



faith in action ***in the South West***

a survey of social and community action by
faith groups in the South West of England
from faithnetsouthwest

Executive summary and recommendations

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Introduction

Faith is generally expressed in action, often through service to others and involvement in community matters and civic life. In recent years, Government policy has encouraged the participation of faith groups in civic society, both through engagement in social action and in governance. *Faith in Action in the South West* demonstrates the contribution that faith groups are making in the South West of England, in providing a wide range of social welfare and community services, both formally through projects, and informally through their work in the community. It provides the first comprehensive regional summary of these activities and includes some key examples of the kind of contribution that faith groups can make.

Faith Groups in the South West

4,107 faith groups across the South West were contacted by letter and questionnaire and 840 responses received: a response rate of 20%. Of our respondents 94% were from Christian groups and 6% from the region's diverse faith groups. 65% described their location as rural. Of the 125 groups which provide community resources to more than 100 people, 100 are in rural areas.

Buildings

Premises either owned or rented by faith groups are an important resource for hosting activities for the local community. 549 (65%) of the groups responding to this question in the survey, have their building used for community purposes, including use by public bodies and community associations as well as social and recreational activities. There is a great diversity of activities taking place, often a wide range of activities happening in the same building. 69 (8%) have 10 or more different activities taking place in their building and 218 (26%) have 5 or more activities, from informal social contact to community support, with considerable emphasis on youth, including groups for young children. A church hall may be one of very few buildings in a locality that can be used for community activities, particularly in rural areas.

The level of community support and activity that faith groups make possible through the use of their buildings represents considerable savings in resources that financially hard pressed local authorities would otherwise have to find in order to alleviate problems of isolation in the community.


Recommendation 1:

a) Churches and faith groups should seriously consider ways to develop their buildings as a community resource as well as a place of worship, in order to reach out to the widest community, address some of the social issues of their community and finance the maintenance of their building both for their worship community and as a community resource.

b) Public bodies, including funding bodies, should recognise the vital importance of such buildings to local communities and look for ways of offering support in their development and maintenance as a community resource.

Faith Groups and Community Issues

Some of the main problems that faith groups identified in the community help provide the focus for the community support resources they provide. Some of the main issues they identified were: the lack of affordable housing and in particular how it affected young people trying to get a foothold into the housing market; anti-social behaviour particularly from disaffected young people; the need to develop resources to support young people and give them a place in the community; the need to regenerate the



community in particular concerns about the closing of vital community resources e.g. post offices, shops, hospitals; the need to support families and alleviate problems caused by family breakdown; the need to integrate newcomers to the community – bridging the gap between established populations and the influx of new members into the community, in a way which promotes friendship and social harmony. 53% of respondents were actively engaged with global issues and economic justice, demonstrated in commitment to Fair Trade and aid to the developing world.

Community Support

Fair Trade, education, arts and music, environmental issues and housing were areas where most respondents were active. 43% offered support to young people, 41% to older people, 38% to toddlers and 38% to children. Churches have traditionally had links with and supported other community resources. Other faith groups also contribute to the community in this way. Many churches in particular have links with local schools and provide volunteer visitors to hospitals, nursing homes and prisons. 61% of the faith groups responding had connections with local schools. In addition to offering practical support, faith groups may play a role in fundraising for these and other essential community resources.

Partnership working

347 out of the 840 faith groups responding to the survey (42%) work in partnership with other organisations, usually with other faith groups (ecumenical, inter faith or multifaith). Only 57 (7%) were working in partnership with a community organisation and 37 (4%) were in partnership with a statutory organisation/partnership. 30% of respondents were aware of their Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and 10% were involved. Factors identified as barriers to partnership working were: lack of resources and capacity; fear of a clash of values; and lack of information.

Recommendation 2:

2.a Faith groups should be more proactive in seeking partnerships with other community and statutory organisations in providing support for their local community.

2.b There is still a need for local authorities to encourage the participation of faith groups and their representatives on LSPs. Local councils should look for ways to provide better information and financial and/or administrative support to enable faith representatives to engage in partnership working on LSPs.

People

Paid staff

25% of faith groups provide paid staff who offer some support to the wider community, either as community workers, workers with children or young people and other groups providing a wide range of different kinds of support to the community. Priests, ministers and faith leaders are not included in this figure, although clearly they offer spiritual and pastoral care, which is a valuable resource to their communities.

Volunteers

Volunteers from faith groups provide a vast resource of unpaid support to social and welfare activities in communities in the South West. At a conservative estimate, the figures from the survey indicate the 840 faith groups responding to the survey provide at least 10,000 volunteers. This suggests a total across the region of over 50,000 people who offer voluntary service through faith groups.



Beneficiaries

At least 33,000 people are being supported in the community by the faith groups responding to the *faithnetsouthwest* survey. Regionally this indicates a figure of more than 165,000 people. More than one in four faith groups (27%) said that over 100 people benefited from their support in the community. This does not take account of those people informally supported by faith groups, who would otherwise be dependent on more formal support services.

Funding

A total of 233 (30%) of faith groups applied for external funding and 213 (28%) were successful. This represents a high success rate. However, a striking feature from these figures is the far smaller figure for faith groups applying for funding, compared with those who are providing resources in the community as indicated elsewhere in the survey.

Recommendation 3:

- a) Faith groups should be far more proactive in seeking funding for the work they do in the community.*
- b) Funders should be more flexible in their thinking and consider the support that faith groups can provide for the whole community. There is a danger that such bodies may see faith groups merely as religious people trying to make converts.*

Conclusions

Churches and other faith groups in the South West of England are providing wide-ranging social and welfare support to communities across the South West region. The categories supported cover the whole age range from mothers and toddlers, children's groups, young people to older people. They offer support to individuals and groups who are amongst the most vulnerable in the community, including families under stress, people with mental health problems and those with disabilities.

Many of the successes cited by faith groups in the survey relate to the high priority they give to tackling some of the social issues raised out of their knowledge and experience of the challenges faced by their local community. Much of their activity relates to addressing the challenges posed by making themselves available to the wider community and a focus for community activity.

Through their people, both paid staff and volunteers, they address issues of social exclusion and community cohesion, and use their buildings to provide homes for social, cultural and community activities. Their support is for the wider needs of community and society, not simply the vital spiritual aspect. At least 33,000 people are supported in their communities in the South West by faith groups responding to our survey: given the high percentage of respondents, this indicates a regional total of at least 165,000 people supported by faith groups.

Faith groups also demonstrate concern and action in addressing the needs of the global economy through their strong commitment to Fair Trade and aid to the developing world. Their concern and action goes far beyond the gates of their places of worship, and their contribution far exceeds their material resources.

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