

What makes a good community? and what contributions do faith communities make to a good community?

The major world faiths hope and work for community

The meaning of community resides deep in the roots of the world's major faiths. In the Upanishads, from the Hindu Scriptures, an understanding of the oneness of all things leads to a way of life related to everyone and to everything:

He who knows that all things have become one with his own self, and he who has seen the oneness of existence, what sorrow and what delusion can overwhelm him? ¹

And in the Buddhist tradition, as well as in other traditions, the implications for this fundamental conviction are worked out. Whilst there might be different religious traditions, a belief in the oneness of all things crosses all of the resultant boundaries:

All beings can expiate misdeeds, perform good, and attain Buddhahood by the merits of this Sutra. It does not matter whether they are wise or not or whether they believe the Sutra or reject it. ²

Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Baha'i faith, said, 'The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens;' ³ and in many of our traditions this oneness is enacted in religious and social practice: for instance, in the Sikh 'langar', or community kitchen, food is prepared by members of the congregation and then eaten by everyone present, congregation and visitors, Sikhs and non-Sikhs, all seated together in order to symbolize the unity of humankind. ⁴

In the Qur'an there is a balanced recognition of both the diversity of humankind and also of its unity:

O mankind: we made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other, not so that you may despise each other; ⁵

We have ordained a law and assigned a path for each of you. Had Allah pleased, He could have made you one nation: but it is His wish to prove you by that which He has bestowed upon you. Vie with each other in good works, for to Allah you shall all return and He will declare to you what you have disagreed about. ⁶

In the Jewish Scriptures, whilst the Jewish people are God's chosen people, they are chosen for a purpose.

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. ⁷

¹ Isa Upanishad, 7, <http://www.hinduwebsite.com/isa.asp>

² A kaikyoge: a verse for opening the Lotus Sutra: http://www.nichiren-shu.org/nichirenschu_news/Nichiren157e.pdf

³ <http://www.bahai.org/>

⁴ <http://www.realsikhism.com/faq/meanings.html>

⁵ The Holy Qur'an, Sura 49, verse 13

⁶ The Holy Qur'an, Sura 5, verse 48

⁷ Isaiah 49:6

and in the New Testament, in the Book of Revelation, the new community envisaged is described as a city:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' ...

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ⁸

Jesus spoke often of the 'Kingdom of God', ⁹ a community in which all are welcome and in which God's generosity is experienced; ¹⁰ and in Paul's letters in the New Testament the word *koinonia*, 'fellowship', ¹¹ expresses the centrality of community to the Christian Faith.

The vision of a new community has frequently inspired the followers of the world's faiths to seek the creation of communities which reflect the character of the communities hoped for, and in particular to seek the equality and unity of a diverse humanity which such a community demands.

The Department for Communities and Local Government's website ¹² defines 'sustainable communities' as

... *places* where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all. [Emphasis added.]

Whilst places are important, these are not what communities are. Communities are communities of people, relating to each other, experiencing justice, freedom and diversity, and also a level of equality sufficient to sustain unity. The places in which communities are set need to serve these ends, but they are not themselves communities.

What makes a good community?

The above suggests that a good community is people living together in a place in such a way that they know and appreciate one another, serve each other's needs, and enable each other to fulfil their potential. Such a community and its members will experience

⁸ Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1,2

⁹ e.g. Mark 1:15; 4:11,26,30

¹⁰ Matthew 20:1ff

¹¹ e.g., Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:13)

¹² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/sustainablecommunities/whatis/>

physical, mental and spiritual health; will benefit the work, leisure, family and other communities to which its members belong; and will experience and value both unity and diversity.

Take, for instance, the issue of wealth and poverty. There will always be differences between incomes and between the levels of assets which different people experience, but if the inequalities become too wide then a sense of unity is difficult to maintain. So whilst some of the restaurants and events in The O2 will always be out of some people's financial reach, the provision of frequent and high-quality arts, cultural and culinary experiences which are accessible to everyone, whatever their level of income, is vital. The beach during the summer of 2008, which was freely available to everyone, was just right; and the sports garden during the summer of 2009 was equally good. It would be a pleasure to see more imaginative projects like these. And would it be possible for some of the arena events to be brought within the financial reach of families with breadwinners on the national minimum wage? (The Greenwich and Docklands International Festival is an excellent example of accessible arts events, and more such activity would be very welcome).

