

ARCS

Action Research - Church & Society

ARCS Housing Justice Reflections for Cycle Two Friday July 26th 2009

Data for reflection includes:

Two qualitative volunteers focus groups from St Gabriel's & Christchurch
One short qualitative interview with the Catholic priest

The questions below are taken from the 'Guide to Reading the Data' document:

1. How does the data help answer the research question?

Cycle One Question: To reflect theologically on the impact of a Winter Shelter Network on parish life, focusing on an Anglican and Catholic parish.

Cycle Two Emerging Question: Where is the Faith in a 'Faith Based' Organisation?

This year's data has raised some significant questions for Housing Justice about the nature of its 'faith base' and how faith is embodied and articulated in practice.

2. Is there anything that surprises/strikes you about the data?

- *Ongoing reluctance of volunteers to link personal faith with experience*

Reiterating findings from last year, a large proportion of volunteers were reluctant to draw connections between their personal faith and church-based volunteering. The honesty of their responses was helpful but it also raises some issues about the extent to which people are willing to name and take ownership of their Christian faith. There was a sense that speaking about faith in public in the context of an all volunteer focus group was an unfamiliar and awkward experience for some participants. Furthermore, whilst many understood that faith connections could be drawn with, for example, the Eucharist, there was limited energy for exploring this further.

This reluctance to speak about faith was marked by embarrassed laughter, reinforcing an agreed resistance to there being any significant links between faith and volunteering. It could also be argued that this laughter was about recognition. Quite often volunteers laughed at the quotes because they shared an experience; a release, and opportunity to "laugh it off" perhaps.

Christchurch p.3

Sally - Has there been any impact on your faith or spirituality through doing the volunteering?

Lee - Hasn't really changed anything for me in that sense, so no. (laughing)

This year's data primarily shows the strength of feeling amongst volunteers about their own motivations for volunteering; "doing something humanitarian", "doing something good for society", "Making you feel good", not wanting to locate themselves as a holy Joe for fear of hypocrisy. Others are seeking to reconnect with 'reality'; an escape from the sanitised, 'unreal' lifestyle of working in the City. However, whilst last year we thought maybe if volunteers were faced with the contrasting quotations from guests they might welcome opportunities for deeper reflection, this doesn't seem to have occurred; albeit, there were moments of surprise at the depth of insight of the guests.

St Gabriels Church p.5

Jade: I guess for me, I don't think you have to be Christian to volunteer because it's just something that I think most people do with good values, whether they're Christian or not.

Jade: You asked whether there's been any impact on our faith and I'd say there's been no impact on my faith because it aligns with my faith. (Several agree). ...it supports what the Christian values say to do, to help your neighbour and that kind of thing. So to me, there's been no impact because there's no conflict.

- **Making the sacramental connections**

There were some interesting responses from participants when the penny dropped in relation to the link with the Eucharist. One male voice in the Christchurch focus group described Eucharist in Church as being rather artificial and detached, indicating that this masked a sense of communion and table community because of the way everyone sat in rows (unlike the Quaker, for example, who talks of sitting in a circle) and this breadline approach to the Eucharist can feel quite individualistic. The ARCS team feel that this is a fruitful area which could be explored further particularly in terms of the clergy's role in strengthening these links.

St Gabriel's Church

Cath: A re-enactment of the Last Supper, do you make that kind of connection?

John: Sorry, I totally missed that point!! (a lot of laughter)

Priest: Let us break bread together, you know, that's something of it, that we break bread, that I am breaking my bread. People are bringing food....

Jean: I don't make that connection-

Jade: I can see it. (Several agree)

Christchurch

Sally - Do you make any questions between communion and volunteering at the shelter?

Jan - Sharing the meal.

Liberty - Oh yes!

Jan - Sharing the meals, sitting down and everyone is kind of equal together. Everyone sat together in the evenings.

Theresa - The fellowship aspect. Yes.

Lee- I was about to say that communion in Church is seen as rather detached from what it was based on anyway. I mean you could say something like the Last Supper is much more of a meal that happens downstairs whereas communion always seems a rather artificial and rather detached from that, because of the process it goes through, it doesn't feel like a meal and sitting down and being in community together. Maybe that's why there's not such an obvious connection in our minds.

