



## Belief in Social Action: Exploring faith groups' responses to local needs

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- What we knew already
- What we did
- What have we learnt
- Reflections, questions

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### What we knew already

- Almost infinite diversity of faith communities
- Build social capital – resources
- Cross social divides
- Can deliver
- Assert values and morals
- Stick around

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*The activities of faith groups 'embraces a range of welfare arenas, including support for children and youth, the elderly, homeless people, and asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, and a range of welfare activities relating to housing, poverty and debt, disability, and community regeneration' (Williams et al. 2012)*

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### But...

- Partnerships are complicated - unresolved suspicions on all sides
- Inter/multi-faith great in theory

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*"while interfaith activities of many different kinds all make some contribution to community cohesion, the numbers involved are generally relatively small and the capacity to engage many others in a more secular age is probably quite circumscribed. There is much 'preaching to the converted'" (Billings and Holden, 2008, p. 33)*

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## But...

- Partnerships are complicated - unresolved suspicions on all sides
- Inter/multi-faith great in theory
- Varied local challenges, takes time to build trust
- Debate on faith had been '*hijacked*' by political agendas

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## What is it like on the ground?

- In the context of
  - increasing economic and social pressures
  - collapse of (secular)infrastructure support

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## What we did

- Focus on just one area within a super-diverse midlands city
- Extensive interviews with local activists
- Interviews with regional and national figures put local story into context

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## What have we learnt?

- Motivations
- Proximity
- Relationships with the state
- Resilience and fragility
- Inter-faith work

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## Motivations

- Teaching; Example; Expectation; Experience; Relationships
- Similarities and specificity

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'Being a Muslim, it's my duty and my faith saying that I must work for reward from my Creator, my God, my Allah... He's given me everything. So I like to do something for humanity.'

Interview at local mosque

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'Jesus told this story about people who just walked past, but then somebody who stayed and helped, and it didn't have to be an important person... it was just somebody who was willing not to be bothered about the religion or race of the person who was wounded, they were just there to help them...we are here because we are following Jesus Christ.'

Local Christian interview

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## Motivations

- Teaching; Example; Expectation; Experience; Relationships
- Similarities and specificity
- Concerns about misunderstandings
  - Islamophobia
  - Homogeneity
- Improvisation: responding to presenting needs

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## Proximity

- Embeddedness leads to exposure to need

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'On a weekly basis we have different people knocking on our doors saying: 'Can you help us, we don't have food.' We realised that there is need. This has not been there four years ago, and it is a new need that community members are presenting to us.'

Interview with Methodist Christian

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'What we're seeing the need for now is advice, assistance and advocacy where people need help filing out forms, benefits... We've certainly seen a big increase in people coming here for food and we do get people coming in asking for money as well...'

Interview at Hindu Temple

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## Proximity

- Embeddedness leads to exposure to need
- Variations in geography of faith groups
- Some focus on own faith community, others accessible to all
- Faith groups have stayed, where others (inc. those reliant on govt funding) have left

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'So in some areas faith buildings are the only thing left and there is a lot of work happening in those places but it's hidden and uncelebrated.'

City-wide inter faith forum interview

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'The strength is in being around for a long time. Of being an anchor in a community. One good thing about the recession is it has sorted out those that are committed to an area for the long haul and those that parachute in only when money is available.'

City-wide multi faith forum interview

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### Relationship with the state

- Witnesses to the impacts of cuts, administration of welfare reform and other social issues

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'The services have changed a lot ... Because of the government's cutting lots of things. We are trying to bridge that gap... People come in our office everyday asking for money, some other time we give clothes to people. We support [our] local foodbank provider with different food. Some time we buy shoes for someone who didn't have any.'

Interview with Baptist Christian

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### Relationship with the state

- Witnesses to the impacts of cuts, administration of welfare reform and other social issues
- Assisting state in understanding/accessing particular groups
- Filling in the gaps - working with the most vulnerable
- Contrasting perspectives on govt funding for services
- Local resources absorbed by presenting needs
- Regional/national engagement with structural issues

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'The political climate is not conducive to making changes around social justice. There is a real democratic deficit which is growing. People have a sense of inability to influence political processes... I do not see that getting better in the short term'

National Christian umbrella organisation interview

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## Resilience and fragility

- Resilience: staying power and commitment to people and places
- Capacity a major issue for many – volunteers, resources, expertise

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'There is a huge gap between what is happening on the ground and policy influence. There is a political presumption that faith groups have abundant capacity to respond to needs. But it is not a level playing field and support is needed, particularly for new and emerging faith groups.'

Academic interview

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## Resilience and fragility

- Resilience: staying power and commitment to people and places
- Capacity a major issue for many – volunteers, resources, expertise
- Those that most reflected the local community often shared in problems around resources and (certain) skills

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'It's getting harder for people to volunteer, particularly with welfare reform. People almost can't afford the time not to be looking for jobs ... Some people I can think of that used to volunteer have said no I can't, I've got to go and do training or whatever'

Christian inter-denominational initiative interview

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## Inter-faith work

- Challenges around resourcing inter-faith work
- For most 'leaving God at the door' did not make sense

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'Inter-faith work does not work when you leave God at the door. That defeats the object of coming together. It's about creating space to work out what our differences are and what we have in common.'

Regional multi-faith forum interview

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## Inter-faith work

- Challenges around resourcing inter-faith work
- For most 'leaving God at the door' did not make sense
- Others sought to avoid identifying differences between religions
- Some agreement that the most fruitful inter-faith work was where people of different faiths actively tackled a shared concern together
- Personal relationships between people (inc. leaders) of different faiths seen as having intrinsic value, which became particularly important at times of potential or actual tension or tragedy

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'9/11 gave new urgency, but not in the old, formal ways ... the faith leaders group is very informal and based on personal friendships between leaders ... The real energy in faith and indeed inter-faith work lies outside the formal and formalised structures'

Multi-faith  
activist interview

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## What have we learnt?

- Motivations
- Proximity
- Relationships with the state
- Resilience and fragility
- Inter-faith work

Where next?

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