Today developers are working hard to ensure a mixture of housing tenures, and to mix them up as far as possible.¹³ This is very commendable. It is also important to ensure that only a small proportion of 'buy to let' takes place. Communities are people, and good communities take place where people relate well to each other. This requires long term occupancy of dwellings. Owner occupation, shared equity and registered social landlord tenures can encourage long-term occupancy, but 'buy to let' generally doesn't. Whilst developers cannot control what happens after the first sale of a property, it is important to ensure that at first sale properties intended for owner occupation go to that purpose: so they need to be sold to private individuals, and no-one should be allowed to purchase more than one property. The Greenwich Millennium Village has some good policies in place in this respect, and we look forward to the entire Peninsula development following the same or even more rigorous policies.

It is people who are the community, and the buildings in which they live need to serve the building of community. It is therefore essential that the people who compose the community are in charge of the buildings rather than the buildings being in charge of them. Representative residents' associations are therefore essential; and where there is a management company managing the physical infrastructure (paths, roads, parking, heating systems, etc.) elected residents, drawn from all tenure types, need to be in the majority on the board. Only in this way will people come first and buildings be run in order to serve the building of community.

Only by residents forming associations and running events, publishing community websites, and making available websites, blogs, and other communication channels, will community emerge, particularly in new housing areas. Particularly significant in this respect are community arts festivals and other such events in which people work together to create occasions for people to enjoy each others' company.

Physical space in which people can meet to develop networks, to pursue shared interests, to learn from each other about different cultural and religious traditions, and to carry out projects and activities together, is also an essential requirement in any community. Thus at an early stage community space needs to be provided, and the people who make up the community need to be in charge of it – for it is buildings

¹³ Registered social landlords sometimes prefer to arrange their dwellings in such a way as to minimize service charges, and we understand this

which must serve the people of the community and not vice versa. Different age-groups have different requirements, and children and young people in particular need facilities suitable to their stage of development. High quality playgrounds are therefore an early requirement in any new community; and if the semi-isolated but visible street corners which young people need aren't available in a new development then suitable alternative provision, such as semi-isolated but visible shelters, need to be provided.

On Wednesday 5th March 2008 the Greenwich Peninsula Chaplaincy convened a consultation conference to discuss the questions 'What makes a good community?' and what contributions do faith communities make to a good community?' About sixty people came in the morning to hear four speakers address the two questions and to participate in workshops. The afternoon was spent listening to presentations on the Peninsula development, The O2, regeneration projects in Greenwich, and the work of the chaplaincy - and we took part in further workshops designed to help the chaplaincy to plan its next few years' work. The points made above about what makes a good community, and the points made below about the contribution which faith communities make to a good community, have been drawn out of the presentation texts and from notes taken during the workshops.

To mention three other suggestions made at the conference:

Public space matters. There need to be accessible outside spaces, small shops, and other ways of people meeting each other; and this is particularly important in a community in which most people live behind entryphones.

The community needs a sense of identity. 'Greenwich Peninsula' is becoming the name by which the community is known, and when all of the residential housing is built there will be no obvious gap between the Greenwich Millennium Village and the rest. A consistent name contributes to a sense of identity, and it is therefore imperative that the tube station should be called 'Greenwich Peninsula'.

A local bus system and good walking and cycle routes (particularly into East Greenwich) will be needed: and in relation to transport a common problem is particularly acute on the Peninsula: Lack of planning for Greenwich Thameside as a whole means that traffic impact has been evaluated for each development in isolation whereas traffic impacts in fact relate to the entire area and beyond. Because of congestion it is already difficult to leave the Peninsula by car at times, and the congestion makes bus travel slow and causes danger and pollution to both cyclists and walkers. Radical transport solutions will be required if the Peninsula is to be a good place to live, and an expensive congestion charge might be the only way to do it.

