

GOOD NEIGHBOURS: HOW CHURCHES HELP COMMUNITIES FLOURISH

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Executive Summary

In this joint piece of research, Church Urban Fund and Theos set out to understand the impact of local churches in deprived communities in England. We sought to explore *what* churches do, and also *how* and *why* they do it. Are there distinctive opportunities, ways of working or forms of community engagement which are particular to local churches?

The research is built around 12 case studies of Church of England congregations and a nationally-representative poll. Overall, the Theos team carried out 165 interviews and attended and observed 58 sessions over a 12-month period. These visits helped develop detailed ethnographies, the results of which are summarised below. To see the full report, please visit www.cuf.org.uk/good-neighbours.

This research project is a 'critical appreciation' of what churches offer their communities – it argues that church-based activities offer both breadth of national reach and depth. They reach large numbers of people nationally, but in a uniquely relational way.

We found that churches are engaged in a wide variety of projects aimed at providing essential material and emotional support to local people – this has been well established by previous studies. We also found, however, that churches promote and embody 'neighbourliness' – building, and helping people build, relationships of mutual support. In this way, they are more than just providers of various community projects and social action initiatives, since strong relationships and social networks can help communities become more resilient in the face of social and economic challenges.

Churches are aware, particularly in areas of high religious and ethnic diversity, of being only one of a variety of religious and non-religious community groups and statutory agencies with whom they should and would work. Yet the community engagement of churches grows from nothing other than Christian commitments and practices, and a desire to "seek the welfare of the city".

For the main part, members of churches did not speak about being motivated by a set of abstract Christian principles. Rather, they were shaped by being part of a worshipping community of a particular kind and in a particular context that was responding to their communities in particular ways. This could be described as 'incarnational' ministry, meaning that churches are not just there *for* local residents but also *with* local residents for the long term.

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CHURCHES HAVE A SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL FOOTPRINT

The Church in England reaches approximately 10 million people each year through its community activities, even *excluding* 'familiar' church activities – Sunday services, Christmas, Easter, Harvest, baptisms, weddings, and funerals.¹

These activities include foodbanks, community events such as lunch clubs or cafés, healthy living activities such as community nursing, exercise classes and healthy eating courses, relationship support, financial education and advice, access to computers/ the internet, and providing opportunities for volunteering.

Among the most frequently used community services were children and youth services, cultural events, and activities for older people. However, churches had also provided support for asylum seekers, for people with addictions, counselling and 'street pastoring'. The activities and community services were more likely to have been used by younger people (18-44) than older ones.

IN DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES, THE CHURCHES PROVIDED VALUABLE SOCIAL GLUE

These quantitative research findings supplemented 12 detailed, qualitative case studies of Church of England churches located in areas of high deprivation. In each of these, there was strong evidence that the church really was the glue of its local community. We discerned two 'layers' of activity.

First, churches ran a range of community projects, often developed as a bespoke response to a particular local need: these included a children's clothing exchange, English language courses, foodbanks, homelessness activities, debt counselling and access to credit unions, lunch clubs for older people, a wide variety of youth and children's work and work with schools, and employment support.

Second, our case study churches would not just provide services but also build platforms for neighbourliness, relationships and social connection. For many of the areas in which these churches serve, material deprivation is only one result of a series of social processes which have also created greater social isolation. Churches themselves emphasise the importance of relationships of service, generosity and love to their own members, but they also saw these as constituting the flourishing of the wider community. They would look to build their own relationships with individuals and institutions in the wider community, pursuing common goals, and provide platforms for people to connect with others. Though less 'tangible', we suggest that understanding how churches sit at the centre of and foster networks of mutual generosity is vital to understanding their impact and potential.

THESE CHURCHES WORKED DIFFERENTLY THAN MANY OTHER ORGANISATIONS

In contrast to other institutions, our case study churches were a stable institutional presence yet also human, relational, personal and locally 'owned'. This meant that they were able to marshal human, financial and physical resources at some scale, without becoming bureaucratic or disengaged from the local community.

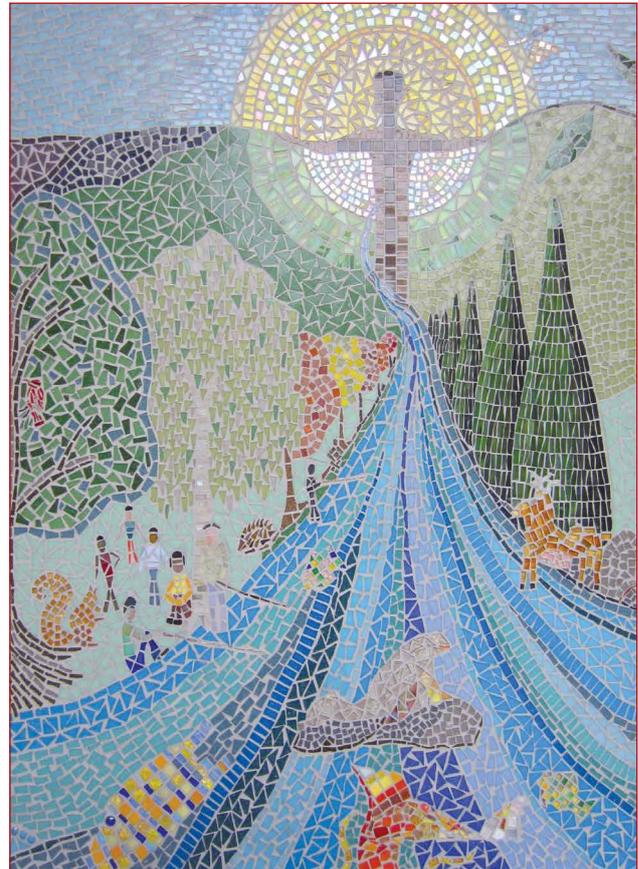
Interviewees benefiting from the church-based projects suggested that they operated differently than those of other providers. They said that they were more empathetic and personalised than state-based services, which could be highly conditional. Projects were shaped in response to particular local needs and usually funded without statutory support. Activity followed need rather than funding or broader statutory priorities.

