

Consultation on Religion and Belief in Public Life

Church Urban Fund response

November 2014

General Questions

1. Do you feel at ease with the diversity of modern British society in terms of religion and belief?

As an organisation, Church Urban Fund feels at ease with the diversity of modern British society. We recognise the value and benefits of diversity and through our work, highlight and celebrate the contribution of different faith groups to our society. We firmly believe that the exchange of knowledge, understanding and most importantly, friendship between people of different faiths and cultures is essential for developing mutual respect. It is when people are isolated from others that intolerance and misunderstanding grow.

2. Are the current systems of civil and criminal law in the UK satisfactory in relation to issues of religion and belief, and to the overlap between these and issues of race and ethnicity?

We very much appreciate the provision set out in the Human Rights Act 1998 to give everyone in Britain the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. We would not support any proposals for the reform of that Act that would take away or weaken this freedom.

However, we recognise the complexities that arise when balancing competing freedoms and the difficulty of allowing people with contradictory beliefs to enact them in public space within the law. Yet we firmly believe that Christians and people of other faiths should be able to enact deeply held beliefs, even if those beliefs go against the grain of public opinion. We sincerely hope that there will continue to be sufficient space within our secular system of law to allow this.

3. Do the media accurately and helpfully portray issues of religion and belief, and communities and groups identified by religion or belief?

There is a very wide range of reporting on religion and belief – some commentators provide thoughtful and thought-provoking pieces on current issues and questions, while others use inflammatory or misleading language that stirs up anger or fear towards particular groups. We welcome journalism that is respectful of faith and avoids misrepresenting people from communities that hold values or beliefs that run contrary to social norms.

Unfortunately, inflammatory news stories influence people's attitudes, perceptions and even actions. For a recent example, we need only think of the recent events in Gaza and the anti-Semitic attacks that took place following the reporting of Israeli bombing campaigns. These events highlight the need for accurate, sensitive

and balanced reporting that helps to inform people about political events without causing unnecessary hostility.

We believe the answer to this is a better level of awareness of religious groups and their place in society in the media (particularly news reporters) rather than legislation.

5. Should faith-based organisations be involved in social and political action and, if so, in what ways and to what extent?

We firmly believe that faith-based groups and organisations should be involved in social and political action; indeed, it is our faith and the beliefs we hold that drive us to engage with the world around us and to seek the welfare of our neighbours.

Faith-based organisations offer a wide range of projects and activities that provide essential material support for people in need, including food banks, drop-ins, cafes, jobs clubs, youth clubs etc. Recent research conducted for Church Urban Fund by Theos suggests that the Church in England reaches 10 million people each year through its community activities, excluding worship-related activities.¹

Other research has demonstrated the enormous and multi-faceted contribution to civil society made by faith communities. For example, a survey a few years ago supported by the North West Development Agency not only showed that faith communities are especially present where social need is greatest, but also that they play an important role in social care, in giving support during periods of community stress, such as the foot and mouth crisis, in supporting sports and arts activities and in stimulating high levels of volunteering.²

Faith groups also create spaces for ‘neighbourliness’ to grow, enabling people to meet with others and build kinds of long-term relationships that are essential for transforming lives. As they are not bound by the same targets or objectives as central or local government, faith groups have more freedom to take this relational approach and are able to relate to people in a more holistic, person and family-centred, long-term way. This approach is in contradistinction to the service delivery model of public services from Local Authorities and large Voluntary Organisations.

These aspects of faith-based social action are crucial for achieving long-lasting change and, while they are no replacement for the state welfare system, need to be recognised, valued and invested in by the government.

Through our Near Neighbours programme, we show how collaborative social transformation can be a vehicle for reducing tension between faith communities. This is done by bringing together people of different faiths to build relationships of trust and collaborate on initiatives to improve the communities they live in. This work helps to break down barriers between different faith groups by encouraging people to set common goals and work together for the good of their neighbourhood. It is only by strengthening civil society in this way that we can properly balance the relationship with the state and the market.

¹ ‘Good Neighbours: how churches help communities flourish’, Church Urban Fund and Theos, 2014

² ‘Faith in England’s Northwest’, Northwest Development Agency, 2003

6. How should disagreements be handled between and within different traditions and communities, and between these and other interests in public life and wider society?

In the United Kingdom, we celebrate the fact that religious groups have a great degree of freedom to express their beliefs in the public sphere. This is not the case in other countries and we do not take it for granted. More could be done, however, to define and celebrate the values that we have in common, focusing on what brings us together rather than what separates us. For example, in our education system – what values do we have in teaching young people that we all share?

