Commission, and a downloadable copy of the report itself, visit the Free Churches Group website at www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research.

"Although a church coffee morning might not sound like Rocket Science, the one in my village has been described as a lifeline... it's not treating people as 'lonely', or 'homeless', or with 'mental health problems', or 'over 55', it's just an event bringing people together whoever those people are and that's really interesting and really really rich."

Church-based community worker

This pamphlet was produced as part of the Free Churches Commission: a major research project which investigates the impact of local churches on social cohesion, commissioned by the Free Churches Group and conducted by Theos think tank. The Free Churches Group represents 28% of all church congregations in England and Wales. Its members include the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the United Reformed Church and the Salvation Army, as well as many Pentecostal groupings and other significant denominations with national spread who have a strong Free Church tradition. Theos is the UK's leading faith and society think tank.