Church Involvement in Community Development Work

What has been the Church's involvement in Community Development Work?

In 1985, the publication of the Church of England’s ‘Faith in the City Report’ (1985) caused political disquiet and inspired a wide range of new initiatives in urban areas. These initiatives, which were developed in response to indicators of deprivation at a ward level, were ecumenical and often relied on community development techniques to bring about change and improvements. Following the report, a multi-million pound Church Urban Fund was created.

Nearly ten years later, in 1996, ‘The Common Good’, a major statement from the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, was published. This report presented the social teaching of the Catholic Church in an accessible and digestible form and provided a theological framework for the promotion of ‘community and the common good’. It spoke of the need for commitment to one’s neighbour, ‘at the level of the community as well as the individual’.

Since 1997 there has been a growing acknowledgement in many quarters - including government policy makers - that faith groups of all religions may now be the strongest community organisations in deprived areas. As yet, however, their potential has not been fully exploited.

The Government’s Urban White Paper published in November 2000 made an important reference on the potential role of faith communities. ‘Faith communities can command valuable resources and social capital in terms of networks, buildings, voluntary activity and leadership skills. These can be especially important in deprived areas if other forms of institutional support have been eroded. Faith communities are a distinctive part of the community and voluntary sector.’ [1]

Another Government strategy paper states that, ‘faith communities should normally be members of Local Strategic Partnerships.’ [2]

In response to a growing interest in faith communities’ role in neighbourhood renewal and regeneration initiatives ‘Faithworks’ was launched in 2001 by a partnership of Christian agencies. Faithworks’ mission is both to equip faith-based organisations to provide quality service to the community and to ensure that Government, locally and nationally, recognises the contribution of these groups in community action.


What is the United Reformed Church’s involvement in Community Development?

The United Reformed Church has institutionally gone further than other Churches in making community work a ministry within the Church. The United Reformed Church ministry of Church Related Community Work (CRCW) began in 1981. In 1987 it became formally recognised by the United Reformed Church General Assembly as a distinctive ministry on a par with the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

What is Church Related Community (Development) Work?

The United Reformed Church sees Church Related Community Work as a vehicle for affirming the Kingdom of God in human affairs. It aims to:

overcome separation between ‘church and community’

listen to people’s experiences, questions & stories

hear God’s Good News from the community

enable people to ‘do business with God’

fulfil human potential and to affirm God’s creation

United Reformed Church, Church Related Community Workers are commissioned to care for, to challenge and to pray for the community, to discern (with others) God’s will for the well-being of the community, and to enable the church to live out its calling to proclaim the love and mercy of God through working with others in both church and community for peace and justice in the world. (Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church)

Within the ‘Five Marks of Mission’, two have particular (but not exclusive) emphasis for Church Related Community Work:

To respond to human need by loving service.

To seek to transform unjust structures of society.
CRCW is concerned with responding to a God who is already actively involved in the world (not just in church) and is contextual in nature – it needs to be worked out with local people.

This leads to a theology of:

Dignity; in which all are valued as God’s people.

Action; based on justice and love for neighbour.

Transformation; for individuals, the church and society.

Collaboration; between teams, communities and churches.

Service; accepting and valuing the gifts of everyone.

Equality; for all involved, requiring the church to let go of its controlling role.

Church Related Community Work is not a means of increasing church membership but an engagement with those outside the church, particularly those who are disadvantaged or oppressed.

The United Reformed Church has adopted Core Competencies for its Church Related Community Workers (CRCW) which include the National Occupational Standards in Community Development Work (NOS) given in Information Sheet 1. To these, additional values that mark the ministry of Church Related Community Work have been added, such as integrity, honesty, inclusiveness, recognising all people as valuable and equal as made in God's image, love for one another as for ourselves, respect of and dignity for others, the integrity of all creation and the inter-dependence of all creatures of the earth.

