Contesting "Good Practice" in Faith-Based Action for Social Change:

Diversity, Dialogue & Dilemmas in Christian Community Work

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Abstract

Faith-based community work is currently receiving a high level of policy interest from diverse organisations and government bodies in England, based on its perceived potential to address a combination of policy, organisational and individual interests. Building on emerging findings from qualitative research with participants in this contested field across these levels of interest, this paper analyses the complex agendas shaping the contemporary construction of the concept of 'good practice' for Christian community workers in the current policy and practice climate. Based on this analysis, some of the resultant tensions and dilemmas facing those involved are highlighted, from policy, practice, and theological perspectives. In light of the rationalistic tendency of many of these agendas to evaluate any work based on their own standardised model (which, it is argued, internalises rather than recognises these tensions), the paper proposes an alternative basis for practice, founded in ongoing processes of critical, reflective learning, and which recognise the organisational dynamics concerned.

Introduction

Faith-based community work is currently receiving a high level of policy interest from diverse organisations and government bodies in England, based on its perceived potential to address a combination of policy, organisational and individual interests. This chapter explores the different agendas and expectations being expressed by different 'stakeholders' in this field, based on emerging findings from multi-level qualitative research involving literature analysis, interviews, participant observation and action research undertaken between September 2004 and December 2005.

These agendas and expectations are then critically analysed to explore the extent to which they may be compatible, highlighting three different strategies being deployed by stakeholders in response to their increasing awareness of the diversity of practice in this contested field. Examples from the research are used to illustrate the issues, problems, tensions and dilemmas which result from using

each of these approaches as a normative basis from which to build an understanding of "good practice" for Christian community workers. Community work is shown to be a highly contested arena of practice even in its more secular manifestations, to which the faith dimension adds further complexity. This analysis is used to highlight the need for an alternative framework to form the basis of practical action and reflection in this context.

Agendas and Expectations – the Current English Socio-Political Context for Faith-Based Community Work

The agendas shaping the English context in which contemporary faith-based community work takes place have changed substantially over the past 20 years [1].

Policy makers are increasingly turning to "faith communities" as potential alternative providers of welfare provision, and as "partners" in securing community cohesion and civil renewal. At the same time, increased societal secularization, ailing buildings and declining church membership levels have put increasing pressure on congregations to find ways to reconnect with the communities around them. Various national and more local infrastructure bodies have arisen to bridge the gap between these 'stakeholders' and promote a greater role of faith-based community work. In this context, individual activists and groups linked to congregations are also seeking to find ways to apply their own values and theologies to address social needs, and in doing so encounter the complexity of the demands, expectations and agendas of these different 'stakeholders'.

Local Appropriateness or Managing Difference? Standardisation, professionalisation and the search for shared ground

As awareness of the extent and diversity of local practice grows, increasing attention is being given to the publication of guidance and training which attempts to define how best to deliver this work. However, this material has itself drawn on a complex set of different theoretical and theological approaches, often subconsciously and implicitly.

The confused theoretical base and the different stakeholder expectations have left practitioners experiencing complex dilemmas as they try to integrate different agendas and perspectives in their practice, often with little or no training or support. Rather than address these underlying issues

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[1]   A more comprehensive account of the agendas described briefly by way of introduction here can be found in Orton (2006).

directly, however, this research identified three distinct approaches that were being commonly employed by stakeholders to deal with the increasing awareness of diversity in practice. Increasingly, these strategies became concerned with "good practice", a term used to reinforce certain practices and discourage others by establishing a normative basis for the work. However, each of these strategies encounters difficulties when used to construct such a normative basis, as we will now explore.

