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**CLES Bulletin** is a topical summary of articles which have appeared in the professional press. Its aim is to provide a pithy précis of a subject area, drawing out the specific and common issues raised in the individual articles.

## CLES Bulletin No. 15 September 2003

### **Having faith in regeneration**

Progressively more emphasis is being placed on community involvement as a key factor to successful regeneration. Consequently, the potential of faith groups within these communities is being seen as a significant ingredient in achieving sustainable renewal.

The establishment of the Inner Cities Religious Council and the Faith Community Liaison Group has shown some commitment from the Government to drawing out the capacity of faith groups in assisting the regeneration process.

The topic has been consistently of interest in the press as more and more positive examples arise showing how faith and regeneration can work together in partnership. However, there are still a number of barriers and difficulties, which need to be addressed.

**Regeneration and Renewal**<sup>1</sup> magazine reports on the newly established Faith Community Liaison Group (FCLG), based in the Home Office and chaired by Community Policy and Civic Renewal Minister Faith Mactaggart. The FCLG is a high-level working group set up to give faith groups a greater influence on policy and public service delivery across Whitehall.

Although the FCLG has been welcomed, there is a feeling that if the Government is really serious about drawing on the rich body of experience of faith groups, it needs to get more direct input from the grassroots, particularly as many people at the grassroots level are not aware of all the initiatives being espoused at the senior government level.

<sup>1</sup> Klaushofer, Alex *Testing times for the faithful* Regeneration & Renewal 29 August 2003 pp.16-17

*Regeneration and Renewal* identified a major hurdle to greater involvement, as being the difficulty faith groups have in accessing funding. Research showed that of the 7,000 projects identified, only 18 per cent received any kind of public funding. It claims this is largely due to prejudice on the part of the funding bodies and fears that the funding is going to further the work of a religious community rather than being used to help the whole community.

It also identified barriers within the faith groups themselves, in that, some minority faiths' are reluctant to open up to the wider community. Other stumbling blocks include the Islamic prohibition of gambling which prevents them from applying for Lottery funding, and the Muslim antipathy to filling in forms – their tradition being an oral one - suggesting that interviews might replace filling in forms.

It concluded that the biggest success in the context of regeneration would be when faith groups feel they are no longer being discriminated against on the grounds of religion.

**Green Futures**<sup>2</sup> highlighted the Balsall Heath Forum as an example of community-led regeneration in a deprived and multi-ethnic area. The Forum came about when local people were alarmed by what they saw as the authorities' failure to tackle rising criminal activity and prostitution and so they set up a residents' group. Following the race riots elsewhere in the country, news of the Forum's success was warmly welcomed not least because many of those seen to be working together were of different faiths.

The key to the Forum's progress has been the way it engaged with local faith leaders as a way of reaching audiences who would otherwise be inaccessible. It highlights the example of the Balsall Heath 'Jungle' scheme, which helps residents to grow their own organic fruit and vegetables and generally green the local environment. Initially the members of the Jungle were sometimes greeted with suspicion on the doorstep but by promoting the idea through the local mosques and by getting the support of key community leaders, the Jungle's membership gradually grew.

Recently, representatives of different faiths have joined with doctors, police and social workers to plan an anti-drug campaign. This has shown how it's possible via the faith establishment to get the views and opinions across to people in a way that's beyond the ability of local authority officials or social workers.

It points out, however, that there is clearly a difference between using faith groups to communicate a particular message and their taking the lead in community regeneration. The Forum has decided to establish a Faith Group, made up of representatives from all the local faiths, as a way of bringing people of all religions together into joint projects.

<sup>2</sup> Morgan, Claire *Heathan chemistry* Green Futures Mar/Apr 2003 pp.46-47

*Roof*<sup>3</sup> magazine identifies a number of successful faith and regeneration partnerships. It looks at the experience of the New Deal for Communities in Bradford, an area with a high Muslim population. Here, it identifies funding as the main barrier to involving faith groups in regeneration. This is partly due to the fact that there is not enough money around and partly because there are problems about knowing ways to access it.

*Roof* also reports on the organisation, *Faith in the Future*, based in Stoke Newington, north London. The organisation has 10 staff of various faiths and its principle funding derives from Sure Start for work with children and from the Housing Corporation's estate-based regeneration programme. They use the common values of all faiths as a base for their work, and stress that people should not assume that faith groups are going to start preaching to people.

Highlighting another good example of faith through practical action in the inner city, *Roof* looks at the St Peters Community Centre in Coventry. It was brought about by faith groups deciding that to express their faith through regeneration they had to be engaged with other groups. The local community centre is managed by a Sikh but is used for Anglican worship, and separately by the black-run Church of God of Prophecy and also has many Muslim users.

*Roof* also highlights the long-established faith regeneration initiative, Pecan, which works on difficult estates in Peckham. Unemployment was chosen as members saw it as a key barrier to social inclusion – and a spiritual problem as well as an economic one. Board members are Christians and staff make a declaration of faith but its services are open to anyone. There was some reticence about a faith group among statutory bodies at the beginning, and they have to demonstrate that they do not use public money for proselytising.

*Search*<sup>4</sup> magazine looks at the history of faith and urban regeneration and goes on to caution against placing too much weight on any single solution to complex, local problems.

*Search* points out that on the ground, things happen when people come together in groups. In Bradford, Sheffield, Newham and Coventry, for example, it's clear that faith communities can make things happen. Churches and mosques organise events, provide a social focus and produce leaders, that is, people who can speak with some authority about local conditions and needs. However, the problem is how to fit such an ineffable sense of neighbourliness into the bed of grants, applications, guidelines and Government protocols.

*Search* identifies other problems, in that, despite the growing number of inter-faith councils and forums being set up, religion retains an immensely private and personal dimension – and its capacity to exclude and divide. That is, the major world religions make claims of uniqueness; non-believers are by definitions wrong or misled – highlighting clearly a limit to engagement.

However, *Search* argues this shouldn't mean policy makers should avoid this area simply because it poses a problem, but rather, faith should be recognised, and extolled, as one element in the regeneration scheme. Regeneration professionals should be literate in the practices of Christians, Hindus and Muslims.

*Search* concludes that most religious observance is intensely local and faith communities are highly variegated. It argues that although most churches do care about their areas, we should beware going beyond that perception to some formula or tick-box for prayer or worse, national plan for faith in the city.

### Conclusion

It has been consistently shown that a key advantage of involving faith groups in regeneration is that they can offer a unique gateway into the local community. Their ability to penetrate and communicate with those of different faiths through their places of worship is an inimitable strength, which can be harnessed for the benefit of the wider community.

However, it is equally clear that there are still a number of barriers in engaging faith groups. The issue of funding continually arises in terms of discrimination on funding boards and the need to filter information and accessibility down to the ground level. Also the fact that faith groups can be voluntarily socially exclusive can pose problems, as people have to want to get involved for regeneration of this ilk to be successful. Conversely, there are numerous examples from around the country where members of different faith groups are working in harmony together for the benefit of the wider community.

There is still a long way to go in terms of channelling the full potential of faith groups, due to the various limitations of engagement. However, the potential has been recognised and whilst efforts continue in this area, it will remain a lively topic of debate.

For more information on this topic please contact:

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<sup>3</sup> Smulian, Mark *Gently does it* Roof May/June 2003 pp.27-28

<sup>4</sup> Walker, David *Acts of faith* Search 39 Summer 2003 pp.11-