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Paper Title: Implementing Policy Goals or Sharing God's Love? Reconciling the Public Policy Agenda with the Faith Agenda

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Summary of Research

This paper builds on a recent research study to examine the interaction between the public policy agenda and non-profit practice. Specifically, the paper looks at the capacity of local churches to respond to the policy of the UK government to promote 'civil renewal' and community and neighbourhood 'cohesion'. Those who contributed to church projects were found to be motivated more by a desire to 'share God's love' than by a wish to be instruments of policy implementation. Church projects were better at building bonding than bridging social capital. The implications for both local churches and policy makers are discussed.

Description

The Link to the Conference Themes:

In line with the conference title 'Nonprofits, Philanthropy and the Public Agenda: Linking Research, Practice and Policy', this proposal builds on a recent research study to examine the interaction between the public policy agenda and non-profit practice. Specifically, the paper is concerned with nonprofits as developers of model programs; the role of nonprofits in addressing frontline public problems; and the way in which public policies affect the mission, operation and evaluation of nonprofits. These conference themes are addressed within the context of the religious sub-sector in the UK.

The UK Public Policy Agenda on Nonprofits:

Two major themes can be discerned in the current UK government's policy agenda in relation to the nonprofit ('voluntary' or 'third') sector. One theme is about the potential of the sector to expand its role in the delivery of public services such as personal and community care. A second theme is essentially about 'building social capital', although it is more usually referred to by UK policy makers as 'promoting civil renewal', developing communities and neighbourhoods, or 'building social cohesion' (HM Treasury, 2002; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Whereas the first theme is about effective and efficient provision of services to those in need, the second reflects more generalised concerns about social behaviour including participation in local and national political systems, street-level crime, anti-social public behaviour, and community development in diverse neighbourhoods.

The twin policy themes (public services and civil renewal) are driving change in all parts of the UK voluntary sector but the UK government is particularly interested at the moment in the potential role of the religious or faith sub-sector (Farnell et al, 2003; Furbey and Macey, 2005; Lukka and Locke, 2000). Faith groups (referred to in this abstract as 'fbos') have been described in recent UK governmental policy documents as "sources of values and commitment", with an important contribution to make to "building a sense of local community and renewing civil society" (LGA, 2002). The government wish to utilise the experience and diversity of fbos and engage with them in policy implementation has been reflected in the establishment of a Faith Communities Unit within the Home Office (Faith Communities Unit, 2004) and in a major pre-election speech by British Prime Minister (Blair, 2005) in which he said he wanted churches to make a 'visible, tangible difference' to society through their 'capacity not only to help, but to inspire and to enthuse ...'.

The Research and Policy Questions:

These trends raise questions about the ability and willingness of the faith sub-sector to respond to the pressures to participate in the implementation of the public policy agenda. To what extent, for example, are fbos able and willing to address frontline public problems? Do they have the capacity to

develop new programmes and promote the development of social capital? And what is the impact on them as organisations as they move into the role of governmental agent; in what ways, for example, are their mission and operation affected?

Previous Research:

There is a growing body of US and UK literature which explores the contribution which fbos can make to public policy implementation (eg Cnaan, 1999; Jackson and Kimberlee, 2004; Smith and Sosin, 2001). Data is starting to accumulate, too, about the implications of changing public policy goals for faith based organisations themselves (Campbell, 2002; Chaves and Tsitsos, 2001; Harris et al, 2003). But the focus of most authors writing about fbos and public policy has been on involvement in the provision of public services such as care and welfare. Few researchers have focused on the way in which fbos are responding to the second public policy theme; the 'civil renewal' or 'social capital building' agenda. (Schneider (1999) has applied the social capital concept to faith-based social services agencies but not in the specific context of public policy pressures.) Our paper, therefore, will explore the extent to which one kind of fbo (local churches) is able to contribute to implementing the UK civil renewal policy agenda and the implications for them of trying to do so.

Our Study and this Paper:

The paper will build on the findings of twelve case studies of local parish churches conducted in 2004 in the (Anglican) Diocese of Birmingham, England. The fieldwork for the diocesan study comprised 26 interviews with parish priests and lay people who took a leading role in church-organised or sponsored activities; 9 focus groups with church members who were active participants in church-organised activities or in community activities organised under the auspices of outside agencies; and 11 focus groups with users of church-organised activities.

The data revealed the many ways in which local churches can benefit local communities and neighbourhoods; through flexible responses to social needs within local communities; by active engagement with diverse groups; through the imaginative use of physical and human resources; and by breaking down barriers across different groupings. They can contribute to building both bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). The case study churches were often providing services and facilitating social contacts for people who were not in touch with other agencies. In many of the parishes studied there were few other community resources. The local and personalised nature of the churches' activities were particularly noted, as was their ability to welcome people who felt excluded from other organisations.

Although the community-building activities of the churches were widely appreciated and were making a substantial contribution to the quality of life in their local areas, the study also showed that implementing the civil renewal policy agenda posed a number of challenges for both clergy and lay people in parish churches.

Those who contributed to local projects were generally motivated more by a Christian concept of 'service' and a desire to 'share God's love' than by a wish to be agents of government in building civil renewal or community cohesion. This had implications for volunteer recruitment, retention and management and also for the day to day work of clergy who were often called upon to learn new skills and work in new ways. In addition, joint work across denominational and community-group boundaries was particularly challenging for many of the churches studied.

The study also suggested that local church projects are often attractive to users and local people because of their informality and independence. And they can be effective in providing care to local people and helping them to develop links with others living nearby. However, they seem to be best at facilitating links within homogeneous groupings such as between older people or between those who volunteer for the church itself; that is they develop bonding social capital. Their capacity to develop bridging social capital, even within local areas, appears to be more limited.

The paper will build on the study findings to explore and discuss the implications not only for

governmental policy makers but also for those who guide the goals and activities of fbos. It will explore the capacity of local churches to respond to the civil renewal policy agenda; to address frontline public problems and to assist in building social capital in local communities and neighbourhoods.

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