Strategy 1. "Whatever is appropriate"

*Initially, recommendations by policy makers and researchers to those dealing with diverse faith-based practices focused on advocating **whatever was 'appropriate'** to individual circumstances.* For example, Local Government Association guidance recognised that there was often uncertainty over whether public funding should be made available for faith group activities. After indicating that there was a general consensus over not funding worship or propagation activities, the guidance then recognises that there are situations where discretionary judgements about appropriateness may need to be made by local officials. This leads to different interpretations, benefit/risk assessments and conditions in different places. In many cases, such as decisions over awarding discretionary rate relief, this can mean that faith groups are more dependent on particular officer or councillor decisions than other comparable local community groups, and these decisions can vary significantly across time and place. This discretion-based approach is highly problematic when applied to contested areas, and has come under increasing strain, particularly when combined with the increasing political recognition of the possibility of institutional forms of discrimination, especially connected to ethnic identity . Such difficulties are further exacerbated by continuing confusion over what particular understanding of community cohesion and multiculturalism should underpin British public policy, particularly in terms of whether to assimilate or value difference in the public sphere .

The following questions, observed as being asked by practitioners, serve to illustrate some of the difficulties in applying standard principles to faith-based community work on contested issues such as the interpretation of equal opportunities in practice:

(i)   Does insisting that faith-based organisations adopt standard equal opportunities statements, committing them to equal rights irrespective of gender, sexuality, etc.:

a.   encourage these organisations to be more inclusive in their practices?   *and/or*

b.   result in institutional discrimination against those groups who consider that these statements do not fully reflect aspects of their beliefs, through reduced access to public policy engagement and

funds?

(ii)   Even if such standard equal opportunities statements are accepted by faith-based organisations in terms of service delivery, to what extent should faith-based organisations be able to insist on particular personal characteristics (such as holding particular beliefs or behaving in certain ways) when deciding whom to employ or allow to volunteer in this context? This issue has been brought into sharp relief by the recent Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 and Equality Act 2006, which legislate on these matters, but contain certain allowances and exemptions building on tests such as 'genuine occupational requirements' and organisational 'ethos'. However, the interpretation of many aspects of these acts remains substantially untested in the courts.

(iii)   How should specific religions or denominations understand and interpret their own scriptures and traditions in light of alternate hermeneutics over how such beliefs relate to their cultural contexts? A particularly visible public example of this is the current debates over homosexuality currently dividing the Anglican Communion.

These issues frequently fail to be recognised in research into this field, and even where they are recognised, they tend to either just be noted as highly problematic (e.g. Smith, 2000) or reduced to broader questions such as "How flexible can liberal society be when faced with [religious] inflexibility?" In this research, it was apparent that these issues tended to arise instead when faith-based workers drew on their own alternative ideological and value-based traditions and discourses. These alternative discourses were frequently observed as enabling faith-based practitioners to bring alternative terms, meanings and frameworks to bear on debates over issues such as equality, human rights and social justice.

Evangelism (speaking of one's own faith) and proselytisation (attempting to convert others to your particular faith) were similarly highly-contested, evoking impassioned arguments for and against their inclusion in 'good practice'. Those advocating for their inclusion frequently cited rationales of personal and organisational integrity; that their words and actions should reflect their beliefs. Those advocating against their inclusion frequently argued that "good practice" would avoid taking advantage of the vulnerability of people in need and/or imposing specific judgements about social issues on particular people. Questions also abounded over whether, if it can take on these forms, it must it always inherently do so, or whether there are alternative ways of working which embody both personal integrity and respect for others.

To complicate matters further, differing moral or theological stances on issues were frequently

caught up in professional debates on how best to apply even the same stance to a particular practice situation. A practical example of this is in how practitioners deal with contested issues such as contraception and abortion in their practice. Even if practitioners take a similar stance on the morality of these issues, there remain choices and different views over how best to apply these moral values in a particular situation. When faced with questions over these issues, they face a range of practice options that include:

- Refusing to even discuss such matters due to their moral position
- Providing a response limited to particular options based on a preconceived moral framework
- Enabling people to explore all potential options, however unpalatable they may be to the worker concerned.

In addition to these decisions, even within each option, practitioners frequently differ over how much of their personal value perspective they choose to share as part of such a discussion, and how best to do this (if at all).

When applying these debates in the support given by infrastructure bodies to various groups for their own organisational development, additional questions were raised over whether infrastructure workers should challenge any practices which they considered wrong or oppressive. In this situation, not challenging potentially oppressive practices was potentially the safer option, enabling these organisations to remain 'politically correct' and avoid offending groups who held different value positions, not to mention respecting the different historical experiences and contexts of each individual project, drawing on non-directive practice theory. However, at the same time, this held the potential of clashing with the various anti-oppressive practice commitments within secular statements of community work values and principles , in which the commitment *to* challenge such practices is a common feature, even if there is room for difference in terms of *how* best to go about doing this.