Good quality public space is imperative in handling difference and is where disagreements should be negotiated to resolution or tolerance and acceptance by communities themselves, rather than being decided by law. To develop this good quality public space, faith groups should proactively seek support and the provision of training in mediation and negotiation. This is a much more cost-effective option than legislation.

In settling disagreements formally, we believe it is important that every person and community is held to the same laws and tried in the same legal system. We recognise the complexities that can arise when dealing with conflicting freedoms and rights; yet despite these complexities, we sincerely hope that the expression of deeply held religious beliefs will continue to be respected and upheld by our legal system.

Section on social action

Many organisations defined by a religion or belief engage in social action locally and nationally. Together with other civil society organisations, they engage in social action not only of their own accord but also often at the request and on behalf of government, and in partnership with government.

1. What do you see as the benefits and disadvantages of social action by organisations defined by a religion or belief, both locally and nationally?

A distinctive mark, and therefore a primary benefit, of social action carried out by faith-based organisations is the fact that their work is often more relationally based. This comes from the beliefs and values that underpin their work, and as a result of their longstanding presence and their access to communities that enables them to build long-term relationships with others. These relationships are key for building people's confidence, resilience and therefore bringing about long-term change. They have the capacity to encourage human agency and reduce dependency.

This is not to say that faith-based social action should replace the state's provision of welfare. It is important that we have a universal welfare system that ensures every citizen is provided with a minimum income and level of care. Faith-based organisations can add to that minimum provision by doing the vital work of building communities and loving people – work that is very difficult for a state to do.

It is important however to recognise that state-based service delivery models of action are not enough to create well-integrated and cohesive (or even flourishing) neighbourhoods. The specific focus on neighbourliness, which is the starting point for much faith-based social action, is an important enhancement to service-based models of welfare.

2. Are processes of consultation, collaboration and partnership between government and community organisations satisfactory?

In many ways, yes. We receive a grant from the government to carry out our work and have found that partnership to be positive and productive. It is a relationship based on mutual respect and an understanding of the respective roles and contributions of the other. We have also contributed to multiple government consultations.

At a local level, we hear anecdotally that councils are now more willing and open to partnering with faith-based organisations after a period of mistrust and at times, hostility. We welcome this new openness and hope that both central and local government will continue to view faith-based organisations as potential partners that have a great deal to contribute.

We also hear that when local public sector organisations are not working well together, local communities can be the focus of multiple different consultations. This can cause 'overload' and frustration. Lack of quality feedback following a consultation can cause people to question the point of the activity.

Furthermore, recent cuts made by local authorities have often led to very experienced staff leaving important roles, causing a noticeable loss of 'corporate memory' and history. This has impacted on the networks and relational contacts that are of importance in local communities.

Unfortunately, there is still much misunderstanding and ignorance about faith groups and how they function. This sometimes makes the relationship between government and faith groups a complex one. Policies and proposals at the level of ministers and senior officials can often be misunderstood or misinterpreted at more junior levels of government organisations. The so-called 'Trojan Horse' controversy is an example of one of the ways in which this can happen where 'cohesion' is valued over 'accountability'. This is true in many other areas of policy.

3. If not, how should they be improved, and what are the respective responsibilities in the public and voluntary sectors for the making of such improvements?

The relationship between central and local government and community organisations can always benefit from greater openness and communication. We would seek more opportunities for all parties to meet and learn about one another, through shared conferences, visits and collaborative projects and believe it is the joint responsibility of both parties to ensure these take place. We know of many examples at a local level

where the energy and effort put in by local community leaders bears fruit in regard to the quality of their relationships and therefore their ability to work more cohesively with others.

There is still a real need for higher levels of religious literacy and particularly an understanding that religious groups are not monolithic structures, but rather community organisations where there are a wide range of views and in which there resides a wealth of expertise that needs to be available to the rest of society. It is important that Religious Education is taught well in schools as this forms a basis of understanding and respect for differences in religion, as well as laying foundations for faith literacy.

A particular help would be set of principles that faith groups could sign up to which would commit them to working towards a democratic and open society. This could be used as a touchstone for anti-discriminatory practice amongst faith groups and help to reduce levels of anti-religious prejudice. As part of this, it may be timely to re-issue the myth buster previously published by DCLG that was designed to ensure a level playing field for faith-based organisations in relation to public funding and tendering opportunities.

4. What are the principles underlying successful social action by organisations defined by a religion or belief, and what kinds of training activity are most effective in developing leadership skills and qualities?

