

Submission to the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life

By Alison Webster, on behalf of the Board of Mission of the

Church of England Diocese of Oxford

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Introduction

The Diocese of Oxford

The Diocese of Oxford is the administrative area of the Church of England that, broadly speaking, covers the three counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. It covers 2,200 square miles – and much the same area as Thames Valley Police. The diocese sits between the Cotswolds in the west and London to the east. It extends from tiny rural communities to the vastly different cities of Oxford and Milton Keynes. From Chipping Norton to Slough, from west Berkshire to Newport Pagnell, there are villages and market towns, suburbs and urban areas, organized into 626 parishes. There are 815 churches in our diocese – more than any other diocese in the Church of England. So in many ways the best description of the Diocese of Oxford is that it is the family of the 55,000 or so regular worshippers in these churches. However, the relationship between Church and state in this country means that every one of the 2.2 million or so people who live in our area has a parish church. - See more at: <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/who-we-are/#sthash.GFqS6spt.dpuf>

Focus

In this submission we will focus on the theme of social action. The question asked by the Commission is, 'Should faith based organisations be involved in social and political action and, if so, in what ways and to what extent'.

Our submission is based on the knowledge that faith based organisations ARE involved in social and political action, in a complex range of ways. For instance: in prisoner welfare and the resettlement of offenders; befriending schemes for vulnerable people; alleviation of hunger through the provision of emergency food (eg through food banks); environmental and growing initiatives (eg in churchyards); campaigning against climate change, and for a more fair global economic system; support for unemployed people; family and parenting support.

We would like to offer a 'phenomenology' of this involvement: a model for understanding it, and a map for negotiating it. Our aim is to increase religious literacy amongst policy makers, politicians and media commentators who often make important category errors in their navigation of this terrain. The involvement of religion in social and political action is complex – involving diverse belief systems, multi-layered practical and organisational 'delivery mechanisms', and internal politics.

The Matrix

Our phenomenology takes the form of a 'matrix' (see Appendix), with narrative commentary. This has been developed from the experience of many years of involvement in Christian social action, policy interventions and political campaigning. Whilst there is a bias towards the Anglican Church in this experience, most initiatives on the ground are ecumenical, and sometimes interfaith. It is therefore in the field of social action that diversity is both an advantage and a challenge. Theological differences are often not of great significance when a community faces the challenge of feeding hungry people, giving shelter to those who are homeless or destitute, or seeking asylum or a place of safety. Anglican 'triumphalism' is rarely possible at parish level, when the needs of communities can be engaged with only when other denominations, faiths and secular organisations are drawn in. At best, theological and religious differences are explored in the process of reflection on practical action, with such dialogue bearing fruit in learning and spiritual growth.

Understanding the Matrix

An obvious place to start in understanding our matrix is with an individual who, because of her understanding of her faith, decides to take a particular form of action for the common good. For instance, she may hear that a food bank is starting up in her locality and feel called to donate food from her weekly shopping, or to volunteer, working alongside others – of faith and of no faith – to mitigate food poverty in her local community. This is the top left-hand square of our matrix (Personal/Practical). The action may be through a church project, a Christian agency, or it may be through a completely secular organisation that works to improve people's life experience. Whatever the nature of the organisation she is working with (and this work may be paid or unpaid), for her it flows from her understanding of who God is, and what that means for her responsibilities towards others. It is also an important way in which she grows in her faith – receiving from others as much, if not more, as she gives.

Questions that sometimes arise in this square of the matrix are: how explicit should this person be that she is doing this for faith-based reasons? What is the difference between honesty about one's motivation, and proselytisation? Or, what if the values she brings as a person of faith are in tension with the organisation she is working for? This is not just an issue in the sphere of volunteering but also for many professionals who try to reflect their faith through their work.

Questions also arise about how to do a job well. When people of faith make a start, in whatever way, to meet a need or to rectify an injustice, they are thrown into a process of development. For instance, a befriending scheme for people with mental health needs may start out as an apparently simple process of matching isolated individuals with volunteers who can offer support – but this process will be happening against a fast-changing political backdrop of changes in public services; NHS provision; social and economic circumstances that may increase collective stress in our communities; safeguarding expectations, etc. An apparently simple intervention quickly becomes very complex.