Whilst there is not space to directly address all of these contentious issues here, even this short outline demonstrates that any approach to practice which relies *solely* on appeals to 'whatever is appropriate' leaves many issues unresolved. Not least of these issues is **who** decides on what is appropriate when contested issues and practice decisions are at stake. Practitioners frequently view such ethical or value judgements as at the heart of their ability to be a 'good' practitioner in this context, and yet they receive relatively little attention in available literature (with the work of Banks, 2004, 2006 a notable exception).

What can be observed, however, is that an approach theoretically dependent on local interpretations of 'appropriateness' has led to a broad diversity of different expressions of values and how these are applied in practice, whether in policy statements by organisations and different government departments, or in particular practitioners' articulations and practices. It has also, in various places, led to an initial tendency for important practitioner issues and debates to be fudged and relatively suppressed in the interests of not highlighting the extent of diversity in this practice. This is because highlighting the differences in practice would in turn further highlight the deeper conceptual and structural issues relating to community cohesion, multiculturalism and multiple agency/policy agendas of which practice differences are a product. However, the impact of this sort of approach has increasingly proved to be problematic and even self-destructive for *all* those involved, as differing expectations for faith-based community work continue to build without resolving these contentious issues.

Strategy 2. **Finding common ground through terminology that transcends difference**

Alternative, if related, approaches to managing these differences have been based on attempts to **find common ground** between different faith groups or between faith groups and other groups/government by trying to find terminology that may enable people to transcend other differences. This has frequently taken on the form of a search for a language of common values underlying divergent practices, such as (for example) a common recognition of the "value of every human life". An indicative example of this approach to managing difference was observed in the response of a city-wide faith forum to the discovery that there was a local connection with the London underground bombings. In this difficult situation, the forum was able to issue a common statement to a national television news programme expressing their solidarity with each other. In this statement, the forum emphasised their shared condemnation of any theological justification for this sort of violent act, based on the values held in common by all the members of faiths present. The same forum then explored practical actions they could take together to demonstrate these shared values.

This kind of approach clearly meets the policy objectives of helping parts of different faith 'communities' find common ground with each other, and sometimes with practitioners in secular agencies. However, the research also highlighted substantial issues and limitations to this approach. Firstly, by focusing only on what is shared in common, the language adopted can work to hide (rather than resolve or explore) differences, limiting the depth of the relationships and

understanding developed. Secondly, only parts (not the whole) of a faith 'community' may be involved in phrasing such statements, often hiding and/or failing to realise that this phrasing can hegemonically support selective interests. An example of this process in action was a city-wide faith forum discussing how representatives from different religions should work together to promote "family values" and "the value of every human life", as this was perceived to be something that all participants would have in common.

However, during the ensuing discussion, it became clear that the phrase "family values" was being used by some (but not all in the group) as a symbolic code to apply a universalising assumption that all faiths would pursue a conservative agenda on controversial issues such as abortion, the role of women, sexuality, etc. This sort of approach fails to recognise that the theological arguments assumed to be universally held are often actually contested. For example, Christian feminists have critiqued the patriarchal nature of the church as an institution, its role in ideologically reinforcing women's oppression, etc. (see, for example, Gill, 1998, for a brief summary of this literature), and there are growing Islamic critiques of gender-biased traditional patriarchal jurisprudence and cultural interpretations, with these critiques being based on honouring Qur'anic injunctions regarding equality .

Hence, this shared language can clearly be used as a means to deny or hide difference, in the interests of using the chosen terms as a means to co-opt a group into one particular agenda. Critically, this agenda can often be adopted without reflecting on the inclusive and exclusive implications, or other possible understandings within faith traditions.

