Rebuilding Britain's Institutional Fabric: the Transformative Role of the Church of England

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Britain needs both new and renewed institutions. Institutions are crucial to brokering the future of a country. Without both enabling and mediating institutions that leverage people into education, skills and shared prosperity, a nation cannot progress. Yet the nation is in a state of institutional breakdown. Both State and market have failed: on the one hand, the State has developed standardised 'top-down' practices and incurred massive expenditure; on the other, it has outsourced its responsibilities to the private sector and prioritised efficiency of cost over social value. We need to recognise that doing more of the same will only deliver more of the same. We need to create, recover and restore transformative institutions that can genuinely make a difference to people and their communities.

If we are to recover such institutions, then we have also to recover our moral imagination, our sense of what ought to be the case and how people could and should live their lives free of want, despair and insecurity. These new, recovered, or restored institutions have to think, operate, and behave very differently from those which currently hold sway. They have to be holistic, personal, and local – a standard against which both state and market have fallen short.

This essay argues that the Church of England has the potential, the experience, and the capacity to become one of the foundational enabling and mediating institutions that the country so desperately needs. We do not deny the right and ability of other organisations to offer the holistic, personal, and local social care and action that Britain requires. However, we suggest that among all available organisations, the Church is uniquely positioned to create a radical new offer, based on its historic institutional framework and theological underpinnings which provide both universal access *and* local variation.

Research recently conducted for ResPublica's report *Holistic Mission: Social Action*

and the Church of England has found striking evidence that the Church has enormous experience and even greater potential. It shows that levels of social action are considerably higher among Church attendees than the general population. 79% of Church congregations engage in some formal voluntary action compared to just 40% of the general population, while 90% are involved in informal voluntary activity as opposed to 54% of the general population. According to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, members of the Church of England give 22.3 million hours each month in voluntary service.[1] As Eric Pickles has recognised, 'faith communities provide a clear moral compass and a call to action that benefits society as a whole – and the Government is grateful for this'.[2]

And voluntary activity only tells part of the story. Churches, and Christian-based social action groups, are now delivering a range of public services, and there is an appetite amongst many to do more. Christian-based social action has also grown significantly in recent years, delivering a whole host of services to communities across the country. The franchising model, for instance, has enabled the deployment of a wider range of bespoke services, ranging from debt advice to jobs clubs, specifically targeted to meet local needs. Churches and cathedrals are also increasingly becoming incubators for local social innovation and budding entrepreneurs, delivering crucial opportunities and support to initiatives that would have otherwise been hampered by the recession. It is clearly the case that social action is woven throughout everything that the Church does – through its mission and through the lives of those connected to it.

While recognising the social action of other Christian denominations and faiths, we argue that the established Church is uniquely placed to achieve such access and range. In the words of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 'the concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly under-appreciated. Its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country'. The Queen highlights 'the importance of faith in creating and sustaining communities all over the United Kingdom' 'as a spur for social action ... helping those in the greatest need, including the sick, the elderly, the lonely and the disadvantaged'.[3] Thus the unique power of Anglican social action: the Church has a special role in society because of the diversity of its members, the holism of its ethos and reach, and the hyper-localism of its institutions – and that, as such, it accesses people and places that other institutions cannot.

The British Government has to accept that the current model is broken. Neither nationalisation nor privatisation can save the poor from their fate and secure the middle classes in the twenty-first century. We need the government to build on its reform agenda and think meaningfully about institutional innovation. We need the government to encourage the Church to partner with it in a way that is consistent with the Church's vision and beliefs to help create an institution that can transform our lives and our communities through holistic and personal forms of service delivery

that care for the whole human person. Government needs to help the Church become both delivery and social investment ready, and the Church needs to help the government by telling them what people really and genuinely need.

The Limits of the State and the Failings of the Market

In our society, the first port of call is on the state and its vast architecture of welfare and subsidy. The trouble is that the state no longer seems very effective, all too often institutionalising dysfunction rather than solving it. Even during the growth period under New Labour, those on welfare did not benefit from the gains as they should, and now they suffer twice over during austerity as even the little that they have is being taken away. This begs the question: why? Why isn't the state more effective at solving these perennial problems, from drug addiction to educational exclusion, from alcoholism to poverty?

Part of the problem emerges from our understanding of universality. The common view in respect of public services is that this must mean the same thing delivered in the same way to everybody regardless of need. But people do not need the same thing; they need different things depending on who or where they are and the problems that confront them. They also need relationships, community, and a support network, which is currently not brokered into the current 'universal' model. The inability of public service to vary according to need, to give different things to different people in order that all may enjoy an equal flourishing is one of the reasons that inequality has soared.

Moreover, the state itself is often self-contradictory, with different arms delivering opposite things in mutually-cancelling ways. Since the state delivers by departments or silos, it fails to embody a *holistic* account of a person's needs; typically, the different services which people require are delivered via conflicting political agendas, and therefore conflicting approaches to the social problems at stake. In addition, these services are often disconnected from one another, resulting in people not only falling through the cracks but also being fundamentally unable to access the help and services and support network they need. A person who is in need often therefore receives fragmented and contradictory care. This is not because of ill intent on the part of the state, but rather because the system itself is not set up to deliver what is now needed. The state is all too often centralised and standardised and, as such, is inherently incapable of understanding people's needs.

The market as it is currently understood is no better. If profit is the sole motivation for service delivery, then the profitable use of public services relies on not providing or delivering holistic care. This is because profit, as it is currently conceived, comes from creating externalities, from *not* dealing with some problems as they are either perceived as too insoluble or too expensive. In addition, there is a clear motive to fragment the market, as 'cherry picking' allows providers to prioritise the patients that will achieve the desired results and therefore financial reward, often ignoring those with deep and complex needs. People have multiple problems, and yet there are very

few holistic offers from the private sector – not least because this sort of care requires both a personal and a local aspect that is thought logistically too difficult and financially too expensive to deliver. We have already seen this with recent problems connected to the Work Programme: large standardised providers try to attain local and personal traction through sub-prime contractors, a situation that has seen the sub-primes failing because resource diminishes as it passes down the supply chain. Moreover, the care that people really and genuinely need – by nature, interpersonal – cannot be reduced to a commodity; for example, neither state provision nor private sector competition could ever solve complex problems such as loneliness.

If the state is to be equal to the problems of its citizens, it must recognise the systemic gap between how it conceives and delivers public services and what the genuine needs of people are. People need a holistic, personal, and local approach. This requires a fundamentally new type of institution, one whose holistic approach is a signature aspect of its delivery and one which is local to the problems at hand. A number of institutions already work to achieve such a goal – for example, local charities and civic groups – but few can work at the scale required to become the overarching type of institution we need. We know from the failures and successes of the Big Society programme that what was most needed was a hub or an institution with which the myriad social and local projects could link up. Crucially, we lacked an institutional platform that could allow both diversity and universality, that could function as a hub to bring together different types of capacity, imagination, and expertise within and through the network for which it provides the foundation. Only one association exists which is universal in the sense of being literally everywhere, but local in that its focus is always that of the specific locality, its people, and all their needs. That association is the Church of England.

Anglican Social Action Today

When thinking of the established Church, too many of us remain mired in a rhetoric of congregational decline. We do not refute the wider patterns of decline in religious belief and practice as they have been identified by various sociologists of religion. We take note of the statistics provided by scholars such as Callum Brown and Steve Bruce, demonstrating that practices like Christian confirmation in England have collapsed since the 1960s.[4] Various interpretations of this pattern of decline exist, from the notion that people still believe in God but no longer belong to a church, or that they still belong culturally to a church but no longer believe in God, or that they neither believe in God nor belong to a church, and that this decline is generational.[5] Indeed, the Church of England itself acknowledges the collapse of certain formal expressions of Christian practice in recent decades.[6] However, we also recognise the shortfalls of depending on congregational attendance figures as an indicator of English religiosity. Such indicators risk reducing 'religiosity' to types of formal participation, to the extent that they ignore more informal and complex types of relationship between individuals, communities, and churches. Social action is a prime example of this kind of informal relationship, and we argue that it needs to be examined within the wider context of English religiosity. As the Diocese of Sheffield has stated, 'we must avoid

applying the language of industrial production to the life of the Church ... The local church is not an industrial unit of production but a living community'.[7]

A two-dimensional narrative of congregational decline on a Sunday screens from us the work that the institution is already doing with a wide range of people beyond the flock of current believers. The Church considers social action to be part of its mission and service, reflecting in particular the gospel and 'God's call to the poor'.[8] And this is reflected across church congregations today: over 80% of those surveyed as part of ResPublica's research agreed or strongly agreed that their faith is a primary motivation for their social action. Thus the Church's reach extends well beyond itself by several orders of magnitude with those it directly helps, those it works with, and those to whom it offers its assets – typically, the use of its buildings. Increasingly, the Church is reconsidering how its own assets – both its investments and its buildings – can be used for the benefit of society during a time of economic crisis. In this way, the Church has an unparalleled potential to become an institution that all of Britain desperately needs through an asset base that – because it can be put to the use of all of our communities – can transform every community.

By virtue of the theological commitment of its members, the Church is actively seeking that transformation. Its social mission is indivisible from its spiritual mission. For Anglicans as for other Christians, social action is all about incarnation – bringing what is more in line with what ought to be.[9] So raising the Church to be equal to this task is indeed the mission of the Church. And our society has become so self-confidently secular *because* people see no specific need for the Church. They do not see the good work that is being done. Religion, if it is to command mass support, has to be relevant to the ordinary, and the ordinary has never been in so much need of what the Church has to offer.

Christian social action is thriving across England today, shaping the civic life of a range of different types of urban, rural and suburban community. This range is at the heart of the diversity of the established Church and its contact with people of other faiths and none, and shows how the Church as an institution is both uniquely local and universal. The ResPublica project demonstrated how churches often have a level of access to individuals and communities that the state does not – an access which is increasingly recognised by agencies such as the police, local councils, and health authorities as they seek to approach social problems in a holistic way. ResPublica's research, for example, showed that almost half of the Parents and Toddlers groups in England are held in church premises, representing a significant level of access to the lives of both individuals and communities.

Increasingly too, the Church seeks to open up its 'wide-ranging network' in partnership with local authorities, as well as other faiths and Christian denominations. In other words, the geographical reach of the Church's network is now reflected in a range of denominational collaboration and a spectrum of social action in diverse types of intervention, enterprise, and partnership. Much of the

impact of church networks depends on their 'hyper-localism'. According to ResPublica's report, 64% of respondents indicated that they travel less than one mile to go to church, and a further 24% travel only 1–2 miles. These figures echo other surveys carried out on the same question.[10] Furthermore, the social action of these churchgoers also takes place in the same community: 61% of voluntary action takes place less than 1 mile from home, and 29% between 1–2 miles. In other words, 88% of Anglicans travel less than 2 miles to go to church, and of these people who are involved in social action 90% do so less than 2 miles from home.

This is of critical importance if we are to talk about social action and localism. One danger with talking about localism in terms of the Church is that people might live in one area, but take the car to drive to church in another area because of their liturgical preference, and then commit themselves to social action in another area, thus creating three spheres of localism. Yet ResPublica's survey indicates that Christians tend to live, worship, and engage in social action in the same area. This is what we mean by 'hyper-localism': these parts of their lives *overlap* in the same community. 'Hyper-localism' is not a mere buzzword to describe a geographical concentration of personal and professional overlaps. It is a principle of grassroots organisation which is at the heart of the Church's own hierarchy and structure. Nor is the Church's inherent hyper-localism and holism a new phenomenon. Grassroots and informal expressions of social action reflect the historical influence of the Church of England since the early nineteenth century. The unique role of church bodies continues to be to coordinate, through theologies of mutualism and reciprocity, diverse voluntary activities done by people of many faiths and none – and to link these activities with aspects of the state so that both state and institutions within civil society can work together for human flourishing and the common good.

Conclusion

In this brief essay, we have outlined how a false opposition between free market and welfare state which has existed in Britain since 1945 has failed the nation. We have pointed to the complex realities of communities in Britain today, where holism – or the lack of it – defines social cohesion and identity. In such communities, we have shown how it is the Church which is often best placed to act as a bridge between individuals and their society. This reflects a shift in the Church's own thinking about its social action and civic role: where Christians once gave charity to the 'needy', now they increasingly seek to harness the assets of a community. The Church no longer talks of dependency but of social enterprise. Through social enterprise, the uniquely holistic and hyper-local identity of the Church is expressed, and replaces past models of 'ghetto charity' and welfare with future models for transformative change.

According to Luke Bretherton, speaking to the Church Urban Fund, this represents a shift from a model of social action which focuses on service 'to' and 'for' the community to a model of service 'with' a range of partners. He says that 'to' models involve top-down, paternalistic provision, based on a duty of care to the needy, while 'for' models seek to avoid paternalism through adopting technocratic, value-free

procedures that match provision to need but tend to generate dependency. 'With' models, however, 'involve all parties with an interest in the common life of the community or institution'. He adds that 'there are particular challenges if the Church is going to take this "with" model seriously and move to more cooperative action or mutual aid ... If we want to see powerful, resilient and faithful communities with the capacity to address their own problems, then people need the power to act for themselves rather than being dependent on services.'[11] Numerous Christian projects today have responded to this challenge by enabling a culture of 'With' instead of 'To' or 'For': from the Cathedral Innovation Centre to credit unions, from street pastors to debt agencies.

Government has increasingly shown a willingness to work in partnership with national organisations which engage in social action from a position of religious faith. Notable examples are the Church Urban Fund's collaboration with the 'Near Neighbours' scheme and the use of the Cinnamon Network to channel funds for facilitating micro-startup projects. While these flagship collaborations show how a holistic model of social action based on a Christian theology can become part of social policy, we believe that much more can be done to harness the wider networks of the Church. Partnership with Christian organisations must not be restricted to flagship national schemes. In this essay, we have argued that the Church is already the *de facto* network and provider of local public services in communities across England. Governmental policy can do more to reflect this reality by encouraging partnerships.

Of course, there are challenges that both Church and government must face in order to begin to enable such institutional transformation to take place. If the Church is to fulfil its purpose and its potential, it has substantially to upgrade its internal and external structures. It has to adapt to governmental demands for accountability and standards, while at the same time allowing its localities to innovate and create. The Government in turn must create the opening, the incentive, and the encouragement for this innovation. The Government has to accept that the current model is broken, and gear public service reform to a far more holistic model of care. The Church, as one of the country's most transformative institutions, already accounts for and understands this model, and the Government must recognise this.

Thus for both government and the Church, rebuilding Britain's institutional fabric does not require creating a culture from scratch. Our essay has shown that this culture already exists, and is flourishing. It already reaches into different types of urban, rural, and suburban community, it is already local, it is already led by individuals who possess leadership experience in their professional lives, and it already works in partnership with a range of local and national stakeholders. This culture does not need to be created; however, it does need both government and the Church to address key policy issues in order for it to flourish.

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NOTES

1 Cole Moreton, 'What has the Church of England ever done for us?', *Sunday Telegraph* 23 December 2012.
2 Eric Pickles, 'A Christian ethos strengthens our nation', *Daily Telegraph* 12 September 2012.
3 Queen Elizabeth II, speech at Lambeth Palace, 15 February 2012.
4 See Callum Brown (2009), *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800 – 2000*, Routledge, p. 189; and Steve Bruce, 'Christianity in Britain R.I.P', *Sociology of Religion* 62:2 (2001), pp. 191–203.
5 For 'believing without belonging', see Grace Davie (1994), *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, Blackwell; for 'belonging without believing', see Danièle Hervieu-Léger, 'The role of religion in establishing social cohesion', in Krzysztof Michalski (ed.) (2006), *Religion in the New Europe*, Central European University Press; for 'neither believing nor belonging', see David Voas, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', *Sociology* 39:1 (2005), pp. 11–28.
6 The Archbishops' Council (2004), *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 9.
7 See 'Growing the Body of Christ: A Strategy for Growth for the Diocese of Sheffield, 2011–2021', p. 5.
8 The Archbishops' Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp. 6–7, 13.
9 On the theological underpinnings of the Church of England see John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, 'The Anglican Polity and the Politics of the Common Good', this issue.
10 See, for example, Coventry University's report (2010), 'Building Better Neighbourhoods: The Contribution of Faith Communities to Oxfordshire Life', which shows that 85% of respondents are hyper-local and 30% are involved in organisations working with social and community action (p. 10).
11 See Church Urban Fund (2011), 'Power, Poverty and the Church: Galvanising the Church to tackle Poverty in this Country', p. 2.