

Challenging CHURCH

A Report by the Shaftesbury Society



Preface

Reports from the newspapers, charities, churches and communities suggest that we are living in an increasingly fragmented society. The dominance of personal greed and selfishness and the failure of government to establish different values has led to widening social divisions. Not only is Britain an increasingly unequal society in terms of income and wealth, but also citizens living in different kinds of areas have different educational and job opportunities and – because of poverty – even die at vastly different ages.

What are the churches doing to help these people in need in an era when poverty should be offensive to Christians?

In 1994 a church in the former mining village of Whitburn in Scotland, started a small day centre for older people with dementia. As the needs of older people and other groups were identified so the church cooperated with the local authority and other churches to expand. Two hundred thousand of the three hundred thousand pounds needed has now been found for a brand new day centre to be used by churches and community.

This is the attitude that Shaftesbury wants to encourage. This report is challenging churches in our understanding of what the mission of the churches is to the community. It draws attention to the culture of individualism that has infected the churches and so resulted in fragmented community action. In failing to recognise their need for each other, Christians can find themselves divided and isolated.

Churches must work together to meet the needs of the community overall. Communities will be changed when people cooperate and build partnerships. Fragmented church reinforces a fragmented society. A church acting together is a statement that it wants a united and just society.

Bob Holman
Glasgow
October 2004



Contents

Introduction	3
Setting the Scene	4
The Problems of Duplication and Competition	7
Signs of Hope	12
The Way Forward	16
Conclusion	19



Isolation, poverty and despair:
despite our wealth, UK society
still has growing inequality and
severe social needs.





Introduction

Responding to the challenge to see real, enduring change in our country's most marginalised communities is the church's responsibility. Yet despite our significant resources, a challenging calling to mission and genuine compassion and enthusiasm, we are failing to have a widespread, sustainable impact on our communities.

Over many years of working alongside local congregations in community development, Shaftesbury has seen a weakness that hinders our mission. This is the lack of cooperation between churches. In Shaftesbury's experience, it is not uncommon to see similar, overlapping projects established in a neighbourhood – churches duplicating the work of other churches and other agencies. Whilst this may seem to increase the help and support on offer, in reality, it can result in competition for resources, volunteers and attendees. Despite our passion for people and commitment to local communities, a willingness to work together strategically is rarely a priority. As a result, we can struggle for resources and fail to see real change. Our lack of unity has an impact on both our faith and practice.

There are strong practical and scriptural reasons why we need to confront and overcome these divisive issues. This report gives examples of churches that are thinking through this challenge, as well as offering ideas and resources.

Where is this report coming from?

The Shaftesbury Society is a Christian charity with a 160-year heritage of dynamic social action. As well as supporting disabled people through education and care, Shaftesbury works for change in urban areas affected by deprivation. This is achieved by working in partnership with local Christian congregations and groups. We manage projects, employ community workers, offer long-term development advice, provide training and consultancy and produce resources – all with the aim of enabling local Christians to respond more effectively to the needs they see on their streets.

This report is rooted in Shaftesbury's experience of working in over 40 communities up and down the country. It reflects our desire to see transformation, not just in the way we do our community work, but also in society as a whole.

Setting the scene

Context: a dying church?

Church membership is steadily declining. It has dropped from 6.6 million members in 1990 to 6 million in 2000, to a projected 5.6 million in 2005.¹ This equates to over 1,100 church members leaving the church every week for 15 years. According to the 2001 census, 72% of the UK population call themselves Christian.² But this is far from the reality seen in our churches on Sunday mornings. A report published in June 2004 put church attendance at 3.6million³, meaning that only one in ten who call themselves Christians are actually part of a local church congregation.

Context: a needy country

Today, millions of British people are experiencing serious social problems, including real poverty. There is a direct link between poverty and a range of serious health problems – from newborn baby weight to life expectancy.⁴ In 2001, a third of children in Britain were living in households with below half the average income⁵ and the UK had the second highest child poverty rates in the European Union.⁶ 6.5 million adults go without essential clothing, such as a warm waterproof coat, because of lack of money.⁷



Despite extensive and at times groundbreaking effort and cooperation between the public, private and voluntary sectors, the gap between rich and poor is not significantly reducing. As the Salvation Army report "The Responsibility Gap" says: "People do not feel an obligation of care to their extended family, their local community or vulnerable sections of society."⁸

As well as poverty, millions of individuals face other needs: depression, debt, stress, family breakdown and overwork all characterise 21st Century life in the UK. The church certainly has its work cut out.

