

## **Building community in a world of division**

**Revd Dr Howard Mellor**

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It would be good to acknowledge the remarkable work in this field enabled by the Rowntree Trust and the Gulbenkian Foundation and not least the detailed research undertaken by the William Temple Foundation. Personally I pay tribute to the work of Revd Dr George Lovell, a Methodist Minister who committed nearly all his life to Church and Community Development, along with his Roman Catholic colleague Catherine Widdicombe who is a member of The Grail. Other than their work the best books I have read on community are Jean Vanier *Community and Growth*, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

My first exposure to the concept of community was in Deptford and Greenwich in the early 1970s when Red Ken was in power and London transport was cheap and on time! I arrived fresh faced and eager to minister in these communities, their rich culture and endless diversity. Of course I grew up in community but had not thought of Huddersfield in that way – it was simply, 'my street', 'my Town'. But I was aware of differences in community – I discovered in London, no-one spoke, on the trains, in the cafes etc. In fact people looked with suspicion as I invaded their space by attempting of all things, a conversation! Today when you go to London, walk down the pavements and everyone is talking, but not to each other, on the mobile phone!

We should just give a moment to definition (though there are books which devote pages and pages to the subject). Community is:

- A synonym for 'the public', 'everybody' or even in the foreword of a White Paper from the then DHSS, 'This White Paper is ... addressed to the whole community'.
- To refer to a minority or ethnic group, such as the 'Hindu community', the 'gay community'.
- To signal a new approach or soften the public image of an institution, Community College, or Community Prison, or even Community Tax!
- When a public service is locally based and organised in order to provide care in a familiar setting, e.g. care in the community.

- When a service or activity, whether public or voluntary, is run with the participation of local people, e.g. community arts.
- When an activity or protest movement is organised by and for local people, e.g. a residents action group.
- As I have hinted above there are 'virtual communities' in which people engage with others, sometimes anonymously and largely without meeting.

Clearly the essence of community is 'having something in common'. It is a term with an elastic definition referring to groups of people focussed around a common interest, a vision, a heritage, a commitment or a place. These seem to be focussed around **interaction** between people, **interests** shared with others and **identity** with place. In practice this gives rise to Community organisations, community groups, community arts, theatre and media, Community Social Work, and has led to government policies such as Community education, Community Support Officers etc.

Why should community be so important for Christian thought and practice?

**What we believe about God.** Last Sunday we celebrated Trinity Sunday (often the Sunday when clergy take a holiday and leave the explanation to others!). Crucial to any understanding of trinity is the notion of community. Who can forget the talk some years ago in this church with the the image of Rublev's icon with the three figures, separate, connected, focused and committed together. In the doctrine of the trinity is mutuality, respect, difference, serving one another, empathy, more than empathy – devoted love. One cannot speak of the Father without referring to the Son and Holy Spirit and vice versa all round. It was eastern theologian John of Damascus who in the C8th came up with the notion of *perichoresis* which being interpreted means, they get along fine! It is precisely this interrelatedness and mutuality in relation to what we believe about God that notions of community are so important.

**What we believe about people.** Hear this passage from Rowan Williams:

For the Christian believer, human dignity ... depends upon the recognition that every person is related to God before they are related to anything or anyone else ... this means that whenever I face another human being, I face a mystery ... The reverence

I owe to every human person is connected to the reverence I owe to God's creative Word ... I stand before holy ground when I encounter another person – not because they are born with a set of legal rights which they can demand and enforce, but because there is a dimension of their life I shall never see, the dimension where they come forth from the purpose of God into the world, with a unique set of capacities and possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

This is more than a theological notion – it affects that way we are called to deal with all human beings with respect and care.

**Because the Christian faith is a relational faith.** One in which people exist and flourish in relationship. As a parliamentary party report, *Faith in the Future* published this month by a cross party committee of inquiry concludes: relationships are foundational to the Christian faith and to what we have to say to our modern society.<sup>2</sup> John Wesley famously referred to 'social holiness', in which he was not referring to social action, but because holiness was not a solitary thing but one in relationship in Class Meeting – in community. Christian ethics are summarised by the injunction to love God and one another: a call to generosity and sacrifice in making sense of relational faith in community.