- ***Eating together around the table versus 'serving' guests***

The volunteers at St Gabriel's did not eat alongside the guests but only served them food. This contrasted with Christchurch where volunteers were encouraged to eat at least one course at the table; an act, the ARCS team wondered, which perhaps marked out the distinctiveness of the hospitality of the Churches Cold Weather Shelters? This appeared to affect how people related to the question about drawing links with Eucharist/communion and hospitality. Is it easier to wait on someone rather than to sit and eat with guests? Had these differences in practice emerged for purely pragmatic reasons or were they deliberate?

- ***Strangers and Friends***

A separate issue arising in the data focuses on the different sorts of relationships that volunteers have with guests and the appropriateness of these boundaries. In one case, a volunteer felt uncomfortably close to a guest after a request for 'friendship' outside of the shelter setting. This raised questions about the nature of relationships and human encounters once the primary boundary of a hearth has been removed. In a separate incident, a volunteer expressed a desire to keep his distance from the guests by choosing to do the night shift specifically to avoid contact with people because his day job was all about people's problems. What challenges does this raise for offers of hospitality?

Christchurch p.4

Lee - I have to say that I tend to do over night and part of the reason I do overnight if I'm being completely honest is that it allows me to be a bit more detached - it allows me to do something without necessarily having the additional level of commitment of having to spend a lot of time with a complete stranger. I'm happy to do it but I suspect that's one of the reasons why I do an over night. Maybe that sense of community isn't so strong for me anyway.

Mark - and have you had any good conversations with people who get up in the night?

Lee - I have sometimes or we've had people coming in who've arrived. So yes I have sometimes but I suppose a fair amount of my working life is listening to people and their personal problems so I think I've developed those skills, I wasn't born with those skills, so I don't mind doing it but it allows me to commit more readily to the night shelter knowing that I can be a bit more detached.

Christchurch p.3

Theresa: - For me the spiritual side of things has been challenged a bit by conversations sometimes you have with people, you find strength from it, for example i had a very strange conversation with someone once where a guy came in and we let him in and he was talking about how he was here to investigate the murder of someone and he wasn't

mentally stable and so we didnt put him in with the others but he ended up following me home and Jackie decided to run up behind me to be with me and we ended up having a conversation together, I'd given him money for a bus, and I was saying "you have to go now, another way" but he was saying "no but you are my friend, you've been talking with me for three hours". I was saying "im not your friend. we've talked and I've valued that but...". That for me was spiritually difficult. Where were the boundaries. I had a strength though, I felt very calm but firm. It was hard. Maybe it wasnt anything spiritual but I was feeling an inner strength in dealing with it at that time. In the end I have to say that we legged it. He wanted to come home with me. The connections you make with people you are constantly having to work out. Maybe its nothing to do with being spiritual, I dont know.

At St Gabriel's Church volunteers were uncomfortable with the idea of taking food which had been prepared for the guests and that the church had paid for - "we don't need the food, they do". It appears the volunteers are missing the deeper point here about the heavenly banquet - the feeding of the 5000 - the sense of miraculous multiplication, that even if you do just have a cup of coffee or bowl of soup alongside the guests you are still achieving what you set out to achieve, which is to build strong relationships of community and a sense of dignity. The team also compared this to the story of the Syrophenician woman in reverse, of the crumbs under the table (Mark 7: 26); that even if there are crumbs volunteers don't necessarily want them because they were meant for the poor. Thus, their interpretation is about feeding people who are hungry rather than sharing a meal based on mutual gratitude for the abundant provision of food.

The ARCS team wondered whether the Eucharistic prayer - which includes the words "I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word and I shall be healed" - reinforces a sense amongst the Catholic volunteers that they are taking food which they shouldn't be having and thus are interpreting the offer of eating food with the guests as taking bread from the mouths of the poor rather than the real meaning of, for example, the Syrophenician woman story which is about God's gift of abundance across social barriers.

