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**ENERGY FOR CHANGE?: HOW FAITH-BASED VOLUNTEERING IS  
DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE UK**

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# **Energy for Change?: How Faith-Based Volunteering is Developing Social Capital and Community Life in the UK**

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## **Introduction**

Over the last five years, the UK government has become increasingly interested in how faith groups can be a key component to improve local neighbourhoods through developing mutual-aid, by connecting their constituencies with mainstream welfare provision, and acting as a conduit through which people bridge into a wider local community. This new focus on faith-based participation is part of a wider response to broader societal changes, such as increasing immigration and the associated rise in social exclusion.

As the UK population has become more diverse – in part due to mass immigration in the 1970s and 1980's - so there has been a corresponding explosion of different cultures, ethnicities, races, historical trajectories, languages, and faith communities. At the same time government has struggled to connect with many of these communities leaving some disadvantaged and isolated. As government's have tried to address these issues through encouraging participation within faith-based organisations, of principle interest has been the relationship between faith and volunteering and its capacity to build social capital. Against this backdrop of interest, in 2001, The Institute for Volunteering Research<sup>i</sup> and The University of East London<sup>ii</sup> came together to explore voluntary action in faith communities in the UK. The aims of this joint research project were:

- To identify the ways in which people in different faith communities volunteer and how this volunteering is organised
- To explore relationships between faith communities and local networks.

This paper discusses some of the key research findings from our project in the context of the wider debate on how communities are able to create and deliver social capital. We conclude by looking at how powerful this social capital is in bringing together different faith communities and what this means for the ideal of cohesive communities.

## **Faith Communities in the UK- trends in religion**

Firstly, what are faith communities in the UK like? Christianity is the main faith of the country. However there has been a growth in other religions in recent times. This is a result of the current ethnic diversity in Britain, created by immigration in the late twentieth century and the steady arrival of asylum seekers today. This has brought a unique blend of faiths to many cities in Britain. These communities have brought with them new cultures and value systems which permeate their local settings in the UK. In

some cases, migrant communities have sought to preserve the way of life they followed in their countries of origin. Although the pattern of settlement of new ethnic groups in the UK has generally been more diffuse than in the specific ethnic territories of the USA where ‘ghettoisation’ is widespread, there are nevertheless some strongly localised faith-based communities. The 2001 Census will no doubt confirm exactly how diverse Britain’s faith composition is, but for now it seems safe to say that Britain is one of the most diverse countries in the world, as demonstrated by the wide range of faith groups represented. We now discuss how we researched volunteering in a range of faith communities in the UK.

## **Methodology**

We aimed to design a study that could capture a variety of social action in faith communities. Each faith group has its own culture of what volunteering/helping out/service to the community is. Therefore the study had to be sensitive to different expressions of community involvement, different notions of what a ‘community’ is, and different mother tongues.

The research consisted of 25 semi-structured interviews with representatives and leaders from most of the 9 faiths<sup>iii</sup> represented in the UK, asking them questions about their social action. We aimed to unravel a little about the complexity of how faith and motivation relate to each other, looking at how people may or may not be motivated by faith-prescribed values and/or settings in which they practice and learn about faith (e.g. places of worship, community centres).

## **What did the research find?**

Our research found some interesting examples of what takes place in faith communities. Whilst we do not discuss all of the findings here, there are similarities and differences between communities, in what they do, along with common and individual factors in how activities are motivated, organised and resourced. Through the research we have found real life indicators showing that social capital does exist in faith communities. These examples lend colour to our argument that faith communities are able to deliver and indeed create social capital.

## **How do we observe social capital in faith communities?**

In Putnam’s important work on social capital he argues that communities are home to social capital, observable through networks of civic engagement. Through the research we found out about the resources and capacity of the faith communities involved in the project. The communities that we visited certainly have a huge amount of civic engagement. Further, operating out of grassroots groups, formal institutions and informal collectives; most have their own uniquely formed networks of involvement. Does this kind of faith social capital just exist when a community forms, or is there something influencing it? To answer this we now consider the value-fostering nature of faith communities.

## **Values that influence people to act collectively**

Faith communities, through their values, engender a sense of belonging which motivates people to get involved in their communities. Through this we see that 'faith' forms the impetus for social capital formation. Uslaner's (1997) theory confirms this, arguing that there is an element of morality in social capital:

*Social capital... is more than just a collection of social network. For religion, people may invoke a moral force outside themselves that impels them to behave co-operatively.*

Our research confirms that faith is a motivator, although this in itself deserves its own separate study to investigate the intricate way in which it works. We noticed that whilst individual communities may operate in their own unique ways there are undoubtedly similarities in the values base that inspire activity. Communities commonly expressed their involvement around the following ideals:

- To give and help all, financially and/or physically
- To live the spirit of religion and the values proposed by it
- To act selflessly
- To help those that need it. To have social concern about injustice and inequality.