Context: an unchanging mission

Jesus began his public ministry with a declaration of his mission – some people refer to it as the *Nazareth manifesto* – recorded in Luke 4. He came to restore peoples' relationships with God and with each other – restoring them to the way God wanted them to be. Throughout his ministry Jesus exemplified this kingdom through his words, deeds, and miraculous signs. Ultimately, one of the reasons for his death was the challenge to the political and religious institutions of the day.

As Jim Wallis has written: "The gospel of the kingdom is the central message of the New Testament. It speaks of the inauguration of a whole new order in Jesus Christ and the establishing of a new people

In Norwich, Christian volunteers provide a remarkable 154,555 hours of social action services within the city every year – absolutely free. This is the equivalent of 80 full-time workers and based on the national minimum wage in 2003, would otherwise cost £650,000.⁹ Recalculated with the minimum wage of £4.85, used from October 2004, this would rise to £740,000.

whose common life bears witness to that new order in history...in this kingdom, those who would save their lives will lose them, the last are first and the first last, and those who would be great must become the servants of all."¹⁰

Context: a church with huge potential

The church is the largest voluntary organisation in the UK. We have huge potential; maybe we don't realise how much.

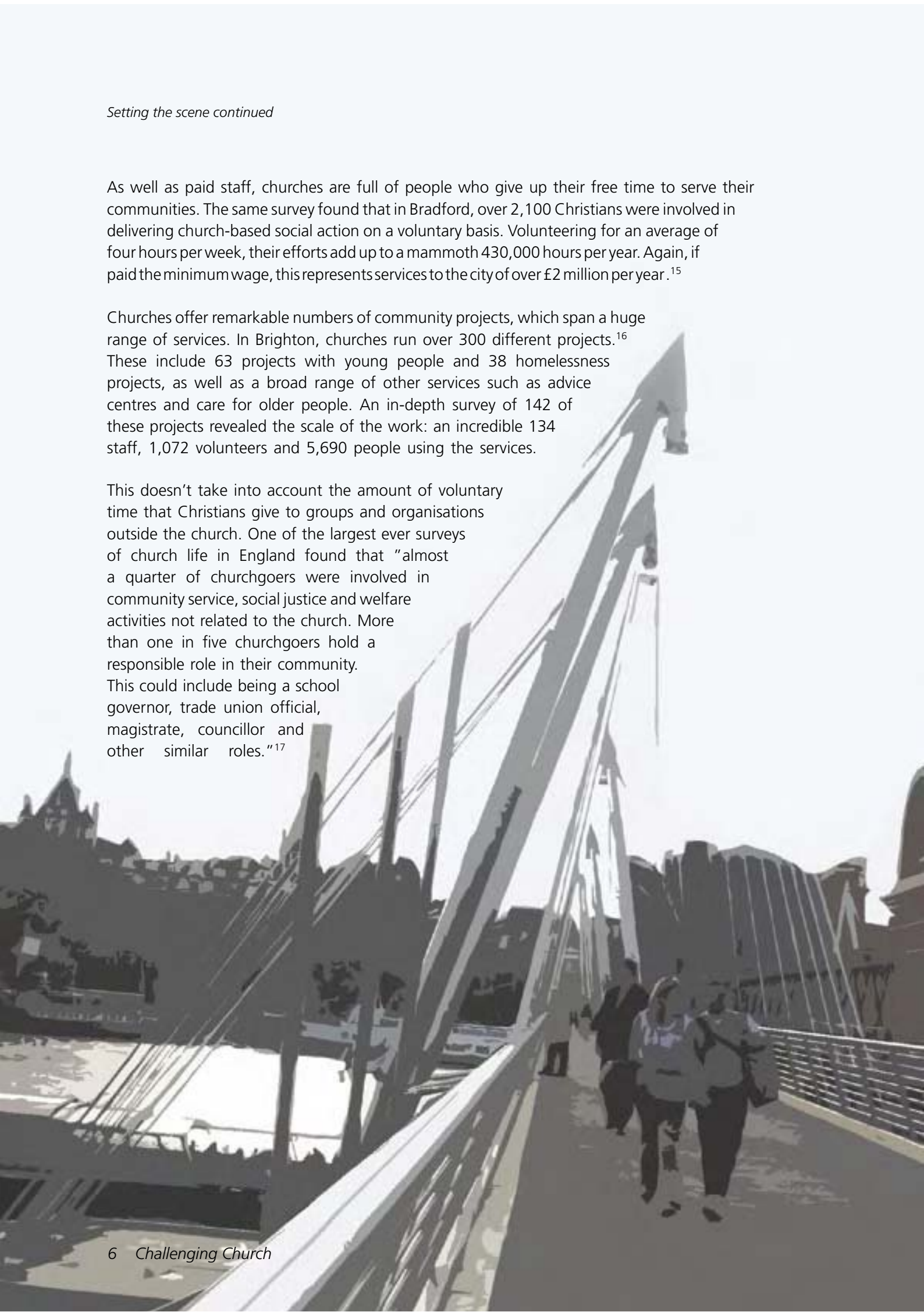
In 2003, the turnover of the UK church was £2.2 billion.¹¹ This is a huge amount of money. To give it a context, it is the same turnover as the four million Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME's) in the UK, which together employ over 12.6 million people.¹² Not only that, but this figure is on the increase: between 1995 and 2000, total church income rose by 39%.¹³