The Horizontal Process

The movement across the matrix – the X axis – is the movement that is necessary for social action to be effective. Much faith-based action happens when individuals who are part of worshipping communities band together to improve their communities (Collective/Practical). But local congregations are set up, organisationally, to serve their function as worshipping communities. They are not set up to run social action projects. Insofar as they express faith

through action/campaigning, they need different organisational structures. Often charitable bodies, informal associations and social enterprises are set up for this purpose. A Christian charity is very different from a congregation, but policy-makers often confuse the two.

When locally-based forms of action are replicated in many localities, larger organisations may be formed to enhance the impact of action on the ground. Hence the Organisational/Practical area of the matrix. To give an example, MHA and Action for Children were originally set up as Methodist Homes for the Aged and National Children's Homes (NCH). Historically, they were the national organisations set up to service the Methodist denomination's collective response to the needs of the very young and the very old. Now, however, they are very much part of the national NGO marketplace alongside other 'big players' like Age UK and the NSPCC. They retain a strong link with the Methodist Church, but their challenge is to operate as, to all intents and purposes, a national secular NGO, whilst retaining a support-base amongst Methodist individuals and congregations. Large Christian NGOs face the tensions inherent in being perceived as relating to 'church', whilst operating within the rules of a secular 3rd Sector marketplace. Having a strong, faith-based, historically consistent value base can be an advantage (in that the organisation may be considered coherent and reliable), but conflicts can also occur (eg when secular and religious values apparently diverge, eg government requiring equality in, for example, adoption and fostering by gay men and lesbians, conflicting with Roman Catholic Theology underpinning Catholic childcare agencies).

The move along the X axis towards 'getting the job done' effectively and efficiently also accounts for the relatively recent development of the franchise model of social action at local level. 'Off the peg' tools are offered (eg through the Cinnamon network) to short-cut the groundwork needed to make effective interventions to mitigate particular needs. The Trussell Trust and food banks is a good example of this. Christian congregations are increasingly embracing the franchise model (particularly in relation to winter night shelters, debt counselling, food banks and street pastors) as a new category of social action where projects can share experiences and expertise, and use social media to gain answers to tricky questions about how best to get the job done, whilst also remaining in touch with the specificities of grassroots need. Franchises give an organisational structure to local social action that is flexible, and encourages ecumenical co-operation. Some critique it, however, for skewing the perception of need and shortcutting the process of community engagement that is necessary to discern need (ie social action is undertaken because of organisational ease, rather than a true assessment of need).

The Vertical Process

This brings us to the 'Y axis' of the matrix. The vertical process at work here reflects what, in theological terms is known as 'the pastoral cycle' of action and reflection. We can illustrate this by returning to our food bank volunteer operating in the Personal/Practical square of the matrix. In the process of her volunteering, she meets food bank users. She talks to them. She prays for them (and sometimes with them). Her activity ceases to be purely practical as she listens in a supportive way to their stories. She begins to offer pastoral (emotional, psychological) support too. And she begins to ask herself what is going on, in terms of politics and public policy, to make so many people end up unable to feed themselves and their children - especially in a wealthy society where food waste is also a huge problem. She reflects on this, reads about it, and joins various campaigns and organisations that are tackling these questions (eg Church Action on Poverty). She has now entered the Personal/Prophetic arena. And as she reads and reflects and learns, she decides to join with others in political activity to bring about the changes she thinks are important (eg an end to benefit sanctions).

Any such change is likely to come about only through collaboration between a broad base of organisations and individuals, Christians and not. Partnership and alliance-building are key.

This process also happens with organisations that address particular needs. The structural injustices that underpin mental ill-health, homelessness, poverty, etc, are explored in conjunction with meeting the practical and pastoral needs of those experiencing them. And this evidence gets passed 'up' to whatever political level is best positioned to deal with it – local authority, national government, etc.

