

NURTURING SOCIAL COHESION:

*A how-to guide for
engaging churches*



Free
Churches
Group

Engaging in the Public Square

‘THEOS’

Introduction

The toxicity of the Brexit debate, a summer of Black Lives Matter protests, and the continuing struggle to balance personal freedom with group responsibility throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have not only demonstrated how fundamental social cohesion is, but have made it increasingly clear that cohesive societies do not ‘just happen’ by accident. Cohesion needs to be nurtured through time and effort over many years – and the nation’s churches have the potential to offer this time and effort in abundance, as a significant element in the nation’s social fabric.

However, neither the churches’ community contribution nor its wider potential have been considered in detail by policymakers. Rather, policy has tended to view religion (including churches) as a risk factor for division. This is largely because most cohesion policy is commissioned in response to crisis – that is, when things have already gone wrong.

In response to this neglect, this is a practical guide offering some basic principles for engaging with churches. It is drawn from the findings of the Free Churches Commission: an investigation into the impact of churches on social cohesion, which consulted nearly 400 individuals across fourteen local authorities within England. We sought to understand what happens in communities on an everyday level, beneath the headlines. What do the churches have to offer, and what could they do better?

Reflections from participants in the Commission research are included throughout the pamphlet. The full report is entitled *The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People*, and can be found at www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research.

Who are the churches?

It is estimated that there are over 45,000 congregations in the UK, including over 36,000 in England.¹ But they are not all the same!

The faith sector has significantly diversified in recent years – and this also means greater diversity among the churches. This is partly because of the impact of immigration, since immigrants are more likely to be religious than the existing UK population: the 2011 census found that 48% of the foreign-born UK population identify as Christian, and 19% as Muslim, while only 14% identified as being non-religious (compared to 25% of the general population in the same poll).²

The 2019 British Social Attitudes survey found that 38% of the population still identified as Christian. The biggest denomination in the UK is still Anglicanism, which comprises approximately 12% of the total population. This is followed by Catholicism, which comprises approximately 7% of the population. However, 13% of the population in the same survey list “no denomination”.³ The fastest growing parts of British Christianity are Pentecostal and New Churches; of the fastest growing denominations in the UK, a third are immigrant churches and another third are Pentecostal.⁴

Roughly 40,000 of the total number of congregations worship in their own church building. Others worship in a variety of third-party spaces, including cinemas, schools, community centres – and other churches!

Part of engaging with the churches is recognizing the rich tapestry of diversity in British Christianity, and embracing it as part of a cohesive society.

Eight Principles for church engagement

1

Social cohesion is important long before the next crisis.

Particularly at a national level, cohesion policy is generally moved forward in response to crisis. This skews our understanding of cohesion issues – and more importantly, has stifled a consideration of what it really means to nurture social cohesion as a desirable end in itself. Of course, cohesion is fostered most effectively through the quiet and sustainable work that goes on in everyday life. Churches are emblematic of this quiet work – so it is worth engaging with them as part of a more sustainable cohesion strategy.

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“I see churches as really at the forefront of community cohesion because the church community is generally speaking multi-ethnic but mono-cultural... and therefore... it’s a fantastic place to build understanding and empathy and compassion for all ethnic groups.”

Independent pastor

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2

Bonding and bridging capital are both important.

Cohesion isn’t just fostered when people from different backgrounds mix – but when people of all backgrounds feel confident that people ‘like them’ have a genuine stake in society. At their best, churches are one place in our communities that demonstrate what a healthy relationship between bonding and bridging can look like: they are sites of belonging. They are also places where people who are of the same faith, but different in all sorts of other ways, come together and forge genuine relationships.

“One of the things that I talk about a lot within the interfaith communities is the ability of churches and other religious institutions to reach out beyond where the local government can because they’re trusted and they have a congregation that goes beyond what we probably have a reach into.”

Council Officer

3

Understand the full range of likely church assets when you are looking to engage.

Churches are significant community resources. Their main asset may be a physical building – but in most cases, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Social networks, community leadership (which is not limited to official leaders and clergy), trusted voices, volunteer capacity, and a vision for what communities could be are all found in churches – and they are usually eager to deploy these assets for the good of the community. This also means we should not assume that churches without premises of their own have nothing to give, or that they are less legitimate. After all, the vast majority are still accountable to other structures, such as a denomination or network – and indeed, they are often representative of the growth areas in British Christianity mentioned above, meaning they will become increasingly strategically important in future years.

“[Churches] literally are a huge resource, in terms of knowledge, in terms of intelligence, in terms of manpower, you know, easily the biggest most significant set of voluntary come together set of people in a community and an untapped resource. So from that point of view, I would definitely encourage local officers, local people involved in any sort of territorial area, to get to know what religious groups are working there.”