We found that motivation is affected by members of faith communities growing up in a culture where it is the norm to 'help out'. Representatives spoke about how there is a natural tendency for people from similar faith backgrounds to come together to help each other out and exist as a collective and that leaders encourage people to get involved. There are also a number of other factors which affect motivation like the extent to which the community is geographically cohesive and the resources and number of people in the community. These factors are all contributory to the existence of social capital in faith communities. Moving from values, we now look at the environment out of which social action takes place.

## **The unique settings of faith communities - home to social capital**

Uslaner (1997) argues that community and social capital are built and maintained through churches (we extend this to cover places of worship in other faiths as well), as they are both recipients of social capital resources available in the community and generators of community and social capital. The settings of faith-based communities are important to understand as they give us examples of environments out of which social capital flows. We found that faith communities have their own idea of who they are serving and who their constituents are. This may be made up of more than one community, with some working in distinctive settings and others having over-lapping boundaries. All faith communities had a unique description of who they serve, ranging from their neighbourhood community to the whole world. One of the communities that did view 'their' community as larger than just their own congregation, spoke about service in the following ways:

*We have the view that the whole world is my family, neighbourly love. You shouldn't see what kind of caste or religion people are.*

This illustrates the fluidity of social capital in a faith setting. It is not necessarily confined to a church or other place of worship, it can spill over into other communities and indeed across country boundaries.

### **Organisation**

Our research also found that many faith groups have links with voluntary agencies in their areas. Some have charitable spin-offs and others are working with local welfare providers. Theory argues that social capital in communities is indicated through dense social connections. In exploring the organisation of faith communities, 'connections' were visible in a vibrant way. There were feelings of trust between community members in knowing that they have a community to fall back on should anything happen to them or their family. Also, the organisation of the communities themselves, in convening people, managing buildings and receiving and giving in-kind resources, illustrates the energy that they have to work for the ultimate good of their faith group.

### **Cultural capital and the types of volunteering in faith communities**

As well as social capital, scholars propose the idea of cultural capital. This is a kind of blend of values, tradition, roots and cultural norms and practices which influence the way in which communities exist. Our research provided us with real-life examples of cultural capital, which we now discuss. These come from a typology that we created from our data, proposing four main areas of social action: routine patterns of involvement; mutual-aid; festival-based volunteering and disaster/cause-response action.

#### **Routine patterns of involvement**

Firstly there are many routine patterns of activities which make up the normal life of the community. These include things like services for older people, women's groups, activity classes and luncheon clubs. These services are provided with cultural sensitivity to the needs of community members and with respect for religious principles e.g. luncheon clubs are made to Kosher or Halal specifications in the Jewish and Muslim faiths.

#### **Mutual-aid**

Secondly, mutual-aid, which takes place when communities come together to help each other in a more informal way, illustrates the strong cultural bonding that was evident in some faith communities. In fact some operated with a kind of urgency response mechanism, displaying an ability to pinpoint tensions and social needs in their community and therefore help people quickly, as shown by this quote from a representative:

*We sometimes have a better 'feel' for some of the issues that affect the community. The sense of relatedness comes from sharing worship and having local concerns. People need to know that you are a spare pair of hands particularly when members of the congregation are living with tension between them*  
This 'shared' way of living was very much the ethos of what some communities were about.

### **Festival-based volunteering**

Thirdly, there is festival-based volunteering which takes place around religious festivals, usually when people coming together to organise celebrations. Most communities reported that this was when the most volunteers are mobilised throughout the year because of the momentum that festivals generate. The cultural capital was evident through festivals being a forum for people to understand the beliefs of their faith and ensure that the traditions around their values could be maintained and hopefully passed on to younger people.

### **Disaster/cause response volunteering**

Lastly there is disaster or cause response volunteering where faith communities were involved in responding to crisis situations like earthquakes, famines and cyclones, around the world. This might be through sending clothes, food or emergency aid or sending volunteers over to the situation. Notions of what a needy cause was varied. For some communities, seeing international members of their faith community in any kind of hardship or poverty was distressing and inspired people to help them. For others it was any crisis situation that they felt moved by. Responding to such situations had become a natural response for many faith communities and thus part of their culture.