This process can often be exacerbated by the tendency for many such groups to fail to be representative or inclusive of those people (young people, women, minority groups, etc.) who are most likely to be prejudiced by this sort of hegemonic use of language. This approach also ignores a realistic understanding of the sociological history of the use and abuse of religion as a tool for both emancipation and oppression/social control .

Perhaps contrary to this tendency, an approach focusing on language-based similarities negotiated in these forums fails to take into account that the reasons for particular people attending such groups may also vary. These reasons can include people who are attempting to find alternative authoritative status, and hence not always those with any recognised leadership role or support from the group that they may ostensibly be representing. This possibility may have both positive and negative implications, and is indicative of the broader debates about participative and representative

democracy in the current policy context (see National Community Forum, 2006). In this context, perhaps conversely, such forums for inter-faith interaction also frequently tend to attract more liberal or open-minded participants, not those necessarily most prone to resist such interaction. In practice, both of these tendencies can limit the usefulness of such forums in drawing together *all* those holding different views, and undermine the potential of any carefully-worded settlement to carry the support of the wider 'faith community'.

For individual practitioners, who have to apply these broadly-worded statements of values and principles to particular practice situations, this language may be helpful in making initial connections with practitioners from other perspectives. For example, one infrastructure worker referred to her role as often being one of "interpreter":

> I mean, I've seen in these things before where representatives from the churches and representatives from health, professional social services get together, and I've been sat in the middle laughing, and they were like "What's up with you?" and I was like "You are both saying the same thing here. You're just talking in the language of theology and church, you're talking the language of social policy and services. If I just re-interpret what you are saying to them, then they are like "Oh, yeah!".

However, a solely-language-based approach to addressing difference is of limited use in resolving the dilemmas resulting from unresolved theoretical tensions remaining beneath this language, if all the language does is 'paper-over-the-cracks'. For example, the faith forum situation above raised questions of whether and when such actions might need to be challenged or supported by community workers if they were engaging in "good practice" – i.e. supported in terms of helping these groups to realise their own agenda in a non-directive manner, or challenged in order to realise the anti-oppressive value base which many community workers claim as the root of their profession.

Such debates can frequently extend beyond the particular intervention of the community worker to contest even the aim of the activity of community work itself. At the heart of the research were recurrent debates about the nature and purpose of the church, the nature of truth, and whether evangelism and community work could and should be compatible with each other (and if so, how this could happen). We will return to consider these issues in more depth shortly; but first, one final identifiable current approach to constructing a normative basis for community work practice needs to be considered.

Strategy 3. **Standardisation masquerading as professionalisation**

The final approach identified as being used to manage the observable differences in practice was an endeavour to develop a shared set of standards to guide how practice should be conducted. These standards frequently claimed to draw on the language, discourse and experience of the discipline of professional community work in applying theory and a defined set of values to this work.

On the face of it, this approach has the potential to overcome the issues identified with the first two approaches by specifying and articulating a particular normative value- and process-base for practice. However, for Christian community work in the current social and political context, there remain a number of issues with this approach. We have already highlighted how community work itself is a relatively young and contested profession that has complex roots, ranging from charitable philanthropy through to self-help empowerment and more radical community organising approaches. In contrast to this, current policy trends have focused on constraining much professional autonomy and localised reflection through managerialism and centralised target-driven approaches to both devolved 'partnership' service delivery and knowledge. The research discovered various reflections of these trends, including public officials referring to the Government's role in terms of service delivery as being about 'steering, not rowing', and increasing attempts during the research period to apply skills-centred, National Vocational Qualification-led attempts to define and measure all professional roles.

When these policy trends are combined with the eagerness of some faith-based infrastructure bodies to demonstrate the compatibility of Christian community work with Government aims and secular practice, often in order to secure access to additional funding, the result has been an attempt by some stakeholders to construct one particular standardised version of practice as being the *only* one worthy of being labelled 'professional', 'high quality', or 'good practice'.