If all these things are true why then are things not better? There is a dark side to human experience. There is frustration in the Western communities because we have concluded that wealth has not brought us the kind of childhood we want for our children. While average incomes have doubled in the last 50 years, people are no happier ... in fact for young people in particular, there is evidence to suggest that the opposite is true and they are disaffected by and within community.<sup>3</sup> In the optimism of the early 1970s Browinski could publish a book entitled *The Ascent of Man*. But not today, not after the atrocities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the debacles of Congo and Rwanda, the cycle of violence in

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christianity: Public Religion and the Common Good*, Lecture at St Andrew's Cathedral Singapore, 12 May 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *Faith in the Future*, A Report by a cross-party Committee of Inquiry, Alistair Burt, Andy Reed, Caroline Spelman, Gary Streeter, Steve Webb.

<sup>3</sup> *The Good Childhood*, report from the Children's Society 2006.

Israel Palestine, not after Northern Ireland. Not after James Bulger, and countless other violations against children, adults and whole people groups.

The Cattle Report, published after the riots in a number of cities in 2001, warned against the dangers of ethnic, religious and cultural polarisation within British cities. Parallel lives, or at worst segregation can give rise to a mutual misunderstanding and mistrust which, itself, can breed disaffection at best and open hostility at worst.<sup>4</sup>

There is an eco-aspect to this talk of community. For the next conflicts will not be about desire to dominate, as in the Third Reich, or impose a political system, as with Communism; but it will be about access to the worlds natural resources. We have seen this in Kuwait and Iraq already. If you are not convinced ask yourself why we are not invading Zimbabwe, Dafur and Sudan, Sumatra to bring the same offer of stability, hope and democracy to its people? Answer: They don't have oil! The wars of the future will be about the availability of water (focussed on dams and river courses) and food (focussed on grain and rice). Therefore we have a responsibility now to treat creation well and thus avoid those scenarios. The Bible has numerous warnings about how the 'land' will suffer if people arrogantly do their own thing. Global warming then is not just an affront to all we believe about God as the one who brings all things into being, but is violation of human community for it places the already most vulnerable at greatest risk. Moreover it creates the context within which future conflicts become more likely.

### **What then should we do?**

**Be hopeful.** Community is a subtle web of place, interest, relationship, trust and hope. Hope lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Not a naive optimism, but a hope based on God himself and the clear biblical intention to look to a renewed creation, a new community. As Jonathan Sacks put it, 'Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the faith that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive value, hope is an active one.'<sup>5</sup> Live hopefully, which in my book means we do things.

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<sup>4</sup> Ted Cattle, *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*, Home Office 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*

**Work for Betterment.** It is a pity we do not have more words for Salvation. Betterment is a good one in relation to community development. The necessity of not only working for the common good but in such a way that the situation becomes for all people, 'better'. The saving love of God for the improvement of life for people. Sometimes that requires armed intervention as in Sierra Leone, but mostly it is about ensuring social well being and politic stability in which good things can flourish and create community.

**Keep an eye on the context.** Because every person has dignity and worth therefore our community rules seek to establish fairness for all, and our community provision seeks to look after those most vulnerable, in childhood (including the unborn child, as in Parliament this week) and in vulnerable old age. Yesterday I was in Salisbury and had time to wander in the Cathedral and see the copy of Magna Carta. Some of these understandings have been hard fought and the liberties, limits and justice systems which we call laws are needed to enable that community to flourish for the benefit of all. Such covenants are part of biblical narrative and central to the way people should deal with each other.

**Break down walls of division.** The relationship with other faith communities can be divisive. We have seen that on many continents and in some of our communities. But it need not be like that. The person who I think addresses these things best is Kenneth Cracknell (Methodist Minister, Professor of Mission and Religions, and friend). He argues for relationships of dialogue and understanding, along with mutual support and close co-operation, with devout followers of other faith groups, without being unfaithful to Jesus Christ and betraying the missionary heritage we have.<sup>6</sup>

**Be involved, building community.** The Holy Spirit gives gifts and skills for service in the community which are used in co-operation together (Olive Branch, Night Shelter, Trinity Centre, Christmas Project, Hampshire Emmaus etc). As individuals engaged in community, such as local government, community groups and associations in which we find opportunities to serve others and develop our true potential.

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith*, Epworth, 2005

The parliamentary report to which I referred earlier calls upon us to value relationships, responsibility, trust, self esteem, respect and potential as being the basis for healthy community.<sup>7</sup> It is important for the Christian Church to model such kinds of community to be a healthy Church, but I am out of time to start that topic, but I judge that to be a good place for us to start.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Burt et al, p.56.