Among other outgoings, this money goes to pay staff. A recent research project in Bradford revealed that Christian congregations in the city employ 150 people in social action initiatives.¹⁴ Based on the minimum wage of £4.85 an hour, this work is valued at over £1.3 million per year. And that's just in one city.

As well as paid staff, churches are full of people who give up their free time to serve their communities. The same survey found that in Bradford, over 2,100 Christians were involved in delivering church-based social action on a voluntary basis. Volunteering for an average of four hours per week, their efforts add up to a mammoth 430,000 hours per year. Again, if paid the minimum wage, this represents services to the city of over £2 million per year.¹⁵

Churches offer remarkable numbers of community projects, which span a huge range of services. In Brighton, churches run over 300 different projects.¹⁶ These include 63 projects with young people and 38 homelessness projects, as well as a broad range of other services such as advice centres and care for older people. An in-depth survey of 142 of these projects revealed the scale of the work: an incredible 134 staff, 1,072 volunteers and 5,690 people using the services.

This doesn't take into account the amount of voluntary time that Christians give to groups and organisations outside the church. One of the largest ever surveys of church life in England found that "almost a quarter of churchgoers were involved in community service, social justice and welfare activities not related to the church. More than one in five churchgoers hold a responsible role in their community. This could include being a school governor, trade union official, magistrate, councillor and other similar roles."¹⁷



The problems of duplication and competition

Celebrating church in the community

In cities throughout our country, Christians and local congregations are pioneering significant and diverse work in their communities. In collaboration with Engage, South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and the Church Urban Fund (CUF), Shaftesbury has carried out research projects in Brighton and Portsmouth, which both confirm this. The report based on research in Portsmouth states:

Behind the many traditional and often austere-looking exteriors of church buildings, is hidden a bustle of activity. It is fuelled by the commitment and enthusiasm of an army of workers, ranging from user-volunteers to trained professionals, often unpaid and unnoticed by the masses. These dedicated folk, numbering in their hundreds, work to provide a myriad of services for the community of which they are part.¹⁸

dū'PLICATE' *v.t.* to make a replica of; to do or make again.
(Collins)

COMPĒTE *v.i.* 1. to contend against for profit, an award, supremacy etc (Collins) 2. rivalry between two or more businesses striving for the same customer or market. (dictionary.com)

However, this report concludes with the challenge:

One observation from the research is that the church is primarily serving a need within a community, and that it is very good at that. However, church and project leaders would agree that they would like to see greater change in people's lives and throughout their communities. This would mean focusing on tackling some of the underlying issues that cause poverty, injustice and pain, as well as continuing to offer community provision.¹⁹

Identifying the key issues

Shaftesbury is convinced that one key reason that the church is failing to have a radical, prophetic and sustainable impact in communities is the lack of cooperation and strategic planning. This is based on our experience of working in more than 40 communities over a number of years. The issues of duplication and competition prevent effective joint working and inhibit change. They need to be addressed if we are to see our communities transformed.

Local congregations can find themselves often unintentionally competing with each other for grants, volunteers and sometimes even clients. And in small geographical areas, it is not uncommon to find several groups working independently to meet similar needs, while other pressing needs are neglected. In many places, Christian projects seem more willing to build links and partnerships with regeneration bodies and other agencies than with other Christians.

Bringing the issues to life

To illustrate these challenges, a story based on real experiences of Shaftesbury partners:

Several years ago a small group of Christians were living on an inner city estate. Through friendships with their neighbours, they began to understand some of the pain and needs of local families.

Together, they wanted to do something to respond, especially with families and children. So they began to run a children's club and over the years, their relationships have developed into a range of activities such as benefits advice, a second-hand clothing store and supporting court visits.

Over the past year, new opportunities have sprung up. They began discussions with the local residents' association and council about renovating an unused community building on the estate. This has led to strong relationships being forged between all the people involved.

The group also meet regularly with others living and working on estates in the city. They share their stories together, consider the challenges of these areas and offer mutual support and learning. However, despite all this commitment and effort to build relationships and work with others, they have had some hard news. A local congregation within the same estate has recently announced plans to develop a family centre – at a cost of over £100,000.