These standards and values define community development and good practice and describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for someone to become a United Reformed Church Church Related Community Worker. She or he is someone who is;

A practical theologian

An agent of local church transformation and change

A community development worker

A social analyst and cultural researcher

An interpreter of power relationships

An effective manager
An educator and storyteller

A facilitator of and participant in worship

A collaborator

A companion and listener

An effective communicator.

Fundamental is the ability for contextual theological reflection linked to community development and the ability to enable others to theologically reflect. The Church Related Community Worker is a community worker and theologian who works with the church to work for change within its local neighbourhood, rather than someone simply employed by the church to act on its behalf.

For qualified community workers from other recognised denominations, there is a Certificate of Eligibility process to apply to become a CRCW in the United Reformed Church.

As a distinct ministry, CRCW has a process of calling, assessment and training. An ecumenical training programme has been developed which results in the Diploma, BA or MA in Contextual Theology awarded by the University of Manchester and the ‘Higher Education Diploma in Church & Community’ which has been professionally endorsed. This is delivered on a part-time residential basis in Manchester for 6 or 12 weekends each year. The course is available and appropriate for individuals from all denominations and Christian agencies.

When called by a local church the CRCWs are paid a stipend from the United Reformed Church. The local costs, including housing, travel, office and administration have to be met by the local church from their own resources. The United Reformed Church sees itself as a promoter of partnerships with other churches through Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs).

Churches and congregations that don’t have a CRCW are also involved with community initiatives. As congregations have declined, many churches have re-orientated their activities outward into the communities where they are located. Church buildings are being used for a plethora of activities, some promoted by the church and others with no direct link at all.

The results from a Church Returns questionnaire in 2002, confirmed that 671 United Reformed Churches are directly involved with some form of community initiative. In most churches (347) this work is jointly initiated by the minister and member(s) but in 262 churches it is the members who take on the responsibility.

Many more churches use volunteers than paid workers. There are a total of 5,509 volunteers working alongside 374 paid employees in 538 churches. Of the paid staff, the Church funds 144 posts. These posts range from nursery staff to youth workers and a total of 142 employees hold a qualification in youth and community work.
Most of these churches cooperate with other groups: 408 with other faith-based organisations usually in ecumenical groups; 422 work with local government agencies; 92 with regional agencies and 19 with national government.

The types of activities carried out are:

- contributing to community organisation (255);
- contributing to learning and skills (263);
- supporting self-help and mutual aid (303) and;
- providing a local service (270).

A total of 682 church buildings are offered for community use and of these over 180 have six or more groups based in their premises. On average this means that in every parliamentary constituency there is at least one United Reformed Church building being put to community use. This community use of church property has led 223 churches to make alterations to their premises.

Models of Christian Involvement in community and neighbourhood by workers, volunteers and congregations

- Responding to Need Building Community Community Action
- Typical Activities Visiting Care Schemes Community Centres, Credit Unions, Self Help Groups, Umbrella Groups, Partnerships, Projects Community Work and Action,
- Campaigning
- Lobbying
- Main Objectives Support and care of Individuals Development of Services, networks and coalitions at local and wider level Community and Social Change
- Political Dimension / Assumption underlying Does not necessarily imply any change in social order, conservative Liberal/ reformist implies a fairer distribution of resources within the existing social order Concerned to radically modify or change the balance of power and resources
- Attitude to Change responding to effects of change accompanying change promoting change
- Authority Hierarchical, helper client, donor-beneficiary enabling delegated Collective
- Use of Power using power for others Sharing power with others using power for/with others to effect a redistribution of power
- Jesus Model Gentle Jesus
- Healer Priest
- King Leader, Servant Prophet, Liberator
- Theological References Good Samaritan
- Jesus Friend of Sinners
- NT models of Healing Servant Church
Mission Church
Social Responsibility
Social Gospel Preferential Option for the poor
God who suffers
Kingdom Prophetic models. Justice God/Church

Source: Churches’ Community Work Alliance Briefing, August 1998.