

# **'What makes for good partnerships in Christian community action?'**



**A survey of Christian organisations, churches and  
para-church bodies in the UK**

## **Executive Summary**

This report has been compiled following a survey carried out in July 2007 investigating 'What factors make for good partnerships in Christian community action?' Organisations and individuals consulted were engaged to some degree in partnership working with various churches and Christian bodies. The survey resulted in 50 responses from across the UK including England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, representing many examples of good practice and ground-breaking activity. (See 'List of contributors')

It is written in the context of increasing challenges over recent years for church congregations and Christian organisations to avoid working in isolation and - at times - competition and to work towards closer links and the sharing of resources within localities.

Key findings provide clear and consistent evidence of ways in which local Christians can actively operate as the 'body of Christ' by demonstrating God's kingdom to a watching world. A sense of unity and common purpose featured highly as being critical ingredients to effective Christian partnerships. In order to achieve this, strong relationships of trust were seen as imperative. Factors quoted which prevent this happening, were most commonly a primary concern with 'parochial interests', which can lead to competitiveness and a lack of trust. Often, where partnerships have been developed, this in itself leads to a greater sense of unity between local congregations and Christians.

Two core themes emerge as a challenge for all those engaged in Christian community mission in this country. Firstly, there is a need for Churches and individual Christians to be prepared for a **'paradigm shift' in thinking about expressions of local church**. There is a need to view 'church' in terms of 'church in a locality' as opposed to a series of individual congregations/organisations. (See John 17) Only when this shift has taken place, can steps be taken to work effectively together towards transformation taking place in our local communities.

The challenge is also for local Christians to **commit to long-term 'informed intercession'** in which Christians from different congregations meet regularly to pray for specific and current issues and concerns in their immediate community. Examples from around the world indicate that when this is in place, communities are transformed by the power of God. The challenge remains, therefore as to whether we continue meeting the needs and concerns of our local congregations or to hold on loosely to these congregational/organisational interests for the sake of God's kingdom being revealed to those around us.

***The survey has been carried out in partnership with The Shaftesbury Society and Faithworks, and coordinated by Jeremy Sharpe – Community Development Worker, Woodley Baptist Church, Berkshire. Jeremy has 9 years experience within this role which has a ministry to families and older people in the area. Various initiatives have been established, in partnership with statutory bodies, voluntary groups and local congregations and Christian organisations.***

## **Background**

In 2004, The Shaftesbury Society published the document 'Challenging Church' which outlined the position at the time of increasing concerns for those on the margins of society, alongside increasing evidence of the churches' lack of real impact within the communities they serve. This was highlighted through considerable evidence of churches and Christian groups "...overlapping projects established in a neighbourhood, and churches duplicating the work of other churches and agencies...." It was pointed out that this "...can result in competition for resources, volunteers and attendees [and that] despite our passion for people and commitment to local communities, a willingness to work together strategically is rarely a priority."

As a result the challenge was made that "the key reason that the church is failing to have a radical and sustainable impact on communities is that lack of strategic cooperation and strategic planning."<sup>1</sup>

This survey has provided an opportunity to further assess the challenges made in reports such as the 'Challenging Church Campaign' and to recommend ways in which the church can move forward in the future.

The survey itself focused mainly on examining the key requirements for effective local networks, barriers to joint working, models of action, and positive/negative outcomes.

## **Key requirements for an effective local Christian network**

1. **Sense of unity and common purpose** - By far the most important factor was to ensure that there is '*sense of unity and common purpose*'. 70% of respondents referred to this in some way as being vital to the success of networks. This is underlined by John Noble when he explains "if we allow the Spirit to unite us in life and purpose under Jesus our head, missionary activity will explode....bringing skills and resources together"<sup>2</sup>
2. **Good communication** – 48% quoted this as being key to success (and, interestingly, bad communication was seen as one of the most common barriers to effective joint working – see below).
3. **Strong relationships and trust** – In order to foster good communication, an environment in which strong relationships and trust are fostered was considered to be equally important. 45% quoted aspects of this as important and, again, a lack of trust is one of the primary barriers to effective partnerships.
4. **Effective leadership** – 45% quoted aspects of leadership as important, although there were differing views as to how this is best put into action. Around 21% viewed the engagement of existing church leaders as a key factor, whilst a further 21% recommended the need for a visionary leader to oversee a network. Some also suggested that networks should operate at a 'sub-leader level'.
5. **Prayer** – It was recognised throughout that effective and collective prayer inspired by the leading of the Holy Spirit is central to any such initiative.
6. **Use of gifts** – Effective use of gifts within local networks was also quoted in varying forms. 21% indicated the basic need for effective use of gifts. Others recognised the importance of a variety and breadth of involvement; the need for engagement with other independent Christian and statutory groups; and people for whom networking is a passion.