At first glance this additional provision may seem like good news. However, the fact is that the family centre will directly duplicate and work in competition with the partnership renovating the community centre. The years of building up a network for real change, owned by local people, seems to have been ignored. The relationships which are required if real long-term change is to be seen in this community have all been weakened.

This is one story, but is not an isolated case. Time and again at Shaftesbury we have seen similar situations. People may be willing to meet together, even to pray together, but planning and acting together proves to be much more of a challenge. As one of Shaftesbury's partners says, "Ownership is a big issue – people only want to invest time and resources in a project if they own it."

Local congregations often allow differences in doctrine or worship style to be the reason why they don't act together to respond to the needs of their communities. Projects can focus on securing funding to keep their own group running, rather than thinking through what might be the best for the people they serve.

These issues reflect how Christians often suffer from a lack of real communication with each other. When we see a need, we want to *do something*. Within churches, this often means defining a project with our own people, our own resources and our own agenda. However, many churches, especially in urban areas, struggle with limited resources. In choosing to work alone, difficult decisions have to be made – about volunteers, money, staff time, transport and other resources.

We rarely pause to look for the most strategic response to a need. We seldom ask others for advice, seek expert opinions or find out what others are doing. As a result our work is often not as effective, radical or sustainable as it could be.

Such issues need to be identified and worked through, not glossed over or ignored. It is only then that we will make inroads into the strategic issues, such as poverty and injustice in our communities.

Biblical basis for unity

While spending time with people in communities seeking to overcome these issues, Shaftesbury has also spent time reflecting on them with others. This is vital, because duplication and competition are not just practical problems – they are theological too.

In 1 Corinthians 12 we read:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.²⁰



The image of a body is powerfully used to describe the church: the *whole* church, not our local church, or a particular denomination or network. All those who believe in Jesus are one body, together. This passage goes on to describe how we have different functions, and that we need each other:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.²¹

In comparing the church to a body, it is clear that God has not created the church to be a homogenous lump, but a multi-cultural and multi-gifted celebration. The passage clearly acknowledges the tension between individual parts of the body, yet there is a call to unity. Indeed, Jesus' last prayer was for unity between believers.



The key consequences of duplication and competition are:

- **The inefficient use of resources**
- **A lack of energy and workers to respond to new opportunities**
- **The concentration of resources on primary, obvious needs, leaving churches without the time or space capacity to look for strategic solutions**
- **The dishonouring of God through the disunity of his people**
- **The erosion of relationships with those outside of the church**

Finding unity in action

Acting together can greatly help Christians and local congregations discover their unity, especially in response to the deepest needs in our society. The brokenness, suffering and injustice in the world should put our differences into perspective.

These complex, multi-layered issues are most intensely concentrated on the margins of our society. It is not enough for the church simply to provide services in our communities. It is our responsibility to seek, along with others, solutions to the deep-rooted causes of social exclusion. This brings a challenge, but also the amazing opportunity to strengthen our unity.

Having worked alongside people embracing this challenge and opportunity in communities around the country, Shaftesbury has seen them embark on a journey of discovery, which has affected them in three main ways:

- **Relationship with God.** They have a renewed awareness of their need for God and the need to pray for God to bring change.
- **Relationships with the wider community.** They have gained understanding about the needs of individuals and groups within their community and found they have much in common with them.
- **Relationships with fellow Christians.** They have gained relationships with Christians who express their faith in a whole variety of shapes and ways, deepening their commitment to Christ and to each other.

Furthermore, when Christians work with others in the local community – embracing the principles of community development – it often leads them to question whether working alone can really achieve

strategic and sustainable change. Through researching and recording the needs and resources within communities and developing relationships with others, it becomes clear that the way things are done is as important as what is achieved.

Involving local people in decision-making is a significant step in breaking down the barriers that can exclude them. This has the effect of releasing much more potential within a community, as people offer their time and energy to see change. In turn, this can significantly increase the chances of small-scale initiatives being sustained beyond the all too typical three-year start-up funding period.

At times, this has led to a radical change in what it means to *be church*. The focus shifts from a local congregation to the needs of the community, and how the Christians living together in that area can best respond to those needs. In turn, this has an impact on where people decide to place their time, energy and money. These are signs of hope that the issues of duplication and competition can be worked through and overcome.

A group of Christian community workers and church leaders was asked: “In your experience, how well do Christian projects work together?”