Police officer

4 Get to know the full range of churches in your area.

The reflections on page 3 should serve as a reminder that the faith sector is rapidly diversifying – and especially if you are working in an urban context, there is likely to be a range of newer churches working in your area. They all have different approaches, different networks, different beliefs, and a different set of assets. All of them have something to offer. Ecumenical forums are also helpful channels through which to liaise with a range of churches in their community engagement.

5 The best person to engage with in a church might not be the official leader.

Formal church leaders are usually the focal point for communication – but their capacity is also stretched, and if they can't help directly, they may still be able to advertise your initiative in a community newsletter or similar.

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“Don't just think that the vicar is representative of all the congregation. What might be more useful is to say, 'Would you mind putting this in your newsletter?'.”

Anglican priest

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6

Acknowledge the challenges that churches might be facing as a barrier to their engagement.

Churches do not have a single, bounded role. They must provide for the spiritual needs of their congregations – but they are also responsible for the maintenance of buildings, financial and personal obligations to their wider denomination, weddings and funerals... and alongside that, most are involved in a range of local community initiatives. Recognise the constraints that churches are facing when liaising with them; for example, if you would like to use their building, they may be struggling with upkeep costs and unable to offer it for free.

“We’re coming to the end of the working life of this building and we need to build a new building. We need new facilities, and that’s probably somewhere in the region of about £4.5 million. The church has got about £20,000, so there’s quite a deficit.”

Salvation Army Leader

“Where do people get their hope? Where do people get their support from? Where do people get compassion from? Well you’ll find all of those things in a church, whether you believe or not. You don’t always find that in a public sector building, because they are about telling you why you don’t meet the threshold, why you can’t access the services, and why you need to pull yourself up by the bootstraps and get on with it.”

Council Officer

“[There is a] difference between putting on services and serving people... Putting on services for people tends to be a time bound thing. It’s something you can do from outside the area. But serving people is a much more proximate thing... it might not be convenient but you’re available to serve people, it’s a much closer relationship and sometimes not because you want them to come to church on a Sunday, but because you want to serve them.”

Anglican Priest

7 Concerns around proselytism are overplayed.

Most churches have reflected deeply on where they stand on this issue, particularly as it pertains to community engagement. Churches are filled with professional people who work appropriately with diverse people in their working lives, and bring those skills and experiences to their church. Be prepared to have the conversation, rather than writing churches off out of hand. Resources like the APPG on Faith and Society’s Faith Covenant can be helpful for outlining the distinctive responsibilities of faith organisations and local authorities in partnership.

8

But don't expect churches to function like secular organisations- they're not!

Churches want to engage beyond themselves, and they have their own authentic reasons for engaging with cohesion issues. Their faith is why they want to engage in the first place, so don't be put off by explicitly theological language, but take time to learn what lies behind it. In the end, dealing with diverse groups and values on their own terms is a foundational part of living in a cohesive society.



“It’s been a learning relationship with the faith sector over the last 18 months, sometimes out of necessity a little bit. But I’m always a bit in awe of how in touch they are with human beings compared to my organisation which sometimes loses that... I think there’s a real sense of love for the people they work after, but also the place they look after. And that emotional attachment to anywhere is never a [negative] thing.”

Senior Policy Advisor, Council.



Endnotes

- 1 These are the latest figures from unpublished research by Brierley Consultancy, due to be published later this year. The most recent published figures from Brierley Consultancy date from 2018, and are higher: nearly 50,000 congregations and over 38,000 in England. Brierley Consultancy, UK Church Statistics vol. 3: 2018 Edition (Brierley, 2018), 7.
- 2 R. O’Brien and A. Potter-Collins, ‘2011 Census Analysis: Ethnicity and Religion of the Non-UK Born Population in England and Wales’, Office for National Statistics (18 June 2015).
- 3 J. Curtice, E. Clery, J. Perry, M. Phillips and N. Rahim (eds.), British Social Attitudes: the 36th Report (London: NatCen Social Research, 2019), 5.
- 4 Brierley Consultancy, UK Church Statistics vol. 3: 2018 Edition (Brierley, 2018), 4, 7, Tables 11.2.1 - 11.2-5.

This pamphlet was produced as part of the Free Churches Commission: a major research project which investigates the impact of local churches on social cohesion. The final report of the Free Churches Commission is entitled *The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People*, and can be found on the Theos website. The Free Churches Group represents 28% of all church congregations in England and Wales. Its members include the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the United Reformed Church and the Salvation Army, as well as many Pentecostal groupings and other significant denominations with national spread who have a strong Free Church tradition. Theos is the UK's leading faith and society think tank.