

## **Confidence in the Gospel – a Public Gospel**

### **Good work or good news – must we choose?**

Rochford District Council said, “a key challenge would be the potential for faith based groups to use funding for the delivery of services for promoting their faith.” Chichester referred to an active missionary agenda.

We surveyed over 150 local authorities last year and this June published the Faith in the Community report with Christians in Parliament.

The contribution of faith groups and in particular churches and Christian charities to local communities was huge. They run food banks, debt advice centres, street pastors, a church in Warrington took over a library scheduled for closure, a church in Yeovil is delivering the troubled families strategy for the district council. They are doing the regular and also the bizarre: dog training classes, anger management and much more.

When local authorities' budgets are falling and cost of essential social care services climbing more and more is getting cut back. And aside from the politics, churches are the people who are there before the funding kicks in and who stick around when budgets get cut.

Doncaster Council put it like this: “The fact is that by working together with faith groups we can do and achieve more. Faith groups often stand on the side of the hungry and poor and provide support for those who are grieving.”

Except it doesn't always work quite so well. The effusive support from Doncaster was not that common. More often there was an appreciation for the services and support faith communities provided, but a suspicion that partnering with them would be problematic.

Local authorities feared faith groups would want to offer activities and services exclusively to members of their faith, they worried about their commitment to equality and frequently they expressed concerns such as those from Rochford and Tamworth that faith groups would take the money and use any service or activity as a cover for evangelism.

The suspicion goes like this. Most faith groups have a message they want to spread, some, and Christians attract the greatest concern here, are actively out to convert people and recruit them to their cause.

So when a Council want to address homelessness in their city they might be tempted to partner with a hypothetical church, which provides shelter through winter months. But this church includes a short sermon and prayer each evening which anyone wanting to use the service has to listen to.

So the council don't partner, they find someone else providing the service, or commission someone else to do it.

But that's an extreme example. Very few churches expect their evangelism to be funded or supported by the local authority. It's a straw man, a scarecrow, which is built up without evidence and then scares off potential partners. North Yorkshire County Council said that once they got talking they found most of their fears were not realised.

What about a prayer before a meal? What about posters on the walls? What about volunteers who are overwhelmingly from churches being willing to discuss their motivation for helping out if asked?

There are two usual responses to this challenge, one option is for Christian groups to stay away from public funding or any formal relationship with statutory bodies, and therefore free to continue offering the activities while maintaining the overt Christian nature of their activities.

The problem with this approach is that it is often out of synch with what other organisations are doing, it might overlap, duplicate or leave gaps. It can be very well intentions but actually not always that effective.

The second option is to strip out all 'faith' aspects of what they do and provide a service as if they were not a faith group.

And here the problem is what is a faith aspect of these good works. Is it using the language of faith, the premise, the personnel?

Those parts which are different to what others might think, or perhaps those parts which might not be so popular, which might provoke disagreement or cause offence?

There's one area of difference that statutory partners do not have a problem with: the disproportionate contribution people of faith make to the well being of society. The hours given, the nights lost, the priorities uprooted.

Is this not a faith aspect of the church's work?

Because it is not a coincidence Christians provide the vast amount of support which they do.

It's not just they have lots of volunteers and are able to mobilise activity.

It's not a guilt thing, making recompense for the poor record religious institutions might have.

Or a decontamination thing, acting in certain ways so that others will think better. It didn't work with huskies and it wouldn't with food banks.

It's a gospel thing.

They want our good works but not our gospel.

Churches offer incredible services to their community, they remain when others do not, they serve when others walk away, they live while others leave.

And it's quite nice when this contribution is recognised. When the local council want to partner with you in providing a service, when businesses support you, when politicians laud you.

Yet have we sacrificed something along the way? Have we been too quick to keep our calling card in our pocket, has our identity been obscured?

Have we opted for favour over faithfulness?

But we can have it both ways. There are many examples of churches holding true to their beliefs, their motivation and their passion and serving their community.

Just look at Street Pastors, you'd have to be pretty dim to miss the church connection.

We have to be the same people whether we're preaching from the pulpit or sweeping the streets. Whether we're expounding theology or handing out food parcels. We do not have a Christian button which we flip on when we are in church and off when we serve the public.

Otherwise we're recasting the sacred secular divide and this time casting it in a concrete reinforced by our own actions.

It doesn't mean we act the same in every context, the words we use from the pulpit won't be appropriate on the playing field when we're coaching football.

We don't do good just to get them through the doors of the church. We do good because we believe that the gospel which changes our lives will one day banish every trace of pain and suffering. When good will triumph.

We do good because we get to be partners in bringing this good into our world today while we hope for tomorrow.

We do good because we are called to be good news. We are called to be carriers of the gospel.

When we step into our community, when we serve with passion, when we lead with conviction we are ambassadors for Christ.

It's not a choice between good works or good news. It's about both. Always about both.