- *People just tend to do their own thing. They plan their own thing and then send out the publicity wanting support or referrals!*
- *It is hard because everyone has slightly different values and methods. For example when [a para-church youth organisation] works with my church, it's hard because they're a high profile, high-impact, fast-moving organisation and local churches are generally not!*
- *“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*
- *It very rarely happens; people think they should work together but don't.*
- *Not very well, although it works better if the churches are from same tradition.*
- *I've never experienced it.*
- *Work, as opposed to talk, is never easy and needs constant effort.*
- *Often very well, but there can sometimes be an element of competition (particularly around boosting numbers in congregations).*
- *Churches don't work well together; there's a lack of relationships, a building focus, an emphasis on getting people into meetings and lack of respect for each other.*
- *It could be better – often there are weak connections. People are not very open as they think you might “take their young people”. There are some connections and then it dwindles, like a faulty connection on a radio.*

Signs of hope

Whilst duplication and competition are major hindrances to the church working together to see communities transformed, there are stories of hope. There are places where Christians are coming together and working through these issues to make a difference in their communities.

ACROSS A COUNTRY

Across the UK, there are many excellent Christian organisations working hard to bring God's hope into peoples' lives through social action. Historically though, apart from occasional alliances over specific projects, they have operated in isolation from each other, jealously guarding their strategies, projects and supporters. But recently there has been a change in this status quo. Representatives from a number of the country's largest Christian community development charities have begun to meet together to talk – about their experiences, their frustrations and their dreams.²² While it is early days for that group, which calls itself simply the Eccleston Group, many members believe that this is a sign of something new happening. Christian organisations beginning to talk to each other – to plan together and share knowledge – realising that it's not in keeping secrets that we will become more efficient, but as we learn to work collaboratively. As "United we stand", a recent publication from the Evangelical Alliance, states, "it is only as we overcome defensiveness that we will be able to build lasting relationships that will have a deep impact on our society."²³

ACROSS A CITY

What if the local congregations and groups in your city put aside their differences and united to see change? One place where this is beginning to happen is in one of the UK's newest cities, Brighton and Hove. In the mid 1990's a group of church leaders started meeting together to talk about transforming their city. Denominationally, they represented a very broad spread: from Anglo-Catholics to house church leaders, liberals, evangelicals and charismatics. They had different agendas, but each knew of many churches of committed Christians who needed support and advice to make an impact in their neighbourhoods. So they set up *Engage* to provide that service, with support from the CUF, SEEDA and the Shaftesbury Society.

When the group started, cooperation was not easy as they had to get to know each other beyond their denominational labels. They had to lay aside their agendas to focus on tackling issues of poverty across the city. At first, decision-making was slow, but as relationships and trust grew, progress was made more easily. *Engage* now employ a member of staff to work alongside all the congregations in the city. His first year was spent surveying 142 of the city's churches, finding out what each one was doing in their community. Based on the survey's findings, he now works with churches, helping them to develop new areas of work.

ACROSS A BOROUGH


Transform Newham is an exciting initiative that is uniting Christians across this east London borough. Inspired by the stories of Latin American theologian, Ed Silvano, local leaders draw people together from different congregations to pray for their street; they call this a 'prayer lighthouse'. In Stratford, one of the sub-regions of *Transform Newham*, there are over 100 people involved, representing 10 congregations, including Anglican, United Reformed, Baptist, Black Majority and other free churches. The initiative also extends to what they term "marketplace transformation", where Christians are gathering across denominational boundaries to pray together in their workplaces: schools, hospitals, government offices and businesses. There are currently 525 prayer lighthouses in Newham.

ACROSS A NEIGHBOURHOOD

In Streatham, south London, a number of churches work together within their neighbourhood. Regular meeting between leaders led to strong relationships and the development of many ideas for joint activities. After a few years, one leader suggested to the others: “perhaps it is time we stopped courting and got married.” This suggestion led to four churches signing a public agreement, along with a service of dedication, which committed them to “do nothing singly that could be better done together.” As they were the churches of West Streatham, it has become known as the COWS Covenant.

It has not been a completely smooth ride, but ten years on the churches have grown closely together. They arrange joint Christmas services and coordinate their input into the annual local festival. Their efforts to work collaboratively have seen real fruit in youth and schools work, with strong relationships formed with local schools and a new youth centre developed as a joint venture. David Whitlock, the Baptist minister involved in the partnership says: “unity has not meant uniformity but, through focussing on what unites rather than what divides us, we have been far more effective in witnessing to God’s kingdom than we could ever have been working in isolation.”





A group of Christian community workers and church leaders was asked: “What do you see as some of the challenges of working together?”