Of course, not every individual is able to offer practical and pastoral support, AND be prophetic and a political campaigner, and no organisation can do all those things either. A Christian theological vision understands individuals as having specific gifts, with a particular contribution to make. Discernment through prayer and reflection is necessary in understanding that. Part of the support an individual (or organisation) gains from their worshipping community/congregation, is affirmation of their role, as well as confirmation that we all part of one body, working together for the common good. This is a strong motivating factor, and at best can head-off physical and psychological burn-out often experienced by change-makers.

Some Observations

- 1) Category Errors:** Churches are worshipping communities, not service delivery mechanisms. Faith-based charities and organisations CAN deliver services (and do), but will not be easily co-opted into government schemas because their pre-existing value-bases will not allow an easy or uncritical relationship with secular power. Denominations at national level have a primary function to support worshipping communities at local level. They cannot and do not operate like faith-based national charities. Even with more centralised denominations like the Methodist Church, there is no 'command and control' economy.

It is a category error to talk of, for example, 'The Church of England becoming a deliverer of public services'. The Church of England is not the kind of organisation that can deliver public services, because it is not an organisation in the same way as, say Action for Children. The only delivery mechanism is a local one, but as we have seen, it would be highly risky to trust public services to bodies that are set up primarily to organise their life as a worshipping community.

The one exception to this rule is in the field of education. But the delivery of education through Church of England Schools is through a completely separate infrastructure dating back to 1811, which has evolved in partnership with state education services, and continues to do so. The comment attributed to a member of the Government (of which party it matters not) that, 'If the Church can deliver education, why can't it also deliver care for the frail elderly' is another clear demonstration of a category error.

This is not to say that churches cannot play a key role in delivery – just that the church needs to work in partnership with an agency. For instance, in the wake of the 1980s riots in inner city areas, the Church of England launched its famous report, 'Faith in the City'. Churches raised considerable sums of money to support community development in areas of urban deprivation, and set up the Church Urban Fund (a national faith-based NGO) to distribute it effectively. The resulting twenty year programme has left a huge and positive legacy – the fruit of effectively connecting national and local action.

- 2) Christians have played a huge historical role in most areas of social reform – the ending of transatlantic slavery (Wesley, Wilberforce, More); reform of prisons, factories and child labour; campaigns for health and sanitation (eg including Josephine Butler’s campaign for the welfare of prostitutes); campaigns for children’s health and rights (eg Save the Children, Eglantyne Jebb); and for social housing (Octavia Hill). And that’s just to foreground many women social reformers!

Churches and Christian charities are key stakeholders in the NHS, the Welfare State and the Social Security System. Contemporary Christians and church leaders at work in the Organisational/Political area of the Matrix in the first half of the twentieth century, made a significant contribution to bringing these agencies about, and the work of Christian charities has changed and evolved in the light of their development since. It cannot be assumed that just because, pre welfare state, Christian organisations were the most important providers of care and education, that were the welfare state to be ‘rolled back’, these organisations would be willing and able to take back the role they once had. Any suggestion that this is the case is historically ill-informed and politically naïve.

- 3) Christian social action has itself changed considerably over the last 30 years, with a burgeoning of activity amongst evangelicals, bringing new energy and a more entrepreneurial style. The above-mentioned franchise models all have evangelical origins – and many are spin-offs from the hugely successful ‘Alpha’ movement (eg Alpha for prisons). This trend has enabled the nature of faith-motivation to be more clearly thought through, and has led to a more whole-hearted affirmation of the power of faith as a motivating force for change, alongside a more nuanced understanding of appropriate ways to share faith that avoid unprofessional behaviour or possible spiritual manipulation.
- 4) There is a ‘hidden hinterland’ between congregational activity and social action projects. This is the informal world of locally-based pastoral care on a small scale: looking out for neighbours; shopping, cooking, and offering practical support – especially for older people and young families. In aggregate, however, this activity is hugely important in building social capital, but cannot be easily captured in any organisational model of change. Recent debate has raged as to whether over-regulation of official activities is overshadowing and undermining this fertile ground of informal support (eg can we distribute homemade cakes in a community setting, without falling foul of food hygiene regulations? does each and every encounter that a vicar or a church member might have with another human count as a ‘pastoral encounter’ that must be recorded to meet safeguarding regulations?).

