

## 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. This article is taken (with permission) from Trust & Foundation News - Autumn 2004. It provides useful information on the way trusts and other funders think in regard to funding faith based projects.*

### **Funding Faith Based Projects**

Great Britain is a state which officially professes Christianity and protects many other churches and faiths with legal standing. Yet a number of foundations have long been cautious of funding in this field or are uncertain of the grounds on which they can fund faith groups. Is this caution actually discriminating against whole groups of people on religious, cultural and ethnic grounds? Are there really strings attached? Are we out of step with where public sympathies really lie, or are foundations obliged to prefer a secular outlook to a religious one? **Mark Woodruff**, Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts, reports on a meeting of ACF members to discuss these issues.

Do we make grants to churches and other faith groups to help them to serve their local communities? Or are we unhappy about funding religious activity? ACF members have a range of answers. Foundations with a religious remit are happy to promote a faith through its philanthropic work. Others believe in a 'separation of church and state', and deny that faith groups can claim to have a role like 'secular' charities. For some foundations, there is a distinction between funding the community work church people feel motivated to do, and the practice of the faith which motivates them. Still others sense that people's belief, its effects, risks and benefits, cannot be distinguished so easily, and try to weigh each case on merit.

#### ***'Two peoples divided by the same language'***

Where a body or project is identified as faith based, it risks being seen as limited. Behind this lies a presumption that a proposal may be intended for supporting a particular faith. The problem for funders is that faith groups often use language and express a culture which is unfamiliar. The problem for faith groups is that they do not see that their language and culture need to be translated out of religious categories, in order to be intelligible to others. As mainstream funders do not necessarily understand where faith groups are coming from, they may tend to rule out the risk of funding in the field of religion. All charities appealing to funders have to make a good case, but faith projects seldom realise that their language and motivation, even where one would have thought the values and proposed work objectives were close to each other in spirit.

#### ***Faith groups' view***

Few religions see virtue in using philanthropy as a tool for conversion. While content that a charitable activity may put a faith, and the integrity of its believers, in a good light in front of other people, they may see it as repugnant to offer help with strings attached. Need is addressed because of need, not because it is a chance to make converts.

People of faith are perplexed because they see projects and charities which have no religious affiliation successfully applying for grants, while they themselves are disqualified

from grants towards the same work, apparently on the grounds of the faith connection, or an unfounded suspicion that their work *might* be a cover for proselytisation. So the odd situation arises that faith based groups can go to elaborate lengths to deny or downplay their religious values, in order to qualify for funds essential to the work they are otherwise well placed to do.

### ***Community regeneration***

On the other hand, some foundations regard faith communities as so deeply rooted in local areas, that they hold vital keys to renewal and regeneration. Many faith bodies are not groups of individuals, but communities long established in local areas, through families, social groups and other networks. They can also have firm connections with other aspects of local life, from schools to the health service, other community groups and political structures. They can therefore be uniquely poised to offer support to families in trouble and those at risk, especially the young. For instance, many charities working with the homeless were founded by, and still run with, church people. The same is true of some of the most effective projects working with offenders and young people.

### ***The difference between belief and believers***

Several foundations questioned why, if trusts are making grants to promote change and social progress, they hold back from funding advancement in religion. Is an advance in religion not going to contribute to the general advance of humanity?, is there a misplaced consensus that funding faith is wrong, whereas bringing out the best in any faith could make it produce 'added value' results for society as a whole? And what is the cost to society's cohesion if we don't fund faith groups? Charities wishing to undertake programs whose objectives are to share religious faith, or to address social concerns with a religious remedy, would be unlikely to expect support from the secular world. They may look to religious foundations to fund them, but many would see their main source of support as coming from coreligionists.

### ***Discerning faith groups***

So perhaps, rather than routinely disallowing appeals from faith groups, a more precise tool would be a conscious evaluation of the objectives in asking for help.

When looking at a proposal from a faith group, it is important to see who has ownership of the work and controls its assets. If this needs to be clarified, it may be right for a well-meaning church or other community to be encouraged to found a separate charity to preserve the integrity of the work, and protect itself from accusations of ulterior motives, or of operating charitable work in order to raise income for religious activities.

Some foundations find this distinction useful. Regardless of whether promotion of religion is a good or bad thing in itself, putting some distance between it and the direct charitable work it offers can enhance the integrity of both. Otherwise the charitable project can be seen as exclusive, because it may tend to benefit only one religion or those who practise it. Specialist foundations may see no problem here (especially those with a religious remit), but in the main trusts prefer to make grants towards inclusion and the building of society as a whole. So, a number of foundations are happy to assist faith groups if it is clear that supporting faith activity is outside the scope of the grant. Yet ironically, the only access to 'inclusion' for some very isolated people, who would otherwise be excluded from wider society, is to be found in their faith groups.

## **'Culture' or 'Faith'?**

For some religious groups, especially those more recently established in this country, the dichotomy between faith and practice looks very Christian, western and inauthentic. So, are again, there is a cultural misunderstanding to be overcome.

Some felt the churches get a raw deal from funders who have not looked at their work on merit, before ruling it out an ideological principle. From such a perspective, faith is seen as a negative factor in society, as it appears discriminating and defines the separateness distinctive groups instead of engaging them in a unified but diverse community.

Others felt this to be a false betrayal of realities on the ground. Much fine and essential work in some of the most deprived and needy corners of the country is only carrying on because of church support and members active involvement. It would be unjust, therefore, to stop supporting church and faith groups on the grounds of the religious convictions of those who produce the work. Indeed, in other circumstances, such a judgment would itself be seen as highly discriminatory and contrary to the principle of valuing diversity.

It can be a minefield for funders to set themselves the task of deciding where faith ends and where culture begins. One assumption some felt needed guarding against was a tendency to look at non-Christian faith groups as cultural (and so to fund them) and to consider Christian groups is faith based (and so to be more discriminating about them than the others).

The question this poses is why we are suspicious of Christian's motives. Some of the most groundbreaking social action has been undertaken by the concerned efforts of Christians, for example in *Christians against Poverty*. The work is effective and widely valued, transparent, and open to all. Why therefore do Christians and other faith groups still have to answer a case, in order to overcome unfounded suspicions?

### ***Assessing the culture and objectives***

Appearances can be misleading. Sometimes only a visit, with eyes and ears open, can pierce through the cultural language (e.g. Bible texts) that some people find alarming, but which some charities feel inspires them in their work.

Equally the term 'open to all' can mean something different in different faith traditions. For some it means, '*it is open to all to join our religion and benefit from whatever we can offer*', for others it means '*Our services are open to all to come and go without expectation or pressure*'. Again, this is a cultural and language issue, upon which discernment may be called for.

### ***Supporting proactive work of faith in society***

Beyond health, cultural, educational and social work undertaken by religious groups, it can be easy to lose sight of how religion is viewed in many cultures in itself. Even though in the UK a considerable number no longer practise Christianity, they still hold many of its ethical values. Indeed the traditions of dissent, humanism and sceptical non-belief all have roots in the Christian tradition. Given that Britain has a small but influential body of practising Christians, many with no belief (but whose cultural ethical background is the Western Christian tradition, whatever their personal take on it), and given that there are significant minorities with religions from other parts of the world all exercised alongside

each other (including a huge new non-white Christian population), religion should not be overlooked as a vital element in social cohesion. The religious factors cannot be reduced to a cultural level, as it makes no sense to disregard spiritual elements which continually form cultures. From this point of view, several foundations have directly promoted faith groups looking at inter-religious dialogue as a contribution to social progress.

### ***Assessing wider benefit***

To judge the benefit of the faith community to a wider society, a visit is usually vital. Some funders feel it important to consult other organisations in the locality to assess church impact on the community, to look into the history of the charity's development, and to see whether a church is part of the warp and woof of community life in the area it wants to work in, or the field it wants to address. Others however felt that, in the interest of complete transparency, it is not desirable to research potential applicants with third parties unless they have given express permission.

Two useful criteria could be the project's understanding of inclusiveness, and who is meant to have ownership of the work (the church or the user, or both). Accordingly, work should be ecumenical, and embrace people of other faiths and nonreligious people in the wider community who could be of help and are well disposed.

So a good rule of thumb might be to judge whether the intention behind applications churches or other religious groups tends towards inclusion or exclusion. Foundations could also assess the extent of commitment from church funds (e.g. at a diocesan, or other regional level) and any financial backing arising from the generosity of local church or group members.

### ***Assessing outcomes***

As with 'secular' projects, funders could look at the expected outcomes and impacts from work undertaken by faith groups. Is the motivation just to do good, or to undertake works of charity out of a sense of religious duty? As good as this may be, it risks leaving things just as they are and unintentionally maintaining a cycle of dependency. How can the Samaritan instinct to help be translated from temporary relief to qualitative and permanent transformation? Many religious people think in terms of development and transformation in the context of their religion (for example 'spiritual growth' or 'redemption' and 'regeneration'), so it is not unfair to assess how these principles translate into charitable programmes in the context of the world and the experience of their users. As in all grant projects, these are phenomena with results that can be evaluated and learned from objectively.

*If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the ideas,  
please do get in touch with us at CANDL.*

*We can also forward points to the author should you so wish.*

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