What contribution do faith communities make to a good community?

Faith communities witness to community, both in their founders' words and actions, and in their present activity. The Sikh Langar (see above) is a constant witness to an inclusive community; the Christian sharing of bread and wine is both a remembrance of Christ's death and a foreshadowing of the future banquet of heaven; and in a variety of religious traditions the sharing of food is a sign of God's blessing and of a coming promised community. Every faith community builds its own community and reaches out beyond it; every faith community seeks the physical, mental and spiritual health of its members and of those beyond its membership; and every faith community both teaches and exemplifies both the unity and the diversity of humankind.

Take, for instance, Jesus and his teaching. Jesus is valued in different ways in different faith communities: so here there is already both unity and diversity. And Jesus himself exemplifies the search for unity in diversity. He crossed boundaries - between Jews and Gentiles, between the respectable and the outcast, between rich and poor;¹⁴ and early Christians learnt the lesson: they knew not to discriminate between rich and poor; the Apostle Peter learnt not to call Gentiles unclean; and the Apostle Paul taught that 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'¹⁵

A major contribution which the faith communities can make to a community, and particularly to a new one, is both to maintain their differences and to work together whenever and wherever possible. They can therefore embody the unity and diversity which every good community needs. Thus on the Greenwich Peninsula the faith communities maintain their differences (in terms of what they believe, what they teach, and how they practice their religion) and they work together whenever possible: in running a team of chaplains, in relating to issues facing the community and to institutions on the Peninsula - and in the future they will work together in managing a building for the faith communities and the wider community to use.

Many of the issues over which the faith communities can create debate and express a view relate to the nature of the community in which they are set, and to make both positive suggestions and constructive criticisms on the basis of their Scriptures and traditions is a proper role for the faith communities.

Every faith community has as its two objectives: 1. to worship God (or, in the case of Buddhism, to seek enlightenment), and 2. to serve the physical, mental and spiritual needs of their own members and of others. *Both* of these activities contribute to the life of a community. As a result of fulfilling these two objectives religious organisations create social capital: networks, new organisations which spin off into independence, new skills for their members, etc.. In order for all of this to happen faith communities need physical space: so in new communities developers need to provide that or need to provide land on which faith communities can provide their own. At an early stage in any community it is essential that borough councils, developers, and faith communities' representative bodies, meet in order to plan for faith communities' involvement in the new community and for the physical space which they will need. The Greenwich Peninsula provides a good example of this happening in a timely and thorough fashion.

It is appropriate to leave to the end of this paper a particular contribution which faith communities make to communities, and that is that we stay. In many of our communities the Church has been worshipping on the same spot for hundreds of years, and often for well over a thousand years. Other faith communities might not have been here so long, but once established in a community a congregation of any faith intends to stay and often does. Individuals might come and go, but the corporate body continues to meet for worship and continues to serve the community, constantly adapting in order to serve new needs and new situations. Commitment to communities as a reflection of God's commitment to us is an important aspect of the 'faithful capital'¹⁶ which faith communities offer to a community. Such 'faithful capital' is 'social capital' but it is also much more than that, for every faith community brings to

¹⁴ In Mark 6 Jesus serves the needs of Jews (for instance, by feeding the 5,000); in Mark 6:53 he travels into Gentile territory and serves Gentiles' needs (for instance, by feeding the 4,000); in Mark 5:21-43 he heals both poor and wealthy - and he chose the company of society's outcasts: Mark 2:13-17.

¹⁵ James 2:1-7; Acts 10; Galatians 3:28

¹⁶ *Faithful Cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice* (Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing, London, 2006)

a community a distinctive contribution rooted in its faith tradition and in its present belief and practice.

To be themselves is the first contribution which faith communities make to a good community; and to be committed in the long term to the service of the community is the second and subsequent contribution.

We hope to make these contributions to the Greenwich Peninsula over many years; and we hope to see there a good community.