This was epitomised in research observations of the attempts by national bodies to explore how Christian community workers might see their work in relation to the newly-consolidated 'National Occupational Standards for Community Development Work' and promote these standards as the basis for good practice (see, for example, Churches Community Work Alliance, 2003; Humphreys, 2005; Community Development Exchange et al, 2005). One denomination, the United Reformed Church has chosen to adopt the secular National Occupational Standards as the basis of their community work role. This decision itself was seen by many of the infrastructure agencies interviewed as being "good practice" This denomination's Church-Related Community Work Covenant (an agreement signed by churches hosting these posts) sets out the aims and value base of

community work using definitive, universalising statements such as:

> *All* community work aims to tackle the causes of prejudice and discrimination and to build
> local structures where power is justly shared; we work to fight discrimination against others
> (whether because of race, nationality, belief, sex, sexual orientation, disability, age, class, or
> any other reason) within ourselves, our organisations and wider society.

Clearly, such statements are at odds with the observations of divergent practices and debates discussed earlier in this paper, especially in terms of whether different faiths should be respected or challenged when holding different cultural or religious views on contentious issues. At the level of professional values, however, such universalising statements attempt to define the nature of community work practice in terms which support particular stakeholders' positions on the contested issues. These definitional statements thus play a hegemonic role supporting particular practices and values, building alliances with others holding similar views within and outside the faith community concerned. In these documents, these universalised statements of aims are taken for granted, before going on to specify how these aims might be met through the rational application of a series of practical, measurable skills employed by the practitioner.

Another example of this approach is the Faithworks Charter, which sets up its own "benchmark" of standards as the measure of "good practice", using principles such as outcome measurement, "not imposing our faith on others", and equality of access to the services provided by faith groups, whilst implementing employment policies which enable faith-based community work organisations to "preserve our distinctive ethos". Adherence to this position is then regulated through means of membership of a "social movement" to support their precise articulation of these positions.

However, by prematurely universalising aims and standards across diverse practice, the skills-driven managerialist agenda can leave little room for continuing reflection over the still-contested issues of purpose. In policy-makers' hurry to discover 'what works', and practitioners' frequent desires for quick-fix solutions to everyday issues, at best there is little time or desire to address the more fundamental question of what this practice is aiming to achieve. As such, this standardised form of quasi-professionalisation that is being imposed is in danger of falling into the trap described well by Jeffs and Smith :

> The problem with skills-led training is that it is incrementally bolted on to a partial analysis
> of practice and purpose. Faulty and restricted perceptions of essential role, purpose and
> practice ensure that the skills taught must be inadequate to the task. Sustained analysis and

theory making become superfluous within this model, being perceived as 'obscuring reality' and 'getting in the way of action'. In the end, it is only by luck that any contribution to the good can be made. Overwhelmingly, skills-led training obscures the development of understanding about what exists, what is good and what is to be done.

Increasingly, however, practitioners and those infrastructure bodies listening closest to them were observed to be beginning to recognise these issues with 'broad-brush', standardised approaches. One example from the research begins to highlight a range of the practitioner concerns with these approaches as currently articulated. A non-Christian, unqualified lay worker, who was running a community centre originally established by a church and now run 'at-arms-length', was observed during the course of one short session with a support body to be asking highly pertinent questions about the application of standardised quasi-professionalism in her context:

- When running a short holiday club, at what point does a parent who attends with their child become a volunteer and hence require their criminal record to be checked, a full induction and risk-assessments carried out, etc. etc., ? When they first offer to help do a task such as making a cup of tea? (And should the rules applied be different if the person who offers is under 18?)

- And should the worker then turn down this offer of help (contrary to her broader aim to get parents and young people involved and empowered in running the group in the long term) just to avoid risk?

- If she insists that older members of the church congregation go through these processes before helping, won't she put off many of those who would otherwise consider getting involved and helping build bridges with the congregation? If so, how can she overcome their resistance to these standardised formal processes, which potentially includes a perceived suspicion of their intentions for getting involved associated with criminal checks and/or perceived sleight on their competence in preparing food and drink associated with risk assessments and food hygiene courses? And how does insisting on these measures affect her role as a relatively newly-appointed worker and her relationships with the congregation in that setting, especially when these members of the congregation see themselves as having carried out these activities well for many years without such processes having been in place?

- What outcome measures could truly capture the holistic nature of their approach?