Summary

- 1) Faith-based organisations have a long and rich history of involvement in social action in Britain. The question is therefore not should they be involved, but how can their involvement be maximised to good effect.
- 2) Clarity about levels of involvement – from individual to congregational to corporate, is crucial to a clear understanding of the dynamics of each.
- 3) Faith-based rationale and motivation are crucial to effectiveness at all levels, and cannot be separated out or compartmentalised. However, this motivation should not be understood as compromising the potential universality or the inclusiveness of faith-based enterprises. Rather, the faith motivation gives a depth of commitment and longevity that is invaluable.

- 4) The hidden contribution of faith community activity is in its informal neighbourly activities – not formally organised into ‘projects’ or ‘initiatives’ but happening at a very local level, both within and beyond congregations. Care needs to be taken at all times to ensure that legislation designed to regulate official activities does not impact in a negative way to undercut this crucial work.

Alison Webster, November 2014

Useful Reading

999 Food: Emergency Food Aid in the Thames Valley, A Snapshot, produced by Alison Webster for the Oxford Diocesan Board of Mission, 2014. (see www.foodmatters.org.uk/999-food)

Building Better Neighbourhoods: The Contribution of Faith Communities to Oxfordshire Life, 2010, Oxfordshire Stronger Communities Alliance (see <http://www.fbrn.org.uk/reading/building-better-neighbourhoods-contribution-faith-communities-oxfordshire-life>)

	P Personal / Individual	C Congregational / Collective including interfaith and ecumenical	O Organisational Faith based 3 rd sector organisations, local, national, international
Practical meeting needs / community provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary activity • Neighbourliness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Night shelters • Older people's support activities • Toddler Groups • After school clubs <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Street Pastors • Food banks • Debt counselling (CAP) • Alpha Prisons </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salvation Army • YMCA • Local Housing Associations
Pastoral Emotional and psychological support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for family and friends (face to face, social networking) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pastoral Care teams e.g. bereavement, baptism, men's breakfasts, women's groups, young people's support services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samaritans • MHA (dementia) • LGCM helpline • Christian counselling centres • Befriending and buddying schemes
Prophetic Challenging society and cultural norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publishing – books and blogging • Individual campaigning e.g. peace campaigns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interfaith walks of witness, promoting cohesion • Peace vigils • Good Friday processions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate change campaigns • Fair-trade • Action for Children • Prison reform
Political Party political and single issue lobbying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual MPs/Lords with an explicit faith • Christian Local Councillors • CARE • Christian Alliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ? • Election Hustings? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christian Socialist Movement • Christian Conservatives • Christian Democrats • World Development Agencies • Single issue lobbies • Bishops in House of Lords / C of E lobbying
Partnership Working in alliances in secular contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual people of faith campaigning through other organisations e.g. Amnesty International. Christian Aid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Churches open to community organisations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ CAB ✧ Health Service ✧ Family mediation • School engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith based schools • Chaplaincies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ NHS ✧ Prison ✧ University

Faith Community Engagement in Public Life: A Matrix

Notes:

1. The 'vertical process' is one of conscientisation, reflection/action: meeting practical needs leads to realisation of complex issues and effects, leads to the question 'why is this happening'?, leads to analysis and the question: 'how can we change it?', leads to a process of change, involving political action, campaigning and the forging of alliances.
2. The 'horizontal process' is an organisational process whereby individuals putting their faith into practice see the need for collective action with others, followed by a need for specialist knowledge to do an effective job. The process therefore moves from informal/non-strategic to formal/strategic and from generalist to specialist.
3. Churches are organisations that cannot behave as such (especially the Church of England).
4. Government, public bodies and the media consistently misunderstand faith groups and the ways in which they engage in public life. E.g., Big Society expected things from faith groups that can emerge only from the 'organisational' category, to emerge from the individual and congregational levels.
5. A big area of contemporary growth lies with 'federated organisations' resourcing, from a national level, activities at congregational level (e.g. street pastors, food banks). Most of these have an evangelical basis (and probably originate from Faithworks in the 90s).