

Greenwich Peninsula Chaplaincy Conference
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What makes a good community and what is the contribution which faith communities make to a good community?

It's probably easier to say what's wrong with cities than define a good one. We may all differ in our views. When we say a good city, what do we mean? more human? more liveable in? more productive? more diverse? more equal? Ten years ago a survey showed that 84% of people in the UK wanted to live in a small village compared with the 4% who actually did. Is this what we want – to turn cities into collections of villages – or at least create in them the values that people (rightly or wrongly) associate with villages – a sense of place and belonging, a sense of security, predictability and continuity. Yet equally we want excitement in cities, buzz, encounter with the different and unexpected.

Whatever it is we want, we have the challenge of how to manage the size and complexity of our cities so that they can be habitable places, so that they can cope with the tensions between economic, social and environmental challenges, *and* so that they can respond to a fast-changing national and global context. One urban commentator¹ said recently that we understand less about how cities work than we do about ant colonies. Yet we develop urban policies as if we knew.

One thing we do know is that we have two-speed cities perpetuating and reinforcing inequality. They all have areas “where giants roam” – the five giants identified by William Beveridge of want (or poverty), disease (or reduced life expectancy), idleness (or worklessness) squalor (or poor housing and environmental degradation) and ignorance (or low educational attainment). Disadvantage is concentrated in poor neighbourhoods. They are the spatial manifestation of income inequality and the more unequal incomes are, the more strongly polarised neighbourhoods are. Some public policies, such as housing, reinforce the very market conditions that polarise communities.

There are different ideas of origins and nature of challenges facing distressed neighbourhoods, and different perceptions of the nature of that distress and different conceptions of the geography of the relevant ‘community’ and how neighbourhoods do and should interact with the wider metropolitan region. The multiplicity of policy initiatives and instruments deployed over the last forty years have reflected changing views about the nature of urban problems as well as changing political priorities. Sometimes there have been individualistic explanations – blaming the victim. At other times, more structural ones, recognising that, As FITC² put it, “the exclusion of the poor is pervasive and not accidental. It is organised and imposed by powerful institutions which represent the rest of us.”

Let me illustrate some of this by looking at Liverpool. In 1993, Merseyside was designated as the then only EU Objective 1 region in England, a sign of the scale of its economic decline in preceding years. The port made Liverpool an imperial city in the 19th century and the legacy remains in its architecture – and to some extent its sense of itself. (When there was a debate in some newspaper a little while ago about which was England's second city, Birmingham and Manchester, the answer in Liverpool was “London of course”.) However port-related industries meant mainly semi- and unskilled jobs, so that when they declined through the first half of the 20th century there was no core of skilled workers to be the basis for attracting newer high-tech industries. In the 1960s, the sticks and carrots of regional policy brought new jobs, for example in the car industry, but also a pattern of company ownership that had within it the seeds of later downfall. Manufacturing was dominated by a small number of very absentee employers. Branch plants of national or multi-national firms were very vulnerable to a loss of jobs when companies restructured and between 1971 and

1992, Liverpool lost nearly 40% of its jobs at a time when they grew nationally by 7%. Service sector employment fell by 22% when it increased nationally by a third. Loss of jobs was accompanied by persistent loss of population. Those who went were the ones who could leave. The city was caught in a vice. On one side was the high proportion of people who were most vulnerable and most dependent on public sector services and resources. On the other side were the divisive New Right policies that took little account of some of the deeper causes of the problems and had little sympathy with the consequences. Some of you will remember that this was a time when Archbishop Derek Worlock and Bishop David Sheppard played a crucial intermediary role speaking up for the city.

Much has happened since then and over the last ten years, we've probably also been helped by a favourable national economy. There are many signs of improvement but Liverpool – and Merseyside as a whole – remains a significantly deprived area. In the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation, Liverpool was the 2nd most deprived area in concentration of deprivation and the 5th in extent. It has 67 SOAs in the worst 1% in the country (i.e. out of 324). It was a source of great joy, therefore, when in 2003, Liverpool won the Capital of Culture designation for 2008. With its forecasts of thousand of jobs, new visitors to the city and billions in investment, the Capital of Culture status was anticipated as being 'rocket fuel' for a new local economy driven by cultural and creative industries and giving hope for sustained economic prosperity. But there have also been complaints about it being used as a tool for economic growth rather than as an expression of grassroots and community-based activity – the kind of 'scouse' culture that has sustained the city in the face of economic adversity.

As it said in a history of Liverpool published to mark the 800th anniversary of the granting of Liverpool's charter as a city: ". . . regeneration has not been without its critics, and there exists an inherent conflict between those who wish to see the city's cultural traditions used as a driver for urban renewal and those who see culture as an expression of the wider community, those who treasure art for art's sake and those who fear that in the regenerative process Liverpool is losing its uniqueness and exceptional character – becoming just another identikit city . . ." ³

In part, this has been a reflection of the emphasis that has been put on the regeneration of the city centre, where old dock and office buildings have been converted into upmarket apartments largely for young professionals – sometimes physically adjacent to, but in other senses many miles away from the still deprived parts of the cities. There is also disquiet about the prominence of retail, restaurants and wine bars in attempts to boost the economy. Nothing unique about Liverpool in this: modern economies are built upon consumption and . . . Liverpool wants to be a global city, but as a local Methodist minister ⁴ said "Liverpool's culture is to be, in its way, caught between a localism that means six streets down the road is 'them' as far as my congregation in the inner-city are concerned, and the globalism of the MetQuarter." (the shopping centre with the big brands) She goes on "We have to ask, however, whether the balance is to be tipped – has the global moved the local out? Most of my congregation have never been to the MetQuarter. Certainly – they, like their minister, will never earn enough to shop there!"