"There is a need for people with a focus on the Kingdom in their locality, as opposed to empire-building or ego-massaging"

"People must be willing to seek common ground rather than emphasising differences"

"It is critical that leaders have trust in the network's intentions and effectiveness"

7. **Theology and values** – A sense of ‘kingdom-mindedness’ was quoted by 12% as a vital ingredient. Others focused on the need for tolerance of differences; inclusive theology; security in own identity; and a commitment to the communities they serve.

### Barriers to effective joint working

1. **‘Parochial interests’** – By far the most common barrier to joint working identified related to individual churches and organisations focusing on their own agendas ahead of any benefits to collaborative opportunities. 61% made some mention of such issues which often stemmed from historical understandings of ‘church’ as it relates to individual congregations, as opposed to church in a locality. The likely causes of this can be found in related matters also featuring highly as common barriers. A **lack of trust** was mentioned by 42% of respondents as being a frequent concern, along with **competitiveness** (12%) contributing towards the focus upon local concerns.
2. **Organisational issues** – Collectively, a variety of organisational matters formed a high percentage of reasons for joint working not being effective. The most commonly quoted of these was **‘communication issues’** (33%), with **‘lack of purpose’** (27%) also rating highly as a difficulty. Other organisational concerns included **‘not enough empowerment of lay people and too much reliance on clergy’**, **‘weakness in leadership’** and **‘lack of prayer’**.
3. **Logistical reasons** – A variety of differing matters of a logistical nature were frequently given as reasons preventing or inhibiting more effective joint working. The most common of these was pure **busyness** making up 30% of responses. Others included **‘lack of preparation/experience’**, **‘financial restrictions’**, and **‘security/confidentiality’**.
4. **Theology & Values** – A relatively small number of responses referred to theological or ‘value-based’ issues as causing barriers. Some of those mentioned, however, included **‘strongly held theological positions’**, **‘a failure to understand that together we can do more’** and **‘a broad or narrow view of mission’**.

*"A key barrier is centuries of tradition embedding the primary outworking of a church through a local church structure/ institutional mindset"*

### Models of joint working

Two suggested models for joint working were suggested. These were

- **‘One initiated/spearheaded by one primary church/organisation’** and
- **One based on equal and shared partnership**

The majority of respondents recommended a combination of both approaches with 47% recommending that initiatives are initially spearheaded by one person, church or organisation and subsequently broadened out into an effective network in which all stakeholders have a sense of ownership in the initiative. This is underlined by one respondent who suggests that “if one organisation has the idea and then wants everyone to join its agenda but without any transference of decision making, it will fail.”

*"Although you always need a dedicated leader, he must be kingdom-minded and always have in mind the joint success of the project"*

Other suggestions included using one ‘independent’ organisation with no ‘vested interests’ to facilitate action on a local level. However, it was also pointed out that the ownership of such initiatives is often unequal, with large ratios of stakeholders representing a small proportion of the local church population.

## Outcomes

Combinations of generalised and more specific examples of positive and negative outcomes were given, many of which indicate the challenges and potential that exist in closer collaboration.

### Positive outcomes

One of the benefits of networking across churches/ organisations has been a **higher profile as well as a greater capacity to serve local people** (42%). This was indicated in relation to awareness within the church as well as by secular organisations and the general public which, in turn, leads to more referrals, greater understanding of projects and better use of volunteers/staff. 39% indicated that **relationships and contacts had also improved** as a result of closer networking, and a further 12% that it had led to a **greater focus on collective mission** in the local area, as opposed to individual church efforts. In general terms, **inter-denominational cooperation and trust** had increased, along with examples of joint prayer and mission activities. In many cases, closer networks had also led to a **stronger voice** for the Christian community in local matters of interest/concern.

*"Joint partnerships can show the world that there is ultimately one church, with many expressions"*

The majority outlined examples of specific community/mission projects which had been initiated as a result of local networks and were operating very successfully. These included work with homeless people; asylum seekers; peace march and Hope UK (See 'List of contributors')

*"Once you get out of one box, you begin to question all of your boxes and dogmas, which is really healthy"*

Other mutually beneficial examples were given such as sharing good practice; promotion of the concept of 'one local church'; encourages and strengthens smaller congregations; can unite churches/denominations.

### Negative outcomes

There were very few negative side effects suggested by those who responded. Of those offered, all related in some way to one or more of the barriers mentioned above.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Throughout this survey, a number of very clear themes have emerged, which help us to gain some insight into 'what factors make for good partnerships in Christian community action?'. Clearly, every village, town and city are different and made up of a variety of traditions, relationships, and experiences. Consequently, there can be no 'one size fits all' process which can be applied to every area. However, there are some core ingredients which, evidence shows, should result in Christians within local areas working together more effectively as a demonstration of Christ's body in their community.