- *Busyness! It takes lots of meetings to ensure good communication. It is difficult finding the time. Different church structures and decision-making processes take time.*
- *It's hard to lay down our territorial / competitive attitudes. We are often competing for the same funding, volunteers and even clients.*
- *Personality clashes between church leaders.*
- *Ownership – churches want to have their own projects. People only want to invest in a project if they own it.*
- *Often the leadership may have a vision but the wider church community does not always accept it.*
- *Where do people go when they become Christians? To the congregation running the programme or a local congregation?*
- *Fear of loss of identity.*

“Big Breakfast” and “Power-Walk LS11” are just two prayer initiatives in Beeston, South Leeds, which involve 10 local churches. The congregations in the area are committed to working together. They have employed a community outreach worker whose role is to develop church unity and to enable relationships to grow between Christians across congregations in the area. Action is an important part of their expression of unity. Christians from six local congregations are working together to run a “Kidz Klub” on Tuesday evenings. Over 100 local children enjoy activities, quizzes, songs and Bible teaching and are regularly visited in their homes during the week.

Congregation leaders are also working together to make their buildings more suitable and available to the community. This includes pursuing joint funding opportunities and working together to welcome, befriend and offer support to asylum seekers and refugees in the area.

ACROSS AN ESTATE

Buttershaw is a housing estate on the outskirts of Bradford, West Yorkshire. The Cooperville and Buttershaw Methodist Church and the Anglican parish church of St. Aidan's from the parish of Shelf St. Michael and Buttershaw St. Aidan, are two small churches in the area, both largely attended by elderly people. Although it has not always been the case in the past, over the past few years there has been a real strengthening in their relationship. Two years ago they decided to take on a full-time community worker, who works for both churches, alongside volunteers from both congregations. New projects, overseen by the community worker, have been modest and based on what people living in the area have asked for – a local newsletter, line-dancing classes, and a group of volunteers who provide cups of tea to those waiting at the doctor's surgery. They may be small, but are significant signs of hope in a struggling community.

AROUND A NEED

Langney is one of Eastbourne's northern suburbs, with a population of 11,000. The community is geographically and socially isolated from the services and resources of nearby Eastbourne. One Christian running a local help and advice centre, saw the need for residents to have easy access to information about church services and activities in the local area.

The local churches gathered details and contact numbers for all their activities, from Sunday services to dance groups, bereavement groups and youth clubs. They put all the details into a booklet, and added details of other local services such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the toy library, play groups and charity shops. The finished booklet is now available in public meeting points throughout the area, including the doctor's surgeries and local community centre.

AROUND AN OPPORTUNITY

Imagine three quarters of a million tourists arriving on your church's doorstep one weekend a year. This is the experience of the churches of North Kensington as the crowds of the Notting Hill carnival descend. Instead of feeling overwhelmed, however, a group of local churches including Westbourne Park Baptist Church, Notting Hill Community Church, Latymer Christian Fellowship and the Portobello Road branch of the Salvation Army join together to make the most of the opportunity. They hold an open-air service, host DJ's and spend the time evangelising. “We are all small churches,” says Jackie Blanchflower, leader of the Latymer Christian Centre, “but together we can do things we'd never be able to do on our own.”

The way forward

It's vital that Christians pull down barriers and work together for the sake of our neighbours. Whoever we are, whether we have a leadership position within a local church, a passion for our community, or a concern about a particular issue, there is much that can be done.

As we pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven", it is vital that we respond and are willing to do our part. When we choose not to cooperate with other local churches, we put up barriers to this prayer being fulfilled. If we really long to see God answer our prayer, we must overcome duplication and competition and start working together to make a difference in our communities.

The Challenging Church website – www.challengingchurch.net – contains many resources which further illustrate this issue and help individuals and groups to think through what it may mean for them. There are stories of what churches have done to break out of cycles of duplication and competition, tried and tested resources to use within your church, links to useful organisations and essential publications.

On our own

Think:

- Do I long to see God's kingdom come in my community?
- What do I know about the needs of my area? How could I find out more?
- How much do I know about other local churches? How could I find out more?
- Do I need to repent of a negative, competitive attitude towards other churches?
- What am I passionate about? How can I link with others who share similar passions or interests?
- Who is my Christian neighbour? How could we work together to bring God's love in our street, workplace or community?

Ideas for Action:

- Visit other local churches; find out about them, their vision and their work. Make a decision to look past preconceptions and denominational differences and see God at work in others.
- If you have a particular interest, for example asylum seekers or people with learning difficulties, find out what groups exist in your area, both within and apart from churches. Think about how you could get involved. Pray? Give money? Volunteer? If you get stuck, look at www.challengingchurch.net for some ideas.
- If you are committed to seeing an end to duplication and competition, talk to your small group or church leader. Discuss ways in which you can raise awareness of these issues amongst others in your local congregation. Decide on a realistic plan of action and stick to it!
- Then let us know how you get on! Post your story on www.challengingchurch.net so that other people will be encouraged and learn from you.

