

# Faith in Rural Communities:

## Contributions of Social Capital to Community