

SUBMERGING CHURCH?

SUPPORTING FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY WORK IN DEPRIVED AREAS

Leading a church or running a community group in a deprived area is very challenging, as well as rewarding. At Church Urban Fund, we are committed to supporting those who serve these communities, as they live and work alongside some of the poorest and most marginalised people in England. As part of this work, we have been organising a series of overnight consultations for clergy and community workers from deprived parishes to reflect on the key challenges they face and to begin to develop a shared vision for tackling poverty in their diocese. What are the main issues affecting their communities and their ministry, what would help them to be more effective, and how could the wider Church support them? This note summarises the discussions from the first six consultation events – held between November 2011 and June 2012 - in the dioceses of York, Newcastle, Rochester, Southwark, Southwell & Nottingham and Wakefield.

BACKGROUND

Up and down the country, inspired Christians are working unstintingly and compassionately with the poorest and most marginalised members of society. With deep cuts in public spending and low economic growth, churches are increasingly confronted with urgent need on their doorstep. However heroic their efforts, their contribution can still feel woefully inadequate. Organised by Church Urban Fund - and funded by an individual donor - the purpose of the overnight consultations is to give church and community workers from deprived areas the time and space to share their experiences, insights and ideas away from the busyness of everyday ministry. It is also an opportunity for people to make new contacts and develop a greater sense of unity and a shared vision for tackling poverty within their diocese.

ISSUES

Participants were asked about the issues affecting their community. As well as praising the resilience of local people, many of the same concerns came up repeatedly in discussion across the different dioceses:

- **Lack of job opportunities:** with the decline in manufacturing and now the public sector. Where people have got jobs, they are often low paid and insecure.
- **Loss of hope and a sense of powerlessness:** people don't believe that things can change for the better or that they can do this for themselves.
- **Low aspirations:** this starts with children from an early age. Young people face high unemployment, disillusionment with the benefits of education and cuts in youth provision.

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- **Money and debt problems:** the combined impact of benefit cuts and the rising cost of living means that many people are struggling to make ends meet. Doorstep lending and payday loans are on the increase.
- **Destitution:** one of the most extreme forms of poverty affecting asylum seekers and other immigrants with no recourse to public funding.
- **Loneliness:** this is a big problem in many sectors of the community, along with mental health issues.
- **Lack of parenting skills:** means that many families are not functioning well. Basic skills such as cooking healthy meals are not being passed on.
- **Poor community relationships:** due to lack of meeting places, transient populations and council cuts. People often don't know who their neighbours are or how to be a good neighbour.
- **Blame culture:** politicians' rhetoric and media coverage is shifting responsibility on to the poor.

"Someone asked me, 'Can I be a vicar?' People are desperate for work."

"Since the benefit changes have come in, it's really thrown people. There is now a sense of fear."

"The smartest, brightest shops are pawnbrokers. Behind the scenes, loan sharks are busy."

"We had a young person who wanted to be a barrister, but she dropped out of training and ended up working in a care home. Young people are having to lower their expectations."

"We've seen three regeneration programmes come and go, when what we need is industry, employment – a job with some ambition, something kids can aim at."

"99% of the mums who come to our breakfast club are on anti-depressants."

"All these problems are also opportunities. It's important to see hope in the midst of this."

MINISTERING IN DEPRIVED AREAS

The church leaders and project workers we spoke to are very committed to their communities and passionate about their work, but there is also a weariness due to the pressures of ministering in deprived areas, including:

- **Needs of the congregation:** there are so many pastoral issues that it is easy to get burnt out.
- **Lack of people and skills:** recruiting volunteers is not easy, because many churchgoers are exhausted and are coming to escape. There are not enough people even to fill basic roles.
- **Financial pressures:** due to falling income, rising parish share, and the cost of maintaining buildings.
- **Inadequate support:** clergy are put into post and left to get on with it, which is very isolating.
- **Lack of understanding:** there is a strong sense that churches in wealthier areas do not know what's going on in deprived areas and are unwilling to share their resources.
- **Church issues:** internal conflicts and institutional structures are very energy-sapping on top of all the other pressures of ministering in a deprived area.
- **Resistance from public bodies:** who are often wary about churches' involvement in the local community, even though they are providing valuable services.