In our local church:

Think:

- Do we have a vision for our local area? For our town or city?
- How often do we work with other local churches?
- Does our commitment to working with other congregations extend past leaders' meetings and joint worship services?
- How can we support and develop responses with others? What does this mean?



Ideas for Action:

- Find out what the other churches in your area are doing. As you discover community activities, build up a picture of what is going on, noting in particular any gaps in provision and duplicated services. You may like to create a map, with location points highlighted and the activities taking place. This is a good visual aid and helps you to share your findings with others in your small group, congregation or more widely.
- Are there issues in your area that come up time and again? Young people, crime, vandalism, debt or loneliness are just a few examples. Find out what groups and organisations in your area are already responding to these issues. Is there a niche where the churches could work together to make a distinctive contribution? Or could you and others in local congregations get involved in what's already going on? How could your church help make this happen?
- Visit www.challengingchurch.net where you'll find more resources for churches, good ideas and stories of how other churches are working together. Post your own experiences to encourage others.

In our local area:

Think:

- Are local Christians acting together with a united vision for change?
- How could our resources be pooled together to deepen the impact of the church in the community?
- What would be involved in developing joint strategies for responding to local needs? Could we commit to that?
- How would things change if we began to see the Christians that we live near and work with as

co-workers for the kingdom? How could we think and act together strategically to see these places transformed?

Ideas for Action:

- If your church is already part of a Churches Together network, or similar cross-denominational group within your area, put duplication and competition on the agenda for your next meeting. Introduce the issues to people, pray them through together and consider how they can be overcome. A starting point could be finding out what else is going on in your area and considering how you can support and work with these other initiatives. The next step could be to consider how you could jointly respond to needs in particular communities and throughout your town or city.
- Projects and groups working in a particular field, such as homelessness or young people, could meet together to discuss how they could most effectively meet the needs of the people they are seeking to serve. Who knows where this might lead?
 - Pooling resources
 - A joint training programme
 - Agreeing areas of expertise thereby avoiding duplication
 - Presenting a united voice to lobby government or other bodies for change

Locality church

How many churches are there in your area?

For the majority of us, the chances are that there are several congregations meeting just a few minutes away from us. Indeed, in urban areas, there can be scores of church buildings within a few miles, not to mention all the other groups of worshipping Christians meeting in homes, schools and other venues.

As we think about working together to meet the needs of our community, we need to look beyond the activity of any one congregation. Instead, we should consider the church as the whole body of Christ across a town, city or neighbourhood. This is *locality church*, a concept that can unlock a wider and more dynamic vision of Christian community and one that is perhaps closer to New Testament models of church.

For example, when Paul addressed himself to, “the Church of God in Corinth,”²⁴ he was writing to all of the Christians in the city. It is within this metropolitan context that we should consider his exhortation to be united as the body of Christ. As we consider Paul’s challenge today, we too would do well to look beyond our own congregations and to consider how can work together with all the Christians in our neighbourhood.

This process can begin with the smallest of steps, such as sharing information about what each other is doing, taking time to listen and learn from each other, building relationships of trust and honesty, identifying common goals and acknowledging each other’s gifts and skills. This can lead to congregations being willing to put aside their own agendas, exploring where they have things in common and committing to working together for the sake of their communities.



Conclusion

The church is facing a challenge. We are failing to tackle the real and often desperate needs of our neighbours with strategic, sustainable solutions. It's not that we're under-resourced – although in some local churches it may often feel like that. And Christians are not short on innovation, passion and commitment. The barrier hindering us from really making a difference is our reluctance to work together for the sake of our communities, our towns and cities and our nation.

Duplication and competition have a detrimental effect on church-based community work right across the country. In order to be able to challenge the inequalities at the heart of our neediest communities, the church itself first needs to be challenged: as local congregations, are we guilty of putting our own agendas ahead of our mission? If we want to see God's transformation come to our neighbourhoods, we must address the duplication and competition that exists between churches in local communities. These issues not only reduce our impact, but our disunity brings dishonour to God. It is only when we start to pray, plan and work together, as the body we are designed to be, that the church will be in a position to make a creative, radical and prophetic impact on the deep-rooted issues facing our society today.

