

Faith as social capital

The Government has identified faith communities as important sources of social capital. But religion is also associated with conflict and division. How far is faith in 'faith' justified? How far should faith communities engage with government agendas, and what can they contribute to building bridges and forging links with others? A cross-professional research group, co-ordinated by Rob Furbey at Sheffield Hallam University, found that:

- Faith communities contribute substantial and distinctive bridging and linking social capital, but also face internal and external obstacles to development.
- Living close to people of diverse faiths is an increasingly common experience. Faith communities are developing local, regional and national frameworks which connect faiths with each other and with secular organisations. However, these frameworks are not always recognised, so their full potential for mutual understanding and community development is not realised.
- Faith buildings can be significant for developing social capital, as places where people can cross boundaries, meet others, share activities and build trust. But the use of faith buildings can be a source of conflict and their wider communal use may be constrained by their sacred status or poor amenities.
- Faith communities can facilitate building bridges and making links with others. They can allow new forms of association, engender trust in shared community initiatives, and motivate particular approaches to questions of social justice and need. But power inequalities within faith communities can also inhibit the development of social capital, particularly through the subordination of women and young people.
- Faith communities contribute substantially to social capital through participation in formal governance, though individual organisations vary in capacity and commitment. Faith groups have distinctive priorities, timescales, working styles and challenging agendas, informed and motivated by their beliefs and commitment to particular neighbourhoods.
- Many faith communities also contribute to social capital by participating in the wider public domain. Faith, worship and people's development within faith organisations can foster qualities essential for civic engagement. External networking and action are usually undertaken by a relatively small number of people, but their achievements are often substantial.



Background

In the United Kingdom and elsewhere during the last 15 years there has been growing interest in 'social capital' as a potential source of economic and social benefits. Over the same period, both Conservative and Labour Governments in the UK have looked to faith communities as partners in a range of social policies and regeneration programmes.

Social capital is seen as contributing to better educational attainment, lower crime levels, improved health, more active citizenship, better functioning labour markets and higher economic growth. It has been identified as a key consideration in the quest for sustainable neighbourhoods and the achievement of social and community cohesion. This has prompted a review of all the sources, forms and expressions of social capital and how they might be harnessed. Faith communities have featured prominently in this development of policy and practice.

During the last decade, research in various regions of the UK has demonstrated the large scale and wide range of social engagement by faith organisations and groups. But it has also shown that faith communities face important internal and external obstacles to fulfilling their potential as sources and generators of social capital. Faith communities may also be obstacles to developing outward-looking and enriching social networks. Moreover, compliance with government agendas may serve to undermine the energy and distinctiveness of faith-related networks and enterprise. This research explored these issues, by means of interviews, documentary evidence and observations across a range of faiths and UK regions.

Social capital and faith

The idea of social capital and the place of faith in public policy and civil society are both controversial. The term 'social capital' is sometimes distrusted because it seems to impose a utilitarian economic language on human relationships. It is also seen as linked to a community and social-order agenda which many question. Rather like the notion of 'community', it is also an idea which sounds positive but can hide a negative, destructive side. However, social capital is not bound inevitably to a particular economic theory or political standpoint. It is a means to expand our understanding of how people can be advantaged (or indeed disadvantaged) by their social networks as well as by their physical and human capital. In particular, the distinctions between bonding, bridging and linking social capital can be used to develop a closer, critical exploration of community networks, the resources they offer, and the constraints they impose.

Recent events worldwide and within the UK have further sharpened a longstanding debate on the social impact of religion. The divisiveness of religion receives ultimate expression in violence. But faith communities can be characterised by other powerful forms of disconnection from other groups or wider society. Religious understanding that establishes a strong boundary with the rest of the world can produce passive retreat or a more active (and sometimes destructive) assertion of distinctiveness. Yet all the major faiths have core principles that can motivate bridge-building and link-making. In the words of just one tradition:

“O mankind! Behold, we have created you from a male and a female, and have made you nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another...”
(Qur'an 49:13)

All major faiths have doctrinal commitments to peace, justice, honesty, service, community, personal responsibility and forgiveness, which can contribute to the development of networks and the trusting relationships that characterise positive social capital. Recognition of these two facets of religion prompts a critical exploration of the complex field of faith and social capital.

From physical capital to social capital

The collective life of a faith community usually occurs within its building. For some this is an historic building, for others a newly built one or an adaptation from another type of use. Some of these places are very small. Often, however, in addition to a sacred space or worship area there are other premises, including a hall. This physical capital can be significant in developing and sustaining social capital in neighbourhoods where community buildings are scarce. Most immediately, faith buildings are a home where people can share a common life and form bonds with one another. But they can also be the means of contributing bridging and linking social capital to wider community networks. Faith buildings which are open to others offer opportunities for people to cross the boundaries of their normal circle and experience and form new social relations.

“We have had faith groups coming from all communities: Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Somalian groups, Afghan, Iranian and Kurdish ... the list is actually endless.” (Sikh development worker)

The buildings can also be a means of bridge-building and link-making beyond the neighbourhood, giving a platform for engagement at local, regional and national level. Of particular interest are places where the owning congregation or organisations display a willingness to relinquish some control over a building or project and share power and resources with others.

At the same time, there are challenges. Depending on belief and tradition, religious buildings are often understood as sacred places, and restrictions on their use must be respected. Also, the quality and amenities of buildings vary greatly within and among faith traditions. Many buildings are a drain on resources and are hard to adapt. Attempts to modernise can be hampered by suspicion of what goes on within faith buildings, concerns about proselytising and barriers to external funding.