### **Bringing people together from different communities**

Moving from looking at the indicators of social and cultural capital we now discuss if or how faith communities bring people together - how far they provide a local structure that can link people, groups and individuals. In some faith communities, members were affiliated to different castes or factions within their faith or groups bonded by their country of origin. Such inner groupings showed their individuality by sometimes having their own meeting space and place of worship and distinct ways of celebrating festivals. These caste affiliations also had their own volunteering activities and in fact operate as communities within larger communities. However this was not the case in all settings. In some communities, disparate backgrounds meant that groups had broken down traditional caste affiliations and were mixing with other groups. For example in Luton, a large town near to London with a very diverse population and history of racial unrest:

*There are quite a few different Hindu groups here who mix together. Different (Hindu) communities work together here. Once they come here and see what takes place, they want to get involved.*

This was also the case in a Christian community where:

*...because of the small numbers of people e.g. of Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists- people made friendships across groups, as many people went to school together.*

In another community around a Sikh Gurdwara, even though there was a distinct faction caste group, they still went to the main Gurdwara representing all castes, as they did not have the resources to support themselves.

### **Bridging and bonding**

So we see how some communities that are home to social capital are maintaining class, cultural, race or caste boundaries and others are breaking them down by reaching across traditional boundaries. This brings us back to the original theory of social capital, as we consider the idea that some social capital is bridging (bringing different communities together) and some in bonding (where it stays localised to particular faith groups). Many of the communities that we researched were effective 'bridgers', working to develop relationships with other local communities and charities that would in turn help them to develop their own community work. Others preferred to work in localised ways, serving their own members. We would like to stress that there is no right or wrong, and we do not pass judgement on what is the better example of how a community should work.

### **Regeneration and faith communities**

We end this paper by considering briefly the government's interest in faith communities that we mentioned at the beginning of the paper. From the UK government there is a current drive to encourage communities and other welfare providers to join together to tackle social problems together. Faith communities are a locus of multiple community roles and thus are a contact point for government to access 'hard to reach' communities. In the last few years there has been encouragement to faith groups to obtain funding to run local services for local government that they have had experience of managing in their own communities. Often these services have traditionally been provided in a voluntary capacity and we believe this raises some concerns. For those groups in receipt of government funds what happens to their voluntary nature, their spiritual mission and faith identity? There are, as yet, many uncertainties around how faith communities can be involved in delivering mainstream social welfare.

### **Conclusion**

Finally we consider what our findings mean for building cohesive communities. Post September 11<sup>th</sup>, local community practitioners draw attention to the fragility of religious pluralism that exists right now in the UK and US. Cultivating common belonging can be through understanding each others' value systems. Some of this understanding can be fostered at an early age through religious education teaching

in schools. However community polarisation has taken root in some towns in the UK, from the conflict between a strong theological cultural community and a secular community with different values. There are examples of riots, in both the UK and the US, which illustrate the tensions from these polarisations, recently and as far back as the 1970s in the UK.

Faith communities are a force for change, evident from our research, but there needs to be more awareness of how they are effectual. There are many questions that still need to be asked and answered on faith communities. Our project has been a first step. It has given us a glimpse of how majority and minority cultures exist and communicate with each other. We have found that within this dialogue process are inherent complexities and sensitivities around whether or not we fully understand our neighbours' cultures and indeed the routes that we have to becoming informed. Faith community life has traditionally and still has a kind of hidden identity - which breeds ignorance. With the kinds of conflicts that have happened and are escalating around the world, where some dangerous antagonisms exist between different worldwide faith communities, it is crucial that that this is challenged.

### **Acknowledgments**

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3. Christian The Greek Orthodox Church, Liverpool
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5. Religious Society of Friends: Liverpool
6. Islam: local mosque, Liverpool
7. Judaism: Merseyside Jewish Community Care, Liverpool
8. Islam: Luton Central Mosque, Luton
9. Islam: local grassroots women's society, Luton
10. Hindu: Shree Sanatan Seva Samaj: Luton
11. Local interfaith council representative: Luton
12. Sikh: Local Sikh Gurdwara, Luton
13. Christian: Bury Park Christian community
14. Jain: The Jain Centre, Leicester
15. Buddhist: Leicseter Buddhist Centre, Leicester
16. Christian: The Church of Christ The King, Leicester(2)
17. Hindu: Shree Sanatan Mandir, Leicester
18. Judaism: The Liberal Progressive Jewish Community, Leicester
19. Judaism: Leicester Progressive Jewish Congregation, Leicester
20. Sikhism: Guru Degh Sikh Community Centre, Leicester (2)
21. Christianity- Christian community in Evington, Leicester
22. Muslim: Highfields Muslim community, Leicester (2)

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The **Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR)** seeks to increase knowledge about volunteering and voluntary action in the UK and internationally. For more information on the Institute, visit [www.ivr.org.uk](http://www.ivr.org.uk)

<sup>ii</sup> **The University of East London** undertakes research and teaching on a range of social policy issues.

<sup>iii</sup> The 9 faiths in the UK, according to The Inter Faith Network for the UK are: Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism