

A Discussion Paper from Barnardo's CANDL Project

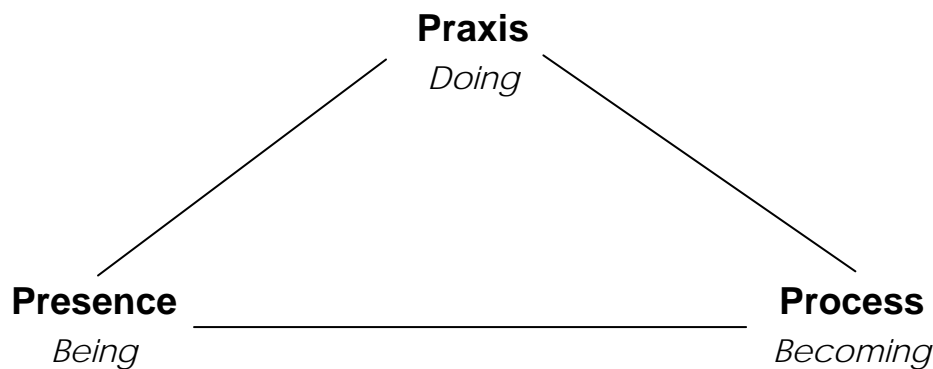
This is one of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes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

Two typologies of Christian social action

A previous paper on theological models for social involvement by Christians seems to have stimulated some interest. In this paper I seek to build on this background to analyse how Christians actually get involved in social action in the contemporary East End. My analysis is based around two typologies: the first looking at practical styles of action and the second at the interactions between attitudes to the state and attitudes to Christianity.

Praxis, Process and Presence

How do people actually go about doing their community work? They will be influenced by their theology but they will also be influenced by their personality, the culture in which they work and the opportunities which present themselves. I believe that in the contemporary church there is a tension between three different modes of action which can be illustrated thus:



The praxis style is that of the activist. What is important is getting things done, achieving concrete results and making a difference. This is typified by the modern idea of the social entrepreneur. In many ways this seems like a development of the evangelical tradition although one can certainly find liberal and catholic social entrepreneurs. Neither does it mean that all people with a strong praxis orientation are social entrepreneurs.

The presence style emphasises being rooted in a particular community, it is interested in being alongside people and becoming part of their life. This presence style will often emphasise prayer and the sacrament of daily life and is therefore most associated with the catholic tradition.

The process style is perhaps the most modern style with less obvious roots in any particular tradition, although it is probably fair to say that people of a liberal tradition are more open to it. The process style is concerned with how things are done rather than getting things done. It is most clearly seen in the community development field where there is an emphasis on a nondirective enabling of people. People do, however, buy into different processes such as that of community organising and community ministry which may have overlaps with community development but also pursue their own agendas (see political and religious agendas below).

The key to this model of community involvement style is that people can participate in all three styles to varying degrees. It would therefore be possible to think of someone who was a fully committed activist, very busily doing projects all over the place, who was also deeply committed to living in the community and creating space for prayer and just being there whilst also developing good processes which enabled people to fully participate in their own community. In practice, however, it is difficult to see how anyone could do all this! There is an inevitable tension between wanting to achieve a lot and wanting to just being alongside people, just as there is between focusing on achievement and on enabling disempowered people and between enabling people and simply being with them. These tensions can, perhaps, at times be resolved but it does require a rather remarkable person to hold all three styles in perfect harmony. In reality they tend towards one or two styles and are prepared to let the other one go somewhat.

I believe that at the moment the key tension is between praxis and process, particularly between the social entrepreneur model and the community development model. The social entrepreneur is both admired for what he has achieved, but is viewed with some suspicion, by the community development worker, because of the way he is perceived as going about doing things. The social entrepreneur on the other hand criticises the community development worker for spending a lot of time running committees and consulting with people when what actually empowers a community is someone making things happen. In this connection Community Organising is interesting because it seems to hold together a strong activist bent with a profound concern for process, its problem perhaps is that having resolved this tension it gives the impression that it has all the answers and thereby alienates potential allies who don't want to fully buy into its philosophy.

In the meantime those whose style is more orientated towards being a presence carry on in their quiet way. Some are more orientated towards praxis -- the long-term community activists who work away for years in their patch. Maybe those more orientated towards process from a basically presence style are the writers and researchers, and this is perhaps where I am coming from. I see the value of the activists but know that I'm not one of them.

