

July 2005

A Summary Of

'Faith in the East of England'

A research study on the vital role played by faith communities in the social, economic and spiritual life of a region. Undertaken by the East of England Faiths Council and the University of Cambridge

RESEARCH TEAM

DR ROLAND LOVATT

FIONA LYALL-GRANT

DR ZOE MORRIS

PROFESSOR CHRISTINE WHITEHEAD
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

REPORTING TEAM

MARK ARGENT

RT. REVD. LAURIE GREEN

JENNY KARTUPELIS

REVD. CANON RICHARD WHEELER
EAST OF ENGLAND FAITHS COUNCIL

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

SARAH GEARY

REVD. ROBIN HEWETSON

ANNE LITTLEFAIR

Commissioned by



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

Produced by



Key Findings

Faith communities

The study estimates that there are over 630,000 active members of worshipping communities in the region, which has a population of 5,388,000. This figure is likely to be an underestimate as there will be some worshipping communities that were not located. Over 75% of people in the region identified themselves as having a faith (2001 Census). Faith is not a minority interest, but an integral part of the infrastructure of our society.

Many things motivate faith groups to offer social or community service. This research shows that social involvement is widely seen as very important to people's faith, but whilst most communities welcome new members, this is not their main motivation. Fewer than 5% of the respondents cited this as the main motivator for engaging with their wider community, while over 50% said it was not the main reason, although they would welcome new worshippers.

There are places of worship all across the region. The largest are used by thousands of people each week, the smallest see less than 20. Some people live very close to their place of worship while others, particularly among the smaller faith traditions, travel long distances to participate. Worship buildings are important as places providing support and generating social capital, but their contribution is wider than this: one Methodist minister spoke passionately of the importance of caring not only for the 145 congregation members, but also the 305 people who benefited from social activities. Where worshipping groups are small, it is harder to sustain a programme of social activity, but here the importance of mutual support is very clear.

Activities

An enormous range of activities supported by worshipping communities are taking place every day, from the 'traditional' such as visiting the sick (80% of faith groups do this) and running lunch clubs (36%) to the more innovative such as IT training (7%) and environmental groups (11%).

Reaching beyond the worshipping community is important – 20% of respondents work with homeless people, 32% undertake food distribution, and there is also assistance provided to those abusing alcohol (16%) and drugs (11%). Twenty six per cent of faith groups are involved in community liaison of various types: for example, 18% have anti-racist projects; 12% have crime prevention projects, and 14% are part of emergency planning programmes.

Almost every section of society – whether or not they form part of a worshipping community, of any faith or none – benefits from the presence and work of faith groups within their community.

Major beneficiary groups are children (86% of respondents had child-focused services) and the elderly (82%). Families under stress, one parent families, single people and others who may be disadvantaged or vulnerable (disabled people: 45%; those with mental health difficulties: 37%; or learning difficulties: 36%) are well represented. This targeting also reflects an anti-discrimination agenda amongst many faith groups, which is emphasised by the fact that other key beneficiaries of projects are people from black and minority ethnic groups (36% of projects work with these) and to a lesser extent from gay and lesbian groups (15%).

The interest of faith communities in promoting both formal and informal learning is endorsed by the statistics, with over 30% of respondents running projects designed for unemployed adults, and 22% for people seeking to improve their skills. This is significant within the regional agenda, specifically for skills improvement.

“Secular bodies find it hard to understand that people of faith must be true to their faith, and not confuse this with a fear of religious people trying to convert others.”

What it means to the region

Reaching out to the widest possible number of people is important. In particular, support for those who are vulnerable, disempowered or in need, is an important driver for faith-based projects. Eighty percent of those questioned did not limit any of their services to their own worshipping group, and only 2% limited all their projects in this way.

The concern that public resources granted may be used for proselytising purposes will usually be unfounded, while the value to social capital and community cohesion of the wide range of faith-based activities is clear. Whether as worshippers, volunteers or beneficiaries, people are supported both directly and indirectly as part of the social infrastructure.

On average, every responding faith community supported 70 people from outside its congregation – a total of 6,275 people benefiting from the total group surveyed. Projected across the region, this would indicate that nearly 180,000 people are actively benefiting from the presence of faith groups every week.

The importance of volunteers to the regional economy is underlined by this study. Using population statistics, it places a notional value of faith community volunteer hours of £582,276 a week (based on the national minimum wage) or £30,278,352 per annum. Faith groups also contribute to the economy as employers.

The research has not so far analysed the impact of faith-based educational services on the learning and skills capacity of the region, but this will be positive, given the range and amount of adult learning programmes mentioned, and the benefit of the training being provided to volunteers.

Worshipping communities provide a vast range of services, community space and support for vulnerable groups and society in general. It is clear that these have a major effect on the fabric of society and upon the social capital of the region. The fact that this is not measured in monetary terms does not reduce its value and there is a clear argument that it would be a major loss to the region if such services ceased.