St Gabriel's Church p.10

Priest: It's particularly significant to eat the food, that you do it. I went to a convent once and I rang the bell and I said, "Sister I'm very hungry." I said, "I know it's after 4 o'clock and I shouldn't really be coming knocking but I'm really hungry and I need...ah an ole bowl of soup would do." So anyway, Sister arrived out anyway with the bowl of soup and she said, "Oh it's you!" So she said, "You can't have this soup. That soup is for the poor man!" I said, "Good for the poor man? Good for me, I'm going to have it!" And some people sometimes might think that there's food for poor people and there's....

Jade: I've always thought of it a bit differently in that-

FP: That we're taking it out of their mouths

FP: Yeah!

FP: I'm eating his dinner and I can have my own dinner at home.

Jade: I feel guilty eating because the church pays for the food.

Helen: But at the end if there's stuff left over and everybody's fed then we will but it's like taking the food out of the people's mouths. We don't need the food, they do.

Jade: And you don't know whether there will be any left over.

The ARCS team questioned to what extent it had imposed the Eucharistic question on the volunteers. However, we felt it was a perfectly valid and creative theme to come out of last years data, but it has raised some very profound questions about the ways these congregations and their clergy in particular enable people to link up personal faith, with communal liturgy and life in the wider world. This is not a question of cognition. Nick the Quaker guy in the Christchurch focus group seems to get it! For if you turn up to a Quaker Meeting and do nothing, it is not surprising that people, in the absence of ritual, might have a deeper understanding of why they are there!

Christchurch p.5

Nick - i dont take communion, you know. As a Quaker you dont take communion. There are no sacraments. I go to other churches and I've learnt to see over the years why people aportion value to it but to me they are just symbols. Nothing more than that. They are a symbol of a relationship and a symbol is made flesh and made real when it's got life and joy and stuff associated with it. And maybe that happens sometimes here. But I dont think this is an exclusively Church thing either. I was thinking about that secular crossover thing, I think God happens whether people give it that name or not. So when I go to like the big Crisis at Christmas shelthers, they are quite different because they are massive. But when they work is when they are relationships between people which have that, whatever you call it, the welcoming, or the sense of love, or, i cant remember the phase you used, yes, the hospitality.

Thus, to conclude, sacrament can both embody the presence of Christ but also obscure it.

- *Lack of a desire for reflection*

Some of the male volunteers at Christchurch stressed that they didn't want to have to think or reflect about things at the shelter and that it was something simple that they could do which "wasn't morally complex". There is a joy in an uncomplicated good. For example, Lee, was not wanting to talk to anyone and preferred to be detached.

Christchurch p. 2

Lee - For me i think it's a bit of a no-brainer. So much of my life is complex morally but this just seems so straight forward. It seems you are just sort of helping people. i trust Mark and others to have thought it through and to have come up with something that hits the right note in terms of the assistance for this particular group of people. So therefore i can just come along and do something that feels good. There are so few opportunities in life to just come along and do something straightforwardly good. So many things seem morally confusing, even giving to charity. This is a very practical way of helping.

- *The role of the clergy*

It was good to have the input from Fr Kevin at St Gabriel's. The ARCS team noted similarities in some of his comments to those made by the volunteers – particularly a fear of proselytizing and a fear of appearing voyeuristic by wearing a dog collar at the shelter. Could this be a sign that priests are adopting something of the urban

plural perspective of their parishioners? If so, does this risk buying into the secular debate, rather than establishing a church presence firmly as a sign amongst the guests?

Clare Watkins felt this touched upon the *ad extra/ ad intra* debate within the Catholic Church and the wider debate about clerical dress in general. It remains a point of contention about how priests cross from the sanctuary to the street and whether they understand their faith in celtic terms or more authentic terms. So, for example, there would be a spirituality of priesthood that would encourage men to see their priesthood as a sacrifice for the people and it would be up to the people to do the 'preaching on the street'. Some priests do not recognise their celtic role as extending to anyone else. This may be a point to explore further with clergy from across the cold weather shelter network.