Notes

- ¹ *Religious Trends No 4*, Christian Research, July 2003
- ² National Office of Statistics, 2001
- ³ *Religious Trends No 4* (see above)
- ⁴ *Poverty and social exclusion in Britain*, David Gordon, Laura Adelman, Karl Ashworth, Jonathan Bradshaw, Ruth Levitas, Sue Middleton, Christina Pantazis, Demi Patsios, Sarah Payne, Peter Townsend and Julie Williams, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, September 2000
- ⁵ *Child development and family income*, Paul Gregg, Susan Harkness and Stephen Machin, YPS, 2001
- ⁶ *Child Well-being, Child Poverty and Child Policy in Modern Nations: What Do We Know*, Koen Vleminckx and Timothy M. Smeeding (eds), Feb 2001
- ⁷ *Poverty and social exclusion in Britain* (see above)
- ⁸ *The Responsibility Gap*, Henley Centre/The Salvation Army, 2004
- ⁹ Opera Community Research, 2003
- ¹⁰ *Agenda for Biblical People*, Jim Wallis, SPCK, 1986
- ¹¹ *Religious Trends No 4* (see above)
- ¹² Department for Trade and Industry's Small Business Service (SBS), 2004
- ¹³ *Religious Trends No 4* (see above)
- ¹⁴ Thomas Low Partnership, February 2004
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Being Here*, Engage and Shaftesbury Society, 2004
- ¹⁷ *Church Life Profile*, based on survey of over 100,000 churchgoers from more than 10 denominations questioned on or around 29th April 2001, Churches Information for Mission, 2001
- ¹⁸ *Hidden Treasure*, Shaftesbury Society, 2004
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*
- ²⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, New International Version
- ²¹ 1 Corinthians 12:21-26
- ²² In October 2004, the Eccleston Group comprised Caritas, Church Action on Poverty, Churches' Community Work Alliance, Churches' Regional Network, Church Urban Fund, Evangelical Alliance, Faithworks, Housing Justice, National Estate Churches Network, Shaftesbury Society, Tearfund and the United Reformed Church Community Work department.
- ²³ *United we stand*, Evangelical Alliance, September 2004
- ²⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:2

Take up the challenge

If this report has inspired, encouraged or challenged you, Shaftesbury would love to help you to continue exploring these issues and what they mean for your church and neighbourhood.

Shaftesbury has a wide range of free resources available:

- In-depth case studies of community projects
- Booklets on theological aspects of church community action
- Practical advice, such as how to carry out a community survey

All of these are available at www.challengingchurch.net. The website also offers more stories, latest ideas and the chance for you to share your own story.

Alternatively, you can contact us by

email: communityinfo@shaftesburysoc.org.uk

phone: 0845 0707889

post: Challenging Church
The Shaftesbury Society
16 Kingston Road
London
SW19 1JZ

Acknowledgements

Design and illustration by amatrix (www.amatrix.co.uk)

Thanks to all those who shared their stories with us.

The church is facing a challenge. The real and often desperate needs faced by people in our communities require strategic, sustainable solutions. The church has significant resources, passion and commitment. Yet often our reluctance to work together is a barrier which hinders us from really having an impact.

Bringing together research, theory and on-the-ground experience, Shaftesbury presents the church with a challenge: if we want to see long-term transformation in communities, duplication and competition between local congregations must be overcome.

This report is a timely and prophetic challenge to the church to rediscover its primary allegiance to, and citizenship of, the Kingdom of God.

Jonathan Bartley, director of Christian think-tank Ekklesia

This report highlights issues that both churches and funders need to grapple with as they seek to effectively serve the communities in which they live and work. This publication contributes to the debate.

Fran Beckett, Chief Executive Officer, Church Urban Fund

SPEAK would like to support the Shaftesbury Society's campaign to create more forums for talking and working together – harmonising to the maximum.

Louise Donkin, SPEAK

When two or three people are gathered in Christ's name, he is with them – so when two or three churches are gathered in his name to care for their community, the Revolution is on! This report reminds us of that truth and then gives us some clear suggestions of what to do about it.

The Rt Revd Dr Laurie Green, Bishop of Bradwell

Shaftesbury has identified a major weakness in the churches' ability to act effectively. We strongly support this call to churches to collaborate in local projects so that together they can use their resources more effectively to meet the needs of their local communities and, we believe, bring new energy to their church life.

Elizabeth Simon, Executive Officer, London Churches Group for Social Action

I welcome *Challenging Church*. It's an important encouragement for a move from competition to collaboration, in the belief that the churches should be committed to one another, in service of all God's people.

The Revd Bill Snelson, General Secretary, Churches Together in England

The Shaftesbury Society
16 Kingston Road
London
SW19 1JZ
0845 330 6033
www.shaftesburysoc.org
Registered charity no 221948

The Shaftesbury Society is one of the UK's leading Christian charities and works with disabled people and local communities to achieve social inclusion, empowerment and justice.