Working in partnership

‘We are increasingly conscious of the importance of effective co-operation with the faith communities... and the growing record of partnership between public agencies and faith communities in the delivery of services.’ [Rt. Hon David Blunkett MP, foreword to *Working Together*, Home Office, 2004]. The ODPM also sees the role of faith communities as vital in improving social capital in deprived areas, as well as cutting across social divisions, so supporting social cohesion.

In this study, 14 of the 22 interviewees from secular bodies felt that worshipping communities provided a good or excellent way of reaching ethnic minorities – in order to further develop their social and community work.

Many secular organisations said that worshipping communities worked with and supported many hard to reach groups, were not held back by often restrictive legislation, and helped in the spiritual development of many individuals. Their activities were often a good way to get disparate groups of people together and helped in the understanding of different people’s faiths and cultures. The role of faith leaders as community leaders was widely recognised.

Of the faith respondents, 73% said they would be willing to work in partnership with secular bodies, and 50% are already working with other faith and secular groups, ranging from local schools through charities to local authorities and LEAs.

But partnerships between faith and secular bodies also have tensions. Faith groups have long term commitments to the community, and do not see themselves as delivery vehicles for government initiatives. There can be differences of priorities and values. There are also issues around discrimination, with secular partners being wary of appearing discriminatory by working with some faith groups and not others, or about different parts of the anti-discrimination agenda. There are also potential problems around confusion between religion and ethnicity.

But the whole reason for the collaboration is that faith groups are different, and bring different advantages. This needs an honest acknowledgement, and mutual understanding.

Opportunities and constraints

Many faith groups would like to become even more socially active, and amongst respondents, each group had started on average two new projects over the last five years. Many projects are started in consultation with the wider community, as well as the host faith group, and are set up in response to perceived need. Asked how they would spend a notional £40,000, respondents came up with an enormous range of ideas, many focusing on youth needs, improvement of premises for community use, support for drug/alcohol abusers and refugees; and skills training.

There was little evidence of faith groups using the indices of multiple deprivation which often form a key part of government thinking. Instead they respond to the needs they see. This can lead to differences over funding decisions, but means that faith groups, embedded in the community, see things from a different perspective. They can often spot and respond to areas of need before these become obvious to public bodies.

Reasons why projects might not get off the ground included 'lack of volunteers' (36%), followed by 'lack of money' (26%), 'lack of paid staff' (15%) and 'lack of demand' (8%). Out of 49 respondents who had ended a social programme in the last five years, 20 (41%) said this had been due to lack of volunteers. The next most common reason for cessation was 'no longer needed' (26% – presumably an indication of success), followed by 'lack of money' (17%), and lack of paid staff' (9%). Other reasons included accommodation/premises and a change in legislation.

Volunteering is absolutely key to the success of projects although new activities may draw in new people. As the motivation for most volunteers stems from their beliefs, specific programmes to stimulate volunteering may not have great impact. However, there is an opportunity to 'grow' the number of suitable volunteers through training courses, provided by faith bodies and by secular partners.

Many projects rely on the 'host' faith community not only for space and volunteers but also for funding. However, only one third of those questioned said that they would not seek public funding because their own resources were adequate. Significant numbers did not think projects provided by faith organisations were eligible; were deterred by the complexity of the application process and its rigid timeframe; or would not take public money if it had strings attached – for example if it entailed the removal of all religious references.

Problems with public funding arise when restrictions relating to this run contrary to the religious motivation underpinning the social activity. Sometimes this may be unavoidable, but at other times there is evidence of a lack of flexibility or thought in the public sector. This requires addressing, e.g. by cross-sector secondments.

There have also been difficulties when people in faith groups have felt their desire to help local communities has been mis-used by the public sector or when well-intentioned attempts to avoid discrimination have ended up actually being discriminatory – for example, funding for children's activities over Christmas only being permitted if there was an undertaking not to mention Christ.

Misunderstandings also arise when secular partners speak of 'faith' but mean 'ethnic minorities'. These types of issues can erode the trust on which co-operation is based.



The Future

The spiritual element is a profoundly important dimension to many people's lives. It can be hard to articulate, because much is lost when it is expressed in secular language, yet the engagement of people of faith in society offers something of genuine value, whether it is a highly localised commitment to a particular project or region-wide engagement through, for example, EERA.

Issues associated with new housing developments and other growth are focusing minds. Building communities involves far more than just building houses, and it will be important to ensure that faith is able to make as rich a contribution in these new communities as it does to the region's well established towns and villages.

The hope is that this research will enable the contribution of people of faith to the life of the region to be enriched and extended. This can happen through secular partnerships, but also through valuing the contributions made to the wider community which are rooted in people's experiences of faith.

The East of England Faiths Council

EEFC will continue its current role, and extend its operation to provide more support for faith-based community activity, if it can find means to enlarge its capacity.

It envisages becoming more active in areas including:

Raising awareness of the value of partnering with public and voluntary bodies

The need for partnership will become more pressing with the envisaged growth of the region, but this research has shown that it is common for there to be negative impressions on each side. These were often justified by past experiences of misunderstandings over issues, unclear roles and clashes over aims. EEFC can develop a work plan to assist in reducing these tensions.

