



Good Neighbourhood Colloquium – 9th February 2011

A Note of the Conversation

This colloquium is part of the Westcott House research and outreach initiative in public life. The aim of the day was to bring into conversation an invited group of people, representing varied social, policy, professional and faith perspectives, to explore a key dimension of the “Big Society” agenda. One projected output was to consider how faith communities can effectively contribute to this agenda, both theoretically and practically. The day was divided into four themed sessions of an hour and a quarter, each session being introduced by two of the participants. The following note is a summary of points made during the four sessions.

(1) What is a Good Neighbourhood?

A neighbourhood is geographical (a community need not be), but the geographical extent is hard to define, and will vary from place to place. The term “neighbourhood” implies relationships between people who live in physical proximity, but what makes a neighbourhood “good” will be different for different people, and in different contexts. So a sense of feeling safe may be one quality that makes a neighbourhood “good”, but for some that means a place of familiarity where they are known, while for others it is a place where people mind their own business. One participant asked if a good neighbourhood is a place where “in times of crisis you can organise help, and in times of celebration you can organise company”?

One current aim, particularly for the Government, is for everyone to be empowered to have a stake in their neighbourhood’s life and development. This “new localism” requires development to become socialised and neighbourhoods increasingly self-organising. This process relies on trust and respectful relationships, and the presence of trusted hosts for the necessary neighbourhood conversations.

The process also requires valuing local assets in addition to identifying local needs. So people in a neighbourhood would need to be able to look among themselves and see what assets they share, not just what needs they have. There is a particular challenge to be able to do this in neighbourhoods of sustained deprivation, such as multigenerational unemployment, and where society has reinforced people’s sense of a lack of worth. Enabling change in these contexts requires a variety of often individual approaches. But there is also challenge at the other end of the economic spectrum, where the prosperous separate themselves from other social groups. “The top 1% are adept at isolating themselves.”

Social practices in Britain mean maintaining neighbourly relations is not straightforward – the role of the car, the reliance on double incomes, the longest working hours in Europe, Sunday trading, all limit face to face interaction necessary for good neighbourly relationships. We can see the importance of social networking, and of non-geographical communities.

- How can communities decide what “good” means, rather than have others’ ideas of “good” imposed?
- What might be local “assets” and how can these be properly enabled?
- How can communities take ownership of a locality and make it work for them?
- How can everyone in a neighbourhood be empowered?

(2) What are Key Public Values and Qualities?

Neighbourliness depends on a notion of care. The capacity to be something for others goes hand in hand with knowing yourself to be cared for, that you exist and have an identity that is honoured. Caring needs to be expressed and received in very small units, since it involves building trust and honesty. This can be easier for children than for adults. The Christian tradition involves the quest for the common good. This cannot be imposed but only arrived at by conversation and negotiation, again starting small.

If we believe in the inherent value and sacredness of all people without exception, then we will be seeking solidarity one with another, not mere tolerance. That solidarity can emerge through shared activity, enabling respect to grow across social differences. In situations of longstanding deprivation this can involve moving through something akin to a grieving process, including rage, resentment, conflict, and paralysis, to empowerment and renewal.

We need to learn to recognise and value what we have, before we lose it. Neighbourhoods involve community *and* nature, and part of neighbourliness is sharing in the stewardship of these. Community is about shared practice, but how that works depends on whether the person is viewed as a consumer or a volunteer. The view of the person is crucial – political neoliberalism inhibits care and solidarity. On the other hand, the “big state” ideas of national health or state education depend on each person being equally valued and a participant.

- How do we relearn the language of “values”?
- How do we flesh out “neighbourliness”?
- How to conceive “happiness” beyond the instrumental?
- What enables self-confidence & empowerment?
- How do we enable true “care” and building sense of inherent value of all people, irrespective of difference?
- Do we work for trust and solidarity beyond cautious tolerance?
- How can we build “the common good” from the bottom up via shared activity
- Can we confront “class” and social inequality?
- How can we re-educate people in altruism?

(3) How can we design Good Neighbourhoods?

While design is not everything, it is something, and design is both a political and a social act. We need to create places that create good “neighbouring”. We also need processes that relate good local planning to good local democracy, that create a bottom-up response to planning, but this needs to include consideration of those who might be marginalised by local democracy.

We need to understand what elements of design foster neighbourly behaviour, and enable social interaction. This includes how we design semi-public space. Part of this goes back to

social practice – running an errand has disappeared, to the post office, or to buy bread or milk, for example.

This needs to be more than planning. We need to explore ways to develop neighbourhood equity in developments like supermarkets. We also need to look at the risk of social breakdown in a development proposal.

There seems to be a tendency for humans, when they are able, to isolate themselves, and to preserve places of privacy. There will always be a tension in neighbourhoods between the need for privacy and the need for interaction.

- How are design/planning/building “political” and social acts
- What facilitates community in design? How does design (re)shape social behaviour?
- How to give people a language to say what they actually want?
- Can we develop designing as continuous process versus single/definitive act done by “others”
- How to balance “privacy” or “safety” with encounter and engagement?
- How to get involved in the new planning panels?

(4) What is the Space for Faiths?

Even the best examples of faith groups providing neighbourhood and neighbourly services operate on a “wing and a prayer”, with financial and human resources precarious. The Big Society has high hopes for volunteers but those who work in local neighbourhoods know that these cannot be relied on or presumed, and nor can even basic continuous funding.

Faiths do have traditions of charity, usually seen not as an act of benevolence but as a duty. In a plural space with different faiths a language will need to be found to enable faiths to talk to each other and the wider community.

Religious faith groups exist within neighbourhoods differently than other groups, living out a narrative of what it means to be fully human. They are not there first to provide services because the State is not doing so, but to live out a vision of being human, and of human community.

But then the challenge is not just a question of faith groups doing things differently, but of doing different things. Yet there does seem to be a breathtaking misunderstanding by government officials of how faith and faith groups work. There are three alternatives for faith groups – simply “being there”, buying into the political rhetoric of partnership, or offering something different. This takes us back to the idea of trust and how to build that.

- How do faiths confidently contribute what is distinctive rather than have their role defined by government?
- How can faiths develop collaboration rather than compete or act in isolation?
- How to build on the long tradition of *public* “sacred space” in contemporary plural neighbourhoods?
- How can faiths speak of the *duty* of common service and be icons of true care based on the unique value of all?
- How can faiths speak together about a vision of what it means to be human and good neighbours?

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