The case study churches offered leadership, and were trusted by local elected representatives and community partners, often serving as trusted brokers within the community. That leadership was described as open and accessible by interviewees. Churches also sought to build agency within their communities, using their networks to help others secure their own goals. They sustained public spaces – churches, community buildings, gardens and green spaces – that were open, hospitable and, as far as possible, free from social and economic pressures.

COMMUNITY-FACING CHURCH WORK EMBODIES DEEP CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT

What churches offer and do in their communities cannot be divided from what churches are, or neatly organised into categories of public/ community-focused/secular and private/internally-focused/spiritual.

Churches are institutions which work for the common good, not because they adhere to any universal ethical principles or even any set of ‘values’, but because they embody a theologically determined way of life. While not always explicit, underlying theological assumptions could be inferred from the kinds of things the churches did and the ways in which they described them.



“The image that has been created is symbolic of what we want to be as a parish church, a place where life and goodness flows out into all parts of North Ormesby, creating a community where everyone is able to grow and flourish.”

Rev. Dominic Black of Holy Trinity, Middlesbrough

Thus, churches were marked by an emphasis on people as relational (people could not thrive outside of caring and secure relationships), hospitality (constantly emphasising the welcome of the other in community buildings, in church services or relationships), hopefulness and incarnation (an ongoing presence in communities spanning generations, even when circumstances were not auspicious).

Case study churches were clear that activity which might be perceived as aggressively proselytising might alienate those they were trying to help. Interviewees thought that authentic Christian engagement in contexts of deprivation included a response to physical and material as well as spiritual needs. The case study churches tended to be growing in size, and also increasingly reflecting the demographic make-up of their local area, but the process was an organic one, and churches were clear that relationships with residents – often vulnerable – should be characterised by hospitality and care rather than a desire to convert. They cared far more about being faithful and engaged churches than they did about being big churches.

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CONCLUSIONS

There is both opportunity and motive for churches to take on a greater social welfare role, and a strong base on which to build. Not only did the case study churches engage in a wide range of community-focused activities, but their emphasis on relationships of mutual care and neighbourliness offers a further dimension.

Churches are alive to what is often a hidden dimension of deprivation, which is a dearth of social connections – relationships – that make life both possible and meaningful. The social impact of churches cannot be reduced to providing services, however well-conceived or delivered. Their commitment to strong and caring networks of mutual support within cohesive communities provides the backdrop and horizon for all of that activity.

Given pressure on public finances and the ongoing difficulty of achieving increased prosperity in many urban centres outside of London and the South East, what tools are available to help communities, families and individuals thrive? Alongside measures which will continue to improve economic opportunity, the work of these churches indicates that building and enhancing neighbourliness and social connection could be one. Although this research has only looked at a relatively small collection of churches, the polling commissioned to accompany this research suggests that the local churches could provide the means to embed this approach in communities throughout England.

These findings have implications for churches, local statutory agencies, and national government. Firstly, churches and church-based agencies are right to point to, and celebrate, the work of local churches – certainly our case study churches were having a significant impact on their neighbourhoods. To follow their lead, other churches should understand and consider that one of the most valuable things they can do is promote neighbourliness. They should also consider the importance of creative local and regional collaborations with other parishes, churches and agencies. Effecting even modest change in neighbourhoods is hard enough, but effecting change across cities and regions is only possible through greater collaboration.

Secondly, local agencies should have greater confidence in churches as potential partners. Churches have assets and people, and the experience of the case study churches shows that they are also locally trusted and sensitive to local need. Churches do not merely support their members, but offer care for all those in their communities and are cautious to avoid alienating people with language or activities that could be perceived as coercive. In fact, people that benefit from church run projects often compare them favourably with other providers.

Thirdly, for the duration of the next parliament, national government and policy makers will be grappling with the question of how to support and sustain deprived communities in what is likely to be a period of ongoing economic challenge. Alternative approaches will have to focus not simply on physical regeneration but also on 'social' regeneration – the quality and quantity of relationships and social networks in areas of high deprivation, and the extent to which these can help communities remain resilient. Taking account of the presence and work of churches could make the difference between public initiatives in this field faltering or prospering.

1 Through ComRes, we asked respondents whether they, or an immediate family member, had accessed community (non-statutory) services in the last 12 months and whether they had been provided by churches or church groups. 48% of adults had accessed community services, with 51% of these accessing services provided by churches or church groups. Using ONS population figures for England, this equates to just over 10 million adults. Note: this is the Church *in* England not solely the *Church of* England.