The 'spaces' of faith association

Activities and relationships within many faith communities are marked by certain features of association which encourage the formation of social capital. Increasing numbers of people live in religiously diverse districts. Although there is also evidence of separation and segregation, this experience of diversity has prompted a growing number of local, regional and national organisational and learning frameworks which contribute to bridging and linking social capital, connecting faiths with each other and faiths with secular organisations. However, these connecting networks are not always visible or widely recognised.

Faith communities are also spaces where the development of religious motivation, understanding, participation in worship and leadership can foster knowledge, qualities and skills required for the development of social capital. Faith communities can also facilitate discussion across different levels of power and influence through their networks, many of which are known and respected. And faith communities can be supportive contexts for associating in new ways. This can involve new partnerships and trust between existing organisations, as in the collaboration between the London Muslim Centre and the neighbouring Jewish synagogue. Or it might take the form of unstructured, non-organisational space, as in the inter-faith and faith-secular Together for Peace cultural festival in Leeds.

But faith association can also produce restricting spaces. Many faith communities fail to listen to women or young people within their number. Women usually do most work in the community, yet the further one moves from grassroots activity towards higher levels of decision-making, the less visible they become.

“Breaking the glass ceiling I think is always going to be difficult, no matter where you are. I can definitely say gender is a big issue... They don't want women in this position because they see that as diminishing their role as men.” (Female volunteer and former management committee member)

Similarly, the experiences of young people – often starkly different from those of their elders – can be crucial for informing the making of connections beyond the community, yet often they are not heard. These issues are not, of course, unique to faith, but the perspective of male elders remains pronounced in faith organisations.

Faith, social capital and local governance

Faith organisations and individual members contribute significantly to the formation of bridging and linking social capital by participating in formal governance and partnerships. Collective and personal belief and practice often sustain and direct a desire to work with others to meet needs and achieve social justice, crossing boundaries in the process. Many worshipping communities are longstanding and deeply rooted in a particular place. This often produces a commitment to people and neighbourhood that is very tolerant of extended timescales for progress. Their approach is often informal and shows greater acceptance of 'messiness' than is found in more orderly official programmes.

“There are certain parameters within faith which enable a coping with divergence and catastrophe. There have always been catastrophes around here... The nature of faith gives us an ingredient to forbear one another a bit. It gets a bit frustrating sometimes. You drive each other up the wall!” (Christian participant in governance)

Faith partners bring their own, often challenging, agendas to the table and they are likely to resist co-option.

Faith organisations' practical local understanding, developed through long-term engagement, can be an important source of linking capital for statutory bodies in attempts to engage with the community. But there is also often a clash of styles and, as with other voluntary and community organisations, faith groups often experience frustration and disillusion, caused by perceived failures in delivery, lack of understanding and wrong priorities on the part of statutory agencies. Lack of capacity and understanding by faith groups and government agencies leads to poor communication and suspicion, countering the trust that is essential for the growth of social capital. Participation in governance is 'expensive' for faith communities; the number of people in faith groups in disadvantaged areas with the energy, confidence

and commitment to be involved in local governance is currently small. Participation is restricted to a small minority.

Participation in the public domain

Faith communities also contribute to social capital through participation in the wider public domain, less directly influenced by government. Many faith communities are internally diverse in terms of age, gender, occupational class, ethnicity and, increasingly, language. This can be a source of conflict, division or repression. But it can also challenge people to move beyond bonding to address the demands of bridging.

However, faith communities are often not participative, and their leaders and members are not always organisationally aware and adept. Leaders who facilitate the involvement and development of community members are of key importance. Their selection, training and example are of major significance in equipping members. The research found promising examples of organisational and congregational programmes that were developing members to participate both within and beyond their faith community. Training and activity which are shared with other groups are valuable in reducing misunderstandings between faith and secular groups and inequalities of capacity among faith groups.

As with many non-faith contexts, external networking and action are usually undertaken by a relatively small number of faith-group members, but their achievements are often substantial. Relations between an externally networking minority and their home congregations and communities are variable. Sometimes the activism of the former and the internal preoccupations of the latter produce a weakening of bonds. In other cases, those working beyond their starting base may remain strongly integrated,

supported by bonding relationships. In return, they draw others into the skills and qualities of bridge-building, link-making and strengthening the community and its capacity to look outwards.

About the project

The research was designed to achieve rigorous analysis of a limited number of potentially instructive cases with both positive and negative potential for social capital. The focus was on particular places and episodes involving, variously, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and non-faith people and organisations. The cases and episodes were concentrated in London, the West Midlands, the North West and Yorkshire in localities characterised by ethnic and religious diversity.

The core research group comprised Robert Furbey (lecturer in urban sociology, Sheffield Hallam University), Adam Dinham (lecturer in social policy, Anglia Ruskin University) and Richard Farnell (Professor of Neighbourhood Regeneration, Coventry University). The primary research was informed by a series of activity field reviews undertaken by consultant members of the research group with expertise in specific fields: Doreen Finneron (faith buildings); Catherine Howarth (community organising); Dilwar Hussain and Guy Wilkinson (inter-faith relations); and Sharon Palmer (governance). The main research technique was the semi-structured interview (24 people). Documentary evidence was also used, and the study incorporated an element of observation (sometimes extending to participation). Interviews were conducted with people who were seen as leaders, including both clergy and laity. Activists, users and other informal participants were also interviewed. Interviewees were selected to achieve cross-checking of experiences and interpretations. There were also nine group interviews, involving a total of 31 participants from 25 organisations.

For further information

The full report, **Faith as social capital: Connecting or dividing?** by Robert Furbey, Adam Dinham, Richard Farnell, Doreen Finneron and Guy Wilkinson with Catherine Howarth, Dilwar Hussain and Sharon Palmer, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 837 1, price £12.95).

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