This illustrates a dilemma. City centres, office blocks, loft apartments, retail and night-time economies *are* all staples of present-day city economies. Can any city, let alone Liverpool afford to turn their back on them? Although there is no necessary link between good economic performance and social cohesion, conversely *poor* economic performance does contribute to social deprivation. And yet, are these policies for places instead of people? Whose culture is it? Whose space is it? Whose place? Whose story?

What does this tell us about making liveable cities and communities? Richard Best⁵ in an address about “The Power of Place” recalls the four ingredients identified by Joseph Rowntree when he sought to create a strong, healthy community near York a century ago.

The first is “don’t create a ghetto of the dispossessed”. In other words, he was pointing to mixed communities of people with different incomes, not segregated but jumbled together or pepperpotted. He wanted to avoid the stigma that can attach to particular areas – postcode discrimination, etc – that has such a corrosive effect on people’s feelings of self respect. In the words of the American commentator, Bruce Katz, we need “neighbourhoods of choice for individuals and families” and “neighbourhoods of connection that are fully linked to metropolitan opportunities”.⁶

Secondly, “design and layout”. Rowntree wanted high quality, well-functioning buildings with well designed public spaces and green surroundings around them. He would have found an awful lot of concrete jungles and the like to dislike over the past hundred years.

Thirdly, he said “create opportunities for neighbours to meet”: building them in at the design stage through community facilities but also enabling projects that bring people together in a common enterprise or interest. Faith communities can play a major role here. Just think how many faith buildings are opened up to the wider community for playgroups, credit unions, clubs or community cafes. Four or five years ago, we conducted a survey⁷ in the North West of more than 2,300 faith communities across eight faith groups. It sought to measure the contribution made by faith communities to civil society in the region. One of the striking findings was that faith communities are strongest where social need is highest. Mapped against the Index of Multiple deprivation, there was a concentration in the most deprived areas and these are also the areas likely to be poorest in terms of having community facilities where people can get together.

To give you one example. We have an organisation that started on Merseyside and is now being rolled out across the North West called Faiths4Change. One of its projects is an allotment project based at Asylum Link in Kensington (the NDC area in Liverpool). It grew from work completed in 2005 during Liverpool’s Merseyfest celebrations, when the gardens surrounding the St Anne’s Church Centre were cleared and renovated. This provided an opportunity to bring Asylum Seekers and Liverpoolians together to create a welcoming and peaceful area to relax. This also exemplifies the role of culture – in its widest sense – in binding people together within communities as well as giving greater self confidence and often new skills.

The fourth ingredient is “management by the people, for the people”. There are lots of ways that this is being advanced now, for example, by RSLs and through opportunities for local citizens to be involved in regeneration schemes in their area or in neighbourhood forums. It’s not everybody’s ‘bag’ and sometimes I think there’s a danger of required people in deprived areas to go through more hoops than the rest of us just to secure decent services. But if these are real opportunities to shape the future of the neighbourhood and feel some ownership of what is happening, then it must be beneficial. This dimension also touches on the role of volunteers in making the world go round. Again faith communities are significant. The North West survey found that one in ten of the responding faith communities was involved in managing or organising projects addressing a wide range of social issues including, housing, homelessness, anti-racism, crime prevention, drug and alcohol abuse, employment and training, social enterprise and personal finance. This is in addition to health, art and music activities. Similarly many of the faith communities surveyed were involved in government sponsored regeneration initiatives such as SRB, New Deal for Communities or SureStart. Almost all this activity was dependent on volunteers. It illustrates the role that faith communities can play in helping people to take an active grip on their own lives and the future of their areas.

These illustrate the different types of what is now called 'social capital': bonding, bridging and linking. They are various forms of activity that can give people support through stronger social networks, that can connect them with others with whom they have less in common but with whom they may discover shared interests and that can provide them with scope for influence beyond their usual range, say, with policy makers. The term 'faithful capital'⁸ has now been coined. It borrows from social capital but is perhaps more explicitly rooted in some of the concepts and values particular to faith communities. The message of social capital is that relationships matter and that the quality of connections between people constitutes a resource for individuals and communities. This resonates strongly with theological ideas such as hospitality, love for neighbour, care for the stranger, human worth and dignity and social justice. It can prompt us to try to reclaim the social spiritual significance of the term regeneration.

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¹ Paul Cheshire, 'Resurgent Cities, Urban Myths and Policy Hubris: What We Need To Know', *Urban Studies*, Vol 43 No. 8, 1231-1246, July 2006.

² *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation*, The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, Church House Publishing 1985, p.360

³ Jon Murden, "'City of Change and Challenge": Liverpool since 1945' in *Liverpool 800 Culture, Character and History*, ed John Belchem p.482

⁴ Barbara Glasson in "Liverpool: The lived experience" by Barbara Glasson and John Bradbury in *Cities of Culture: whose vision, which agenda?* Report of a Core Cities Theology Network Conference, 12-14th September 2006.

⁵ Richard Best, "The Power of Place", Smith Institute Lecture, 26th February, 2008.

⁶ Bruce Katz "Neighbourhoods of choice and connection. The evolution of American neighbourhood policy and what it means for the United Kingdom." Paper prepared for the JRF Centenary event. 2004

⁷ *Faith in England's Northwest: The contribution made by faith communities to civil society in the region*, NWDA, NWRA, Churches' Officer for the North West, November 2003.

⁸ see *Faithful Cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice*, The Report from the Commission on Urban Life and Faith, Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing, 2006