The principles for successful faith-based social action are largely the same as for any other type of social action: leadership, good governance and accountability, strategic planning, resource management and effective implementation. Additionally, faith-based organisations need to think about how their beliefs and values will influence and permeate their work – the degree to which they are explicitly expressed in marketing materials and in their project work. Each organisation strikes its own balance in this area.

It is important that the different faith communities each offer a rationale for their commitment to social transformation as this would provide a clearer basis around which respective faith groups could mobilise in their neighbourhood and more widely. It is clear that faith has a distinctive offer to make to the welfare debate more widely because they provide a different motivation for ‘care’ and mutual accountability to their neighbour. The commitment to a flourishing society where all are included and valued needs to be articulated clearly from the perspective of different faith groups.

We strongly believe that faith-based social action should not be exclusive, but inclusive of all people in need. Data recently collected shows that local churches provide a wide range of welfare services for all people in their communities: the Church in England reaches approximately 10 million people each year through its community activities, even excluding familiar church activities such as services, baptisms, weddings and funerals.³

5. What recommendations relating to social action should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

³ ‘Good Neighbours: how churches help communities flourish’, Church Urban Fund and Theos, 2014

Firstly, that local agencies have greater confidence in churches as potential partners. Churches have assets and people and they are also locally trusted and sensitive to local need. Churches do not merely support their members, but offer care for all those in their communities and are cautious to avoid alienating people with language or activities that could be perceived as coercive. In fact, people that benefit from church-run projects often compare them favourably with other providers.

Secondly, for the duration of the next parliament, national government and policy makers will be grappling with the question of how to support and sustain deprived communities in what is likely to be a period of ongoing economic challenge. Alternative approaches will have to focus not simply on physical regeneration but also on 'social' regeneration – the quality and quantity of relationships and social networks in areas of high deprivation, and the extent to which these can help communities remain resilient. Taking account of the presence and work of churches could make the difference between public initiatives in this field faltering or prospering.

Section on social change

People's sense of being British and of belonging in Britain changes with social, political and economic trends, as does the place of religion and belief in public life. Significant trends in recent years include a decline in religious practice, belief and identity, and growth in the number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities; the growth of religions other than Christianity as a consequence of migration patterns; the increasing impact of globalisation in its various forms (political, economic, cultural, ecological, and so forth); and a greater sense of multiple loyalties and identities.

1. What would you say are the most significant social and economic changes as they affect the place of religion and belief in British public life and people's sense of being British or belonging in Britain?

The recent immigration of people of different faiths has meant that faith is much more visible on our streets and consequently, there is a lot more attention being given to faith in public life. We welcome this and believe that all can benefit from a greater awareness and understanding of different faiths, as well broader conversations about the role of faith in private and public life.

Our Near Neighbours programme shows that people of different faiths have a firm commitment to improving the life of their wider community, as can be seen in hundreds of joint social action projects that have taken place around the country. This activity demonstrates people's sense of belonging to this country and to their local community and should be widely celebrated.

2. Does Britain show equal respect for religious and non-religious beliefs and identities?

In Church Urban Fund, we support churches and local organisations to tackle poverty in their communities. The activities and projects that are set up benefit people of all faiths and none, and contribute to building

stronger communities. Through this work, we see how people from different cultures and faiths can work together to bring about transformation in their local area, showing respect and care for all people.

3. Should public ceremonies and institutions, for example Remembrance Day and the House of Lords, reflect the changed pattern of religion and belief in British society, and if so how?

The Church of England is the national church and it is important that this continues to be respected in public ceremonies and institutions.

4. What should be done to help people of all religions and beliefs feel their perspectives and organisations can play a part in shaping public life?

We need more initiatives like Near Neighbours – initiatives that bring together people from different cultures and faiths to work on common projects and activities. Through collaboration, people discover more about what they have in common with others and begin to build the kinds of friendships and networks that enable them to shape their own community.

5. What recommendations relating to social change should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

Recent social changes mean that traditional communities have broken down and people are more isolated and lonely. Faith communities are well placed to tackle this isolation and to bring people into relationships with others in their community.

We recommend that local agencies have greater confidence in churches as potential partners. Churches have assets and people and they are also locally trusted and sensitive to local need. Churches do not merely support their members, but offer care for all those in their communities and are cautious to avoid alienating people with language or activities that could be perceived as coercive.

We also recommend that efforts to tackle poverty focus not simply on physical regeneration but also on 'social' regeneration – the quality and quantity of relationships and social networks in areas of high deprivation, and the extent to which these can help communities remain resilient. Taking account of the presence and work of churches could make the difference between public initiatives in this field faltering or prospering.