

A Discussion Paper from Barnardo's CANDL Project

This is one of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes quite deliberately blunt and to the point, but do not necessarily represent the policy of Barnardo's.

Faithful Cities **A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE**

This paper is by way of a brief critical introduction to the report from the Commission on Urban Life and Faith (CULF) entitled *Faithful Cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice* (see p.8 of the September 2006 *CANDL Light* for details of the report).

My initial insight, for which I have no firm evidence, is that there was probably a strong debate within the CULF Commissioners about the overall shape of the report between what I call the 'new localisers' and the 'structuralists'. The new localisers I define as those who are persuaded that government has very little influence now in achieving through legislation, the well-being of society and the establishment of social justice. Instead, the new localisers are persuaded that social justice and the common good can only be established in society through intensely local action by faith communities and sympathetic organisations. A typical example here would be that of broad based organising and the work achieved by London Citizens in campaigning for a living wage for the poorest paid workers in some banks and financial institutions within the financial sector in London and for health workers within particular health trusts within London. I think that there was a very strong lobby to promote the new localism and its attendant action by faith communities as being the only effective way in which social conditions can be improved locally and local communities flourish, linked to a kind of despair about the ability of national government and legislation to achieve anything meaningful for the common good.

On the other hand, there was, I think, a persistent strain of the Commission that put a lot more trust in the role of national government to establish the conditions for social justice and human flourishing by traditional macro-mechanisms in relation to taxation, redistribution, and what I call legislating for virtue (i.e. legislation that affects greater fairness and equality economically). This is borne out in the 11 recommendations of the report which include recommendation 3 on wealth and poverty: "For the flourishing of a just and equitable society, the gap between those living in poverty and the very wealthy must be reduced" and recommendation 5: "The government must lead rather than follow public opinion on immigration, refugee and asylum policy. Specifically, asylum seekers should be allowed to sustain themselves and contribute to society through paid work. It is unacceptable to use destitution as a tool of coercion when dealing with 'refused' asylum seekers." At the launch it was clear from conversations I had with supporters of the London Citizen's local action approach that they felt the report had failed to do justice to the key primary role that local action can have in ameliorating conditions for the worst off in society and contributing to human flourishing locally. My own feeling is that having acknowledged the importance, for instance, of closing the inequality gap between the richest and the poorest, the report failed to spell out that in the end this can only be achieved through macro redistribution measures legislated by parliament through taxation, although this was clearly implied. The sub paragraphs related to closing the economic gap between rich and poor emphasised (a) the importance of fulfilled and secure relations in personal life; (b) good health, especially mental health; and (c) freedom including the scope to participate in matter affecting one's life. These hardly do justice to any serious attempt to reduce the inequality gap between the very

richest and the poorest. What the report failed to spell out was that all of these aspirations (a), (b), and (c) above, are much harder to fulfil and indeed are deeply frustrated by the psycho-social consequences of a large inequality gap between the richest and the poorest in society.

A central concept of the report is that of Faithful Capital. This is built on Robert Putnam's concept of Social Capital. Putnam measured peoples' involvement in community life by combining lots of different indicators into a single index of the strength of community life. Most important is the proportion of people belonging to voluntary groups and associations – sports clubs, gardening groups, charitable organizations, scout troops, choirs and so on. But also included as indicators of involvement in community life are such things as whether people bother to vote in local elections or read local newspapers. Putnam's study spelt out in his book, *Bowling Alone*, is an attempt to explain differences in the quality of community life in different parts of America. Building on this concept, *Faithful Cities* introduces the concept of Faithful Capital. Asking the question: what do people of faith add to their communities? Coming up with the answer: worship and prayer; a commitment to and celebration of life; hope; an experience of community; a spiritual dimension; a commitment to transformation; values; and transferable skills. Faithful Capital, using the language of social capital, talks about bonding, bridging, and linking, all of which develop connections and trust within the moral economy of cities. Faith is seen as enlarging the imagination, teaching and encouraging the practise of holiness and wisdom, opening us to the new and deepening our sympathies. And Faithful Capital itself is found in the presence and practice of faith communities; a commitment to place; analysis of resources and needs; use of buildings; contribution to civic life; wider vision and global connections and prophetic action.

What the report fails to say is that Putnam's research into Social Capital on which the concept of Faithful Capital is based, states clearly that nations and communities in which income differences are smaller, score higher on the measure of Social Capital, showing that people in more equal and fair societies are more involved in community life. The most unequal states in the USA have the lowest levels of involvement in community life. What Putnam showed for Social Capital and which is almost certainly true for Faithful Capital, and which the *Faithful Cities* report fails to emphasise, is that community and equality are mutually reinforcing. To quote Putnam: "Social Capital and economic inequality moved in tandem through most of the 20th century. In terms of the distribution of wealth and income, America in the 50's and 60's was more egalitarian than it had been in a century...those same decades were also the high point of social connectiveness and civic engagement. Record highs in economic equality and Social Capital coincided. Conversely, the last third of the 20th century was a time of growing inequality and eroding Social Capital. By the end of the 20th century, the gap between the rich and poor in the USA (and we might add, in the UK) had been increasing for nearly 3 decades, the longest sustained increase in inequality for at least a century. The timing of the 2 trends is striking: somewhere around 1965-1970 America reversed course and started becoming both less just economically and less well connected socially and politically." And at University College London in March 2003, Putnam concluded an analysis he had just made by saying: "There is absolutely no doubt at all that inequality and Social Capital are very closely related." The *Faithful Cities* report clearly highlights that Britain is now a more unequal society than it has ever been. It also highlights the crucial role of Faithful Capital in building community. It fails to say that Faithful Capital, like Social Capital, is weakened and even destroyed by growing economic inequality, and that it flourishes in conditions of growing economic equality (*Note: In commenting on the links between economic inequality and the breakdown of social capital I have drawn heavily on the work of Professor Richard G Wilkinson, and in particular the second chapter of his latest book "The Impact of Inequality". This book is required reading for anyone interested in understanding the close and incontrovertible relationship between economic inequality and the breakdown of social capital*).

The writers of the report are keen that *Faithful Cities* should be used by the church not for an internal dialogue between church people, but as a tool for the church to use in engaging with the public at large including local government and other civic and corporate institutions. They want the church to initiate a debate with the wider public about the findings of the report. The window of opportunity is possibly quite short: 18 months to 2 years – in a world where there is a plethora of such reports, it is all too soon before the next one comes along to steal the limelight. Unlike the Faith in the Cities report which endures in public memory 20 years on, *Faithful Cities* is much more of the moment and we need to grasp the opportunity while we can.

Other recommendations include:

- a) That the Church of England with its ecumenical partners must maintain a planned, continued and substantial presence across our urban areas;
- b) That faith groups in particular, must combat racism, fascism and religious intolerance at all levels of society;
- c) That government and faith communities must give new consideration to the informal education of young people and
- d) That church leaders are asked to initiate wide ranging national debates about what makes a good city in light of this report.

I urge you to read this report carefully and to use it for the purposes intended by the Commissioners. Don't look for a chapter on Theology, there isn't one. It is, we are told, woven into the whole report, at times implied rather than explicit. But my concluding comment has to be to return to the inequality issue. The report makes much of the fact that in research undertaken by the Commission 52% of urban young people in Britain often felt depressed and that 27% said they had sometimes considered suicide. The report also cites a World Health Organisation report of 2004 that said that urban young people in Britain are among the most depressed in Europe. This is clearly a shocking statistic, which *Faithful Cities* says the Government and Church Leaders need to take seriously. "We need", the report says, "to work with young people to help them cope with the pressures of life and we must make investment in young people a priority". But the report fails to go on and to make the link with the psycho-social consequences of economic inequality – namely that Britain is after all, one of the most economically unequal nations in Western Europe and that large and growing economic inequality across a nation promotes strategies amongst its citizens that are more self interested, less affiliative, often highly antisocial, more stressful, and likely to give rise to higher levels of violence, poorer community relations and worse health, including above all, poor mental health. In contrast more equal societies tend to be much more affiliative, less violent, more supportive and inclusive and marked by better health

It is important to know that this report is about faithful communities, and not just Faithful Cities. There is something here for rural, suburban and urban communities, so emphasise faithful communities rather than faithful cities. This should be stressed when promulgating the report to churches across and on the fringes of London or else those living in suburban or rural areas will not be interested. It covers communities as small as seaside coastal villages, suburban areas and of course, the urban and has something to say to them all. I commend the report to you.

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June 2006*

*If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the ideas, please do get in touch either with Chris Brice at chris.brice@london.anglican.org; tel 0207 932 1121; or us at CANDL. Tel.: 020 7729 9701 Fax: 020 7729 3864
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