- Does having a written policy really change practice, or is it just to 'cover people's backs' in case of a problem, and either way, how does she know and keep up to date with everything the law has to say about her work?

- What should her project's relationship be with the founding church? Should this affect the aims

and ethos of the work, and if so, how?

- What should she do when some members of the church want to hold a carol service with the parent and toddler group in their usual session?
- What should she say if members of the church see her work as not contributing adequately to the growth and development of the church itself?
- How does and should her personal identity as a person who isn't a member of the sponsoring faith community affect her work? Does this, and/or should this, affect the nature of the project?

Whilst several of these issues share aspects in common with the broader voluntary sector, many of the available resources in this context seem primarily focused on fitting local practice in to a broader national model of 'competence' rather than asking critical questions about the role of faith-based practice in this context. By attempting to define and enforce one particular approach to practice, these resources frequently conflicted with the diversity of local interpretations of issues and practice decisions. In fact, these local interpretations which were often highly resistant to standardisation. In particular, the national standardised material frequently failed to take into account the differing combinations of varying theological rationales and individual/group interests that were central to local explanations and actions. Hence, in practice, where these models were being applied, even the potential that there might be different aims and methods for this work was largely ignored. This presented a major problem, as a major factor in determining likely project sustainability appeared to be their ability to work out a more integrated rationale that genuinely blended theological, personal, social and organisational goals together.

Equally importantly, various practitioners and infrastructure agencies expressed concern with approaches that uncritically adopted current policy terminology and accepted prevailing political trends, allowing faith groups to simply be co-opted into whatever agenda was held by the government of the day. Such approaches were seen as removing the potential for faith groups and practitioners to engage in critical evaluation of policies and practices in light of alternative viewpoints that proactively draw on their rich theological traditions. This critical perspective was seen as essential for retaining what various Christian practitioners referred to as their "prophetic edge" or "distinctive contribution".

Examples of the creeping acceptance of prevailing political concepts accepted by some infrastructure providers, but frequently contested by practitioners, included the idea that all work with people can and should be measured. This principle was central to at least one of the standardised national model's available to practitioners, which claimed to set a "benchmark of

professionalism and excellence". Despite this, as touched upon in the example above, many practitioners were uncomfortable with this concept, and some articulated critiques drawing on their own theological understandings and rationales for practice that enabled them to deal with the pressures for this kind of measurement in sophisticated ways. In doing this, they cited their need to remain true to their alternative understanding of 'what makes for human flourishing', recognising that these processes may take time or even never be directly observable or measurable by the practitioner. Similarly, Morisy has critiqued the churches' obsession with "meeting needs" within this bureaucratic and rationalistic framework as standing in the way of the churches' potential to learn from its engagement in a form of community work that is central to their mission, and this author has described elsewhere how this can have destructive tendencies for the resulting organisations .

Thus, the regulation of the work of individual practitioners into frameworks that are preoccupied with establishing linkages with national policy agendas, combined with the forces shaping the dynamics of organisational development, can lead to the loss of the 'distinctive contribution' that faith-based organisations are thought to provide.

Moreover, these forces leave the term "good practice" as simply an empty vessel, able to be filled with the prevailing political or hegemonic agenda of the most powerful stakeholders of the day. In other words, the only meaning that can be attributed to the term "good practice" when used in this way is "any practice which meets the different needs and aims of those engaging in defining it". In fact, this critique applies equally to all three of the strategies discussed, which are all dependent on these hegemonic battles, and only differ in the level at which the debate takes place and ideological power exercised.

This leaves practitioners struggling to resolve their day-to-day dilemmas without an adequate theoretical base, reliant instead on the changing whims and agendas of more powerful bodies who vie to contest what should be considered "good", and deploy various hegemonic forces including labelling, legislation, accreditation and funding allocation to enforce their perspective. The challenge for faith-based community work, if it is to develop in a more sustainable and reflective way, will be to develop a clearer theoretical base, rooted in a more critical and integrated analysis of its purpose. This research suggests that any such analysis will not just need to take into account the similarities across existing practice and principles, but also any potential differences between aims and methods being used, in order to develop a deeper understanding through critical reflection at all levels of policy and practice.

Biographical Statement

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