1. **'Informed Intercession'** – Many have been challenged and inspired by two documentaries produced in recent years – Transformations 1 & 2.<sup>3</sup> The films provide examples of town and cities, rural and urban, 'developed' and 'developing' that have been powerfully impacted by God primarily as a result of sustained and 'informed' prayer by Christians from various congregations. In all cases, significant issues such as crime, drug abuse and cartels, sexual abuse, alcoholism and others were, in the main, wiped out and towns and cities transformed as local people began to recognise sin in their lives and turned to God in large numbers. In all cases, this had been preceded by specific prayers relating to concerns relevant to the immediate community. It was not until Christians from various church congregations joined together, that results started to be seen.

There are lessons to learn from these examples as we continue to grapple with the need for God to impact our communities through local Christians. Many of those contacted through this survey, testify to the importance of collective prayer to subsequent effective ministry with various groups of people. These include cities such as Leeds where, over several years, Christians had met regularly to pray for the people of the city. Among many positive outcomes, one result has been a weekly 'Kidz Klub' <sup>4</sup> run as an 'inter-denominational' initiative and which sees up to 600 attending a Sunday morning club for children in the centre of Leeds. Around 95% of the children attending regularly were previously 'un-churched'.

The challenge, therefore, provided by these examples, is for Christians, church leaders, and those running Christian organisations, to make it a priority to....

⇒ **Establish the key needs and concerns of the local community**

⇒ **Commit to meeting together on a long term basis to pray for local people**

**2. Unity & common purpose** – Whilst this can be attempted through discussions and networking events etc., it will only be successful if preceded and maintained by prayer. As indicated above, when Christians meet to pray for people in a specific area, a sense of purpose and vision will result, and with it – a sense of unity. Equally – there will be a building and strengthening of relationships and trust, which are critical to an effective demonstration of God's church in a locality. As indicated in the findings, a lack of strong relationships and trust is often one of the main barriers to partnerships failing.

**3. Leadership** – It is apparent that, in order to be effective, any local initiative requires an **activist with a passion to see communities transformed by God**, who ideally should not have any vested interests in promoting one particular congregation or organisation over another. This would not preclude clergy from carrying out this role, but would provide a greater challenge to ensure that all stakeholders and potential stakeholders maintain a sense of ownership and involvement at all times. **An organising body comprising representatives from a broad spectrum of church traditions is the ideal**, as this helps to build trust across the Christian community, and can also foster confidence and partnerships within the wider voluntary and statutory sectors.

**4. Organisation & communication** – This is another critical factor in ensuring effective local networks. It is important that initiatives being run on behalf of local Christians and churches, **keep everyone up-to-date with developments and ensure that a broad spectrum of interested parties have clear and easy access to those involved in the day-to-day running**. Websites, newsletters and relevant annual/launch events can be effective in encouraging this. (See 'Transform Newham' & Network Leeds websites) <sup>5</sup>

**5. Models for action** – Clearly, different models will work in different areas according to local circumstances. However, evidence shows that an initiative will be more likely to succeed if the following factors are in place:-

⇒ **Vision initially driven by one organisation/person** –

Provided the intention is for fully inclusive participation and involvement by all stakeholders, evidence suggests a 'lead body' is more likely to result in effective outcomes. The alternative – of attempting to operate 'by consensus' can lead to operating through the 'lowest common denominator', thereby weakening any likely outcomes.

⇒ **Strong and inclusive leadership** – Ideally, this will be through someone with no or few vested interests and with a commitment to demonstrate God's love to the local community in partnership with local individual Christians and Churches/Christian organisations.

There remains, therefore, a choice for the church in relation to our engagement within our local communities. We can continue to run projects, groups, clubs and activities as separate congregations and with little reference to other similar Christian activities in the same area. Along with this, is likely to exist the danger of competition for finance, volunteers and 'service-users'. Alternatively, as is already happening in many communities worldwide, attempts can be made to develop a shared vision for communities, preceded by prayer which leads to a more effective sharing of resources, sense of unity, trust and lives impacted by God. John Noble summarises this vision in his book 'The Shaking' when he explains "Jesus not only calls us to be hidden like salt, with its disinfectant, seasoning and fertilizing properties....but also to come together as light. In Jesus physical absence, empowered by the Spirit, we are the light of the world, shining with the character of our coming King and the nature of the kingdom. How different our towns would be if we unitedly expressed our love for God and humanity and our abhorrence for sin and oppression as God intended. The result – the redemption of our communities and ultimately creation itself!"<sup>6</sup>

## **Notes**

- 1 Challenging Church, The Shaftesbury Society 2004
- 2 The Shaking, John Noble 2002
- 3 Transformations 1 & 2, The Sentinel Group
- 4 Leeds Kidz Klub, [www.kidzklubleeds.org.uk](http://www.kidzklubleeds.org.uk)
- 5 [www.transformnewham.com](http://www.transformnewham.com) & [www.networkleeds.com](http://www.networkleeds.com)
- 6 The Shaking, John Noble 2002 pg. 166

## **List of contributors**

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