As a result, church and community workers in deprived areas all too often feel isolated in what can be chaotic and even threatening situations. A lack of validation and support, an absence of co-ordination, a shortage of relevant training or experience, as well as the duplication of activities and competition for dwindling resources can leave them exhausted and demoralised.

"I am overwhelmed by need. I'm hit with 20 problems the moment I walk in the door. I feel ill-equipped to respond."

"Chaotic shift patterns have a major impact on church and family life. People can't commit to things if they don't know when they will be working."

"Nationally, churches rely on the contribution of retired people, but they don't retire to the inner city."

"We're not good at supporting each other: 'Come to me all you who are heavy laden and I'll give you something more to do.'"

SUPPORTING CHURCHES IN DEPRIVED AREAS

Out of these discussions, participants began to talk about some of the changes they could make to respond positively to these pressures, including:

- **Supporting one another:** through gatherings such as the Outer Estates group in Hull, and pooling resources with other churches (e.g. shared youth workers).
- **Being strategic:** focusing on what churches do well, and looking for creative and imaginative ways to do things without money.
- **Empowering others:** avoiding the 'father knows best' model by delegating out more, allowing people to take risks, and investing in indigenous leaders.
- **Finding out what is happening locally:** so that churches can signpost effectively and work more collaboratively. This could mean supporting an existing project rather than creating something new.
- **Faithfulness:** remaining committed to these communities for the long-term.

We also asked people how they thought the wider Church could support them more effectively. Here are some of the key themes that emerged:

- **Vision:** there was a desire for a bigger vision from the church hierarchy, one that is focused on churches' role in the community, rather than a perceived pre-occupation with parish shares and church growth.
- **Validation:** church and community workers said they would appreciate more affirmation from dioceses for ministries in deprived areas, as well as a greater understanding of the pressures they are under.
- **Resources:** acting as a link with grant-making trusts, helping with information and data and providing training, such as non-academic courses in leadership and other skills.
- **Less bureaucracy:** some people expressed impatience with the 'slow machinations' of the diocese and with top-down, centrally driven initiatives.
- **Brokering:** helping to break down the barriers that exist between deprived and wealthier parishes and encouraging more sharing of money, skills, and experience.

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"There is energy in these communities, but we've got to find it. We need to see God at work and join in."

"People get very heated and resign over women priests and parish shares. I've never seen anybody get that passionate about community work."

"Lots of people are asking questions about the kind of world we want to live in. The Church has not been very good at providing answers to these sorts of questions."

"When we contact the diocese to tell them our problems, they tell us their problems!"

"Please tell our stories. Show the rest of church they need to help and support."

Asked about the potential role of Church Urban Fund, the following suggestions were made:

- **Awareness-raising:** telling stories and celebrating the positives, not just the problems, in order to show the rest of the Church how and why they can help and support this work.
- **Strategic thinking:** acting as a sounding board to think about the big picture and help turn ideas into reality.
- **Equipping:** offering training in specialist areas, such as employment regulations.
- **Connecting clergy and community workers:** providing opportunities to learn from one another across different contexts and regions.
- **Mobilising churches on specific local issues:** for example, the closure of a large Alcan plant in Newcastle diocese.
- **Acting as an intermediary:** between the Church and the Government and other big funders to access large-scale funding and speak out about poverty to a wider audience.
- **Joined up working:** encouraging churches to work together more closely, by pulling resources and expertise together across the diocese.

NEXT STEPS

The mission of Church Urban Fund is to support and work with churches that are committed to tackling poverty in England. In partnership with Anglican dioceses, we are establishing a network of Joint Ventures to provide the long-term, sustainable support needed by Christians working in difficult circumstances. Through these partnerships, we seek to be a catalyst, bringing people together, growing useful networks and encouraging solidarity, as well as helping to secure additional funding.

To find out more about Joint Ventures, please contact Andy Turner at Church Urban Fund (020 7898 1699) or go to: www.cuf.org.uk/joint-ventures