Religious and political agendas

The different styles of action described above whilst, perhaps, giving us a helpful insight into contemporary social action in East London don't tell the full story because people are also affected by the level of their commitment to the church and Christianity and to how much they want to get involved with the state. By examining these attitudes we can helpfully match different approaches on a chart:

How involved in the state am I...	Part of state	SRB	National strategy for neighbourhood renewal	Established church (liberal)	Established church	Orthodox church in Russia
	Engaged	Voluntary sector	Barnardos	Christian socialism	Shaftesbury society/Anglo-Catholic	Oasis
	Marginal	Community group	Settlements/ Church originated community groups	Liberal activist	Nonconformist/ Roman Catholic	Evangelical activist
	Sceptical	Refugee group		Radical liberal	Radical evangelical/ Liberation Theology	Ichthus
	Opposed	Anarchist			Christian anarchist	Jehovah's Witnesses
		Non	Residual	Balanced	Committed	Fundamental
		How Christian am I...				

This chart gives us some way of understanding where people are coming from and where organisations are situated in terms of their basic commitments. I have entered organisations into the various boxes purely to stimulate thought and debate -- people are more than welcome to disagree with me!

The different categories are not fixed and it is not uncommon for people to move between them -- groups may fluctuate between engagement with the state in a regeneration programme, for instance, and a reactive distancing which would put them in the sceptical camp. Below I try to explain what I mean by the different categories

Part of the state	Being organically part of the state apparatus such as the Inner Cities Religious Council
Engaged	Not part of the state but interested in being involved with it. Seeks to influence the state and plays by the rules. Typical of the larger voluntary organisations who are concerned with good practice and their public profile
Marginal	Not very involved in the machinery of the state. Tries play by the rules but not necessarily

	concerned to buy into voluntary sector good practice. Tends to want to get on with its work and fairly apathetic about politics. The typical attitude of local churches.
Sceptical	Suspicious of the state and not wanting to get caught up in its agenda. Maybe interested in radical politics but tries to keep within the law
Opposed	A fairly small group who actively opposed the state and are happy to do illegal things. Interested in trying to set up alternative structures. Maybe anarchists, terrorists or religious fundamentalists
Non religious	No interest or commitment to Christianity. May be actively secularist more likely not to be bothered. Other religions would have a similar scale to Christians for their relationship to their religion.
Residual	Typically having a Christian origin which is marginalised but not rejected.
Balanced	Seeks to maintain a balance between rejecting Christianity and fundamentalism. Often influenced by liberal ideas of the kingdom outside the church. May sever links with institutional religion.
Committed	A definite and clear commitment to Christianity. Normally maintain a link with the institutional church, often a strong one.
Fundamental	A definite belief that Christianity is the truth and the only way to bring about thorough social change. Often fundamentalist but not necessarily.

An interesting feature of this typology is how pushing to the extreme of one axis tends to set up a tension with the other axis. Thus the move to fundamental religion tends to alienate you from the state and getting very involved with the state tends to lead you into compromises with your religion. Thus you don't get in Britain are really fundamentalist Christianity which is organically part of the state, as I understand it this is something like what has happened in post communist Russia (but I'm open to correction!)

It also gives us perspective on community ministry which through the work of Ann Morisy has had an important influence in East London. Community ministry seems to be wanting to move Christian social involvement towards a definite and clear commitment to Christianity rooted in the local church, such that the social involvement is a form of discipleship. It has its roots in the post liberal theology of people like Raymond Fung and Stanley Hauerwas and seeks to place the church in a more important position within Christian social involvement.

Examples of typical attitudes according to the typologies

Our project is effective because:

Praxis:: it really makes a difference to people's lives

Presence: people really trust us

Process: we really work at empowering people

State: we've built partnerships with a wide cross-section of the community

Engaged: we deliver a professional, cost-effective service

Marginal: we're responsive to grassroots needs

Sceptical: we work with people no one else is interested in

Opposed: we provide a radical alternative to state control

Non: we treat everyone the same irrespective of religion

Residual: we've built on our Christian roots to create an inclusive organisation

Balanced: we're committed to the Kingdom not getting bums on pews

Committed: our Christian commitment gives our work a special quality

Fundamental: we're obedient to God's calling

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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. There is an expanded version of this paper which we can e-mail to you at your request.

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