



Community  
Development  
Xchange



FAITH BASED  
FbRN  
REGENERATION  
NETWORK

# Faith in community development

## Introduction

In March 2005 two seminars were held to explore the links between faith groups and community development. The seminars were organised by three organisations working in partnership: the Community Development Exchange, the Churches' Community Work Alliance and the Faith Based Regeneration Network.

The aim of the events was to learn more about the perspectives and needs of faith groups so that we can work with them more effectively and sensitively. We also wanted to share our perspective on community development, and encourage faith groups to incorporate community development approaches into their work with communities.

Both of the seminars took place in England, and it is hoped that a similar approach could be taken in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

This report provides a summary of key themes raised in the discussions. A full report of the seminars is available from the CDX office, or can be downloaded from [www.cdx.org.uk](http://www.cdx.org.uk) [www.ccwa.org.uk](http://www.ccwa.org.uk) or [www.fbrn.org.uk](http://www.fbrn.org.uk).

## Shared values?

There were interesting discussions about the extent to which different underlying values and principles of community development are shared or problematic for faith groups. For example, some participants felt their faith shared with secular community development a commitment to individual and human rights. Others found a rights-based perspective problematically political and instead used a framework of duties or responsibilities to the community.

Some participants felt that the inclusion of 'self-determination' in the list of community development values posed problems for some faith groups. For example, some faith groups may be more accustomed to helping people or being responsible for them, rather than helping them to help themselves or encouraging self-determination. From a secular perspective, the idea of accepting the teachings or tenets of a faith or religion can also appear to conflict with the value of self-determination, although people of faith may not experience this as a conflict.

## Individuals and institutions

There were several references to the difference between faith – as an individual or community experience – and faith-based institutions such as churches or mosques. While community development may be compatible with an individual's faith, it may be more difficult to reconcile community development values with hierarchical or conservative institutions. Like many secular community development workers, faith-based workers may often be trying to change the institutions they work for, as well as working to empower communities.

## Working with government

The interest that government departments have recently shown in working with faith groups was mentioned by many participants. Although seen as generally a positive development, there was some cynicism about the motives for this new enthusiasm. For example some participants suspected that government departments are interested in using faith groups to meet their government agendas rather than addressing faith groups' own needs.

One participant felt that government is trying to take approaches which are developed to meet local needs and apply them across the whole country, and that this is unlikely to be successful. Others said that one of the dangers of relying on government funding is that we may end up working with people who are most likely to have successful outcomes, rather than those who have the greatest need.

## Faith first or community first?

There was some discussion of faith groups' motivations for developing community involvement. For instance, examples were given of churches which wanted to engage the community not for its own sake but to preserve the life of the church. But there were also

many examples of churches engaged in community work without any expectation of increasing congregations or some other 'reward'.

The issue of the relationship between proselytising (trying to convert others to your faith) and community development is a complex one, and some participants felt it required further discussion. Many participants felt that simply by openly being a person of faith and working with the community they were giving a clear message about their faith. Many felt that community workers must begin with the needs of the community, and not of the faith group or institution. But participants recognised that there can be suspicions in secular society about faith groups only wanting to work with people of their own faith, or wanting to 'convert' people through community work.

## Recognising diversity

The enormous diversity within the term 'faith groups' was discussed from various perspectives. Firstly, participants mentioned the variation in infrastructure and staffing levels that different faith groups have established, and the support that this provides to small groups. For example, the Jain community has not yet developed its own infrastructure in the UK and relies on volunteers. In contrast, Christian churches were seen as having lots of staff and a strong infrastructure. This perception was disputed, however, as many churches in deprived areas struggle to maintain their buildings and meet their financial obligations.

The public profile of different faith groups was another way in which faith groups were thought to differ, with the Muslim community seen as currently having a high political profile. This prominence was interpreted as both positive (support from government) and negative (high levels of Islamophobia).

Participants also emphasised that there is considerable diversity within any faith group. For example, one faith community can include people of many nationalities who may have different concerns, languages or priorities for action. Gender differences were also mentioned in many discussions, with some participants observing that young women are leading change in some Muslim communities, and others noting the male-dominated structures of many faith groups. Differences between generations within faith groups was also a concern, with many participants finding it hard to recruit young people to participate voluntarily in community groups.

## Service or transformation

Some participants felt that faith groups are inherently conservative, and therefore at odds with community development's focus on change. In relation to the Christian churches, for example, the point was made that churches have a tradition of community service rather than community development; paternalism rather than empowerment.

However, others argued that both community development and faith are transformative, and

campaigns such as Drop the Debt and Make Poverty History were highlighted as radical movements originating in faith groups.

Nevertheless, participants recognised that for many faith groups – as for many secular organisations – community development's focus on empowerment can be challenging, as it requires those who hold power to give some of it up.

## Language

The use of language, and the difficulty of finding shared understanding, was a common theme in the discussions. As in other communities, different faith groups may interpret 'community development' very differently. The chance of misunderstandings can be increased by cultural differences between faith groups. As one participant said, *"people use the language of values and often mean very different things"*. Participants also gave examples of faith groups which employ people to run community centres or do community development-type work, but don't use the term 'community development' to describe this role.



## Next steps

Participants in the seminars were asked what they would like to see happen next to help strengthen the links between faith communities and community development.

Their responses included:

- Provide support such as resources and networking for faith groups and faith-based community development workers
- Map faith-based community development work around the country
- Look at how existing resources could be shared, and how groups can support each other
- Provide more information about how faith and community development link with civil renewal and active citizenship
- Provide space for honest discussions of motivations and tensions for communities, institutions and workers
- Share this report with regional and national networks and agencies.

CDX, FbRN and CCWA are discussing how to develop this work. If you would like to be kept up to date with developments, please let us know.

## About the seminars

The seminars were held at the Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre in London and Durham Cathedral. Participants had many years experience of working in faith-based organisations, and a wide variety of faiths were represented.

The day in London was attended by a wide range of members of faith groups, with eight different faiths represented. The Durham day was less representative, being attended by mainly Christian groups, although one person from the Muslim community and one member of the Zoroastrian faith were also present. This was commented on by people at the Durham conference and two possible explanations were offered by participants:

- there is less diversity in the north east
- projects run by faith groups other than Christian projects are often run solely by volunteers who may also have full-time jobs – suggestions were made about enabling wider participation.

The London seminar was chaired by Rumman Ahmed, Community Relations Adviser to Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and special adviser to FbRN.

The Durham seminar was chaired by Hilary Willmer, former Director of Leeds Church Institute, now retired.

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## Useful contacts

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