Gathering information on social need and applying this at regional level

This research indicates a high level of awareness of local needs on the part of faith communities, who are uniquely placed both to understand and meet it. EEFC can garner this information in a consistent manner and provide it to the public and voluntary sectors; and also use it to support projects which address specific needs.

Managing and disseminating information for faith groups

There is a need to improve clarity and support, concerning project funding restrictions and to make clear the great range of different funding sources available for different types of programmes.

There is also a need to ensure worshipping communities know what training is available, its relevance to their activities, its cost and how to access and apply it; and that they have easily-assimilated information on the effect of legislation and policy on current and planned projects. EEFC could hold a 'library' of information on groups willing to share worship and/or community space, and act as a liaison point for this.

Support for projects

Faith-based projects must complement the limited public sector services already in existence via selection of the programmes and appropriate input of additional resources. They are heavily reliant on volunteering and funding from people whose religious beliefs motivate them to support the wider community. EEFC is well placed to seek, via its membership, particular projects which could be expanded, better resourced and/or replicated, whilst understanding this rationale.

Leadership training

EEFC would like to institute local seminars based on the Intercultural Leadership and Communication School programme that runs in Bradford and Leicester. It is aimed at young adults who are 'pre-influential' in their communities and are likely to become significant role models and influencers in their generation. These people are brought together from separated communities in specific cities where there have been or may be inter-community tensions whether for religious, ethnic or other reasons, and supports them in a continuing network.

“Volunteers are church members and not council workers – government often forgets that.”

We believe this research should be just a starting point. The full study, which you can find on our web site – is intended to be a living document. If you have any comments or queries, or wish to suggest other ways in which the data could be examined or used please contact us.

The Research

The study summarised in this document, and published in full on the web site www.eefaithscouncil.org.uk, was commissioned by the East of England Development Agency, to inform its 'Investing in Communities' programme.

The research has been undertaken by the East of England Faiths Council and the University of Cambridge, with fieldwork and analysis in the first half of 2005. Postal questionnaires were sent to all faith communities in five areas of the region chosen to give a spread of population and social environments: Harlow, King's Lynn, Mid-Suffolk, Peterborough and Southend-on-Sea. Over 100 postal questionnaires were completed. About 70 face-to-face interviews were carried out with faith and secular bodies in three of these areas. There was a good response rate of just over 50 per cent.

In this document the phrases, 'faith groups', 'faith communities' and 'worshipping communities' should be read as interchangeable.

The East of England Faiths Council

People of faith have a particular role in public life, bringing an awareness of the spiritual to the shaping of the future.

The East of England Faiths Council (EEFC) brings together people from the major faith communities in the East of England, providing a way for them to interact with regional governance, and the public, voluntary and private sectors. It is important to recognise that there are real differences between the major faiths, but there are also issues on which they can speak with one voice, such as the value of human life, the need to help those who are excluded or marginalised, and the duty to be responsible stewards of the environment.

EEFC ensures that faith communities are an effective stakeholder in the community: it organises events and conferences jointly with regional governance; holds full meetings at least four times a year; makes input to planning and consultations, and is the nominating body for the faith seat on the Regional Assembly.

Further Reading and Reference Guide

A more extensive bibliography can be found in the full report. The following may be of particular interest:

Churches Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber (2003) *Religious Literacy, a practical guide to the region's faith communities*

Devine, John (2003) *Faith in England's Northwest, the contribution made by faith communities to civil society in the region*

DTZ Pieda Consulting, for East of England Development Agency (2003) *Research to Inform the Investing in Communities Programme*

Farnell, Richard; Furbey, Robert; Shams Al-Haq Hills, Stephen; Macey, Marie and Smith, Greg (2002) *'Faith' in urban regeneration? Engaging faith communities in urban regeneration*

Finneron, Doreen; Green, Laurie; Harley, Sue and Robertson, Jim (2001) *Challenging Communities, Church-related community development and neighbourhood renewal*

Furbey, Robert and Macey, Marie, "Religion and urban regeneration: a place for faith?" Policy & Politics vol 33 No 1 (2005)

Home Office Faith Communities Unit (2004) *Working together, Co-operation between government and faith communities*

Jackson, Marion and Kimberlee, Richard (2004) *Daily Service: How Faith Communities can contribute to neighbourhood Renewal and Regeneration in the South West of England*

Lewis, Sarah (2004) *Beyond belief? Faith at work in the community: a report by South East of England Faith Forum about faith-based regeneration activities*

London Churches Group for Social Action and Greater London Enterprise (2002) *Regenerating London: Faith communities and social action*

Morris, Zoë; Maguire, Kath and Kartupelis, Jenny, for the East of England Faiths Council (2003) *Faith in Action*

Ravat, Riaz (2004) *Embracing the present, planning the future – Social action by the faith communities of Leicester*

Smith, Kate for the Churches' Regional Commission (2004) *Faith in the North East, Social action by faith communities in the region*