

# The Role of Faiths in Civil Society

*A talk given by Dr Doreen Finneron, Executive Director of the Faith Based Regeneration Network, as part of the seminar organised by the British Humanist Association on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2009*

The Faith Based Regeneration Network includes practitioners of community development, regeneration and social action from all faiths, as well as people of no faith, who are interested in the role of faiths in community and civil society.

## That role has three main aspects

- **addressing need at local level, often by the delivery of services, particularly to marginalised and isolated groups,**
- **working together to build cohesion,**
- **and speaking out on current issues; this often leads them to a critique and challenge of government.**

All three roles were recognised by the Communities Secretary, John Denham in a recent speech.

The statement at the top of our agenda papers today is:

**“Current government policy appears to be championing the contribution of faith groups in community work.”**

Is this the case?

The government has policies and programmes designed to engage faith communities so that they make their full contribution to public life.

BUT this is within the wider strategy of Empowerment and other community policy, such as involving local people in the decisions that affect them and supporting voluntary activity.

Turning now to the relationship between faiths and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Faith communities, and in particular those faith based organisations that engage in social action – which is most of them – are an integral part of the Voluntary and Community Sector. This has been the clear message of Government over the years. While it has been acknowledged that faith groups have some distinctive characteristics, the whole thrust of policy has been to emphasise the commonalities with the wider sector.

Government has most clearly stated this view recently in the paper *‘Believing in Local Action’* published with support from Communities and Local Government

alongside *‘Face to Face and Side by Side – a framework for partnership in our multi faith society’*. The message in these government documents is clear.

There are benefits for local communities, the third sector and faith groups when the latter are seen as a normal part of the wider third sector. What the Government is championing is first the wider third sector – and then stressing the importance of seeing faith groups as part of it.

Let me develop this from the point of view of faith based organisations. If they see themselves as separate from the rest of the Voluntary and Community Sector, then they themselves miss out on resources, support and ideas that would help them develop. When faith based organisations do see themselves as part of the Voluntary and Community Sector, they gain enormously from this.

Turning to the implications for the Voluntary and Community Sector itself. There is a long tradition of faith based organisations within the Voluntary and Community Sector, if they were to be seen as outside it then the Sector would be diminished because it would lack a vital part of its constituency.

The increasing interest in the potential for the delivery of public services by faith based organisations, referred to in the introduction to the session, is within this context of faith based organisations as a distinctive but integral part of the Voluntary and Community Sector.

The positive role that faith based organisations have in the community is demonstrated by **evidence from research** from Goldsmiths College, and Kings College; London School of Economics; the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; De Montfort University, the University of East London, and the University of York, as well as research sponsored by Regional Development Agencies

This research shows that faith groups:

- make a multi-faceted contribution to individual and community wellbeing
- are strongest where social need is highest
- reach parts of society that other groups struggle to connect with

and that they are active in areas of high need, such as:

- homelessness
- crime prevention
- and alcohol dependency;
- are largely self-financing;
- and have the ability to stimulate high levels of volunteering.

They are

- rooted in their local communities
- provide a level of continuity and sustained support.
- and their central role within communities can generate local trust, commitment and financial or in-kind resources.

The North West Regional Development Agency research estimated that faith communities in the Northwest generate between £70 million and £95 million to the regional economy (2005 figures). More recent research (2009) puts the figure for the Yorkshire & Humber Region at nearly £300m p.a.

**Faith groups engage in society in these ways from the motivation of their faith, and not as instruments of government. But they recognise that in working in the public sphere, they are bound by the same accountabilities as any other voluntary or community organisation.** And the more effectively faith groups are integrated into the wider third sector, the better equipped they are to fulfil these public obligations.

#### **What does the engagement in community look like and feel like?**

Turning to the first of the three roles, that of addressing needs at a local level. This sometimes takes a form that surprises people who have preconceptions about faith communities.

For example the Lighthouse Project of Hull Community Church works with women in the commercial sex industry. It began as an unpaid service by women from two churches. However, they quickly learned that offering (in their words) "tea and love", although a positive start welcomed by the target group, was inadequate for the needs of the women caught in that dangerous world. The Lighthouse project raised funds and now has a project worker and a project bus, which is a mobile resource travelling around the two red light districts of the city. The bus acts as a safe space and a starting-point for identifying practical support as needs arise. The

Lighthouse project is now regarded as a pioneer in this work and its input in the development of other projects is highly valued.

The second aspect of faith communities' role in public life is their ability to work together to promote cohesion.

The Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre, in the Ladbrook Grove area of London, has for some years worked closely with other faith communities through the local inter faith forum. The Director of the Centre speaks of their mission as helping Muslims from different cultural backgrounds to become better Muslims and at the same time to be at home in Britain and grow as British citizens. The strength of the Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre's commitment and its local connections were tested in 2005.

In the period following the horrific bombings on 7th July and the attempted bombings later in the month, a number of arrests were made in the close neighbourhood of the Centre, posing a real threat of civil disturbance and breakdown of cohesion. The Centre's rootedness in its local community, its support from other faith communities and its credibility with public agencies, enabled it to mediate and defuse tension.

#### **We need here to consider the government's Preventing Violent Extremism strategy and its effects on cohesion.**

The perception in government is that the main threat comes from Al Qaeda and other associated extremist interpretations of Islam.

I think there are other forms of extremism that threaten society.

However, the Preventing Violent Extremism initiative was established on the premise that Al Qaeda is the main threat. But even if this is accepted, as Kundnani's report for the Institute of Race Relations shows, the decision to concentrate exclusively on work with Muslims has, in many communities, undermined the cohesion work, that is often sponsored and supported by Government. It has isolated Muslims from other faith based organisations and from the rest of the community – exactly the bodies that the cohesion strategy was encouraging them to work with. It also reinforces the perception that some people have of Muslims as potential terrorists, thus fuelling Islamophobia.

The third role of faiths is speaking out on current issues. The values of faith groups often lead them to be critical of government policy and to speak out against it. As, for example, the Church of England report, *Faith in the City*

in 1985, which sharply criticised the then Conservative Government policies and their effect on poverty and deprivation in the inner cities.

More recently faith communities have spoken out against the Iraq war and have led the Get Fair Campaign against poverty in the UK.

Government finds this uncomfortable and it is therefore interesting that the Communities Secretary noted and accepted this critical role.

A number of concerns are sometimes raised in connection with faith based engagement in community, particularly, but not exclusively, when public money is involved in funding the delivery of services. The main concerns are:

- that services may be provided for an exclusive target group
- that there may be discrimination against employees
- and the possibility that the services might be used for proselytisation.

**In terms of provision for an exclusive target group – the majority of faith groups are committed to open access,** this is demonstrated by the research mentioned earlier. There are exceptional cases as there are in the wider Voluntary and Community Sector where a group in need of services would otherwise not get them.

In such cases it may be also be necessary that staff are drawn from the same faith group as those receiving the service. BUT this needs to be taken on a case by case basis – it is not an overall prescription.

There is a debate over the role of women and gay people in terms of faith based groups broadly, and this applies to employment in faith based service delivery. This mirrors the debate in wider society and as part of the Voluntary and Community Sector, faith based groups need to participate in this. I know, through my work, that chief executives and trustees of faith based organisations are engaging in these debates

**On the question of using the delivery of services to proselytise. This is unacceptable.**

In a lecture last week on overseas development, the Archbishop of Canterbury addressed the issue of the issue of suspicion that faith groups may be using aid and development as a cloak for proselytism.

In the UK there is also a suspicion that faith groups may take advantage of their position as service deliverers, in order to proselytise.

A study this year by the University of York's Centre for Housing Policy set out to examine this and other aspects of the role of faith based organisations in homelessness provision. They found that faith based and secular providers share many core values, most notably, emphases on respecting the dignity of service users and non-discrimination on grounds such as ethnicity, sexuality or religious belief.

And that the key axis differentiating homelessness projects is not so much whether they are faith based or secular, but rather, the providers' stance on the conditionality of service receipt. The organisations that require a commitment to change as a condition for the service tend to be the secular organisations. **Those offering the service without conditionality tend to be the faith based organisations.**

It is clear from this research that faith based organisations are overwhelmingly not using the delivery of services to this vulnerable group as a means of proselytisation.

If in other cases, faith based groups are using services for proselytisation, this needs to be challenged by a robust interaction with other faith based organisations and the wider Voluntary and Community Sector.

To sum up – faith communities have a role in public life in terms of:

- addressing need at local level,
- working together to build cohesion,
- and speaking out on current issues

I have heard it asserted that religious belief is like a belief in fairies at the bottom of the garden. And that it is fine so long as it is a private affair, 'kept at home' and separated from the public and political domain.

**But it is precisely because it is NOT similar to a belief in fairies that religious belief cannot be confined to the private realm.**

**An essential aspect of all religious faiths is how people treat others, how they related to one another, how they live together in communities – precisely the stuff of politics and the matter of the public square.**

**Faith communities are part of the broad canvas of community and civil society in this country. It's not comfortable, or tidy, but it is life as we know it.**