3. What kind of beliefs & values are embodied in this data?

The values and beliefs emerging in the data reflect a secular humanism with a dash of liberal relativism. However, we are sympathetic to the fact that this may be a survival strategy given the pressures of the global city in which a more strident secularism rubs shoulders with representatives of all the major faiths.

4. Is there anything that seems to affirm the beliefs and values of your organization?

At the ARCS participant workshop Alison spoke of Housing Justice seeking to make the case that homelessness needed to be marked out by hospitality and not just by service provision – a wonderful thing for a Christian organisation to be saying. However, whilst there is a huge energy behind the concept of hospitality in the focus group data, the caveat that the ARCS team want to raise is that this is for many of the participants a hospitality that is at a *physical* and possibly *emotional* level but certainly not a *spiritual* level. We recommend that further theological reflection on the nature of hospitality be explored by Housing Justice. How is hospitality linked intrinsically to the gospel?

5. Is there anything that seems to challenge the beliefs and values of your organization?

These findings challenge the whole nature of faith based action! One could ask, does all this matter? How much "faith base" does there need to be within Housing Justice and within those working at the Churches Cold Weather Shelters? We felt it mattered if people who profess to be Christians can't bring themselves to articulate why they do what they do. If we believe in secular graces that God is working in the world and that He wishes us to partner with those graces we can't partner if we don't own our own name; pretending to be secular is not an answer. Admittedly, it's a huge task for the whole Church to tackle this problem!

6. Where do you see God in the data?

To answer fully the original research question from cycle one more work would need to be done within the churches themselves, amongst non-volunteering parishioners. However, transformation is clearly taking place in the experience of many guests as they journey around the churches and in the coordinated volunteer efforts to support these guests. However, where more work could take place is within the parishes on a pedagogical level to deepen the integration of personal faith and practice, and seeking ways to share these experiences with the wider parish. The role of theologians is to supply those words to help this integration take place.

The ARCS team saw God at work in the words of Nick the Quaker – and would like people to hear more from Nick’s perspective about where he is coming from, not least to sharpen their own articulation of beliefs and values. The Quaker viewpoint is about recognition and not orthodoxy, about seeing the light in people. It would be interesting to see how people responded to Nick to promote debate about the relationship between sacrament and social action amongst the Catholics and Anglicans.

7. What learning might you be keen to draw from this material for people involved in your organisation? What actions would you be keen to take forward?

- *Where does the faith reside in a faith based organisation?*

A faith based organisation is organised by people of faith and designed by people of faith. Who speaks, who listens and who responds to Housing Justice’s espoused Christian voice on national housing issues?

- *The clergy’s role*

Clergy have a vital role to play in this work. Not every volunteer is going to get their heads round these findings but it ought to be possible to get every priest to have something sensible to say. And that would pick up the question about the impact on the parish – they are in the position of being able to communicate across the linguistic divide.

- *Alison’s paper – three way conversation*

A next stage could be to take Alison’s ARCS lecture paper as a text and have a three way conversation between Alison/HJ, clergy in parishes and the ARCS team. Though we appreciate the chances of getting clergy together in a room are limited.

- *Volunteers and guests: where next?*

The ARCS team feel we have run the course on ‘data collection’ with the volunteers and guests. Housing Justice may or may not agree with this. Sally is keen to feed these findings into the training – though Housing Justice needs to do

some soul searching about how much they want to push volunteers. It would be fascinating to compare the volunteer responses with London Jesuit Volunteers who sign up to monthly faith reflection groups using an Ignatian-style.

Questions for reflection

What are the implications of these findings for Housing Justice as it espouses to represent a Christian voice on matters of homelessness?

How does Housing Justice understand its “faith base” to operate in practice?
And at what level does this infiltrate into the organisation’s work?

For Housing Justice what is the significance of volunteers making connections between their work in the shelter and their own beliefs and values? Does their reluctance matter? For whom?

What are the implications for training volunteers particularly in terms of how issues of belief and value are dealt with?

What does Housing Justice mean by hospitality?

This data offers a more complex picture of hospitality than last years – we have suggested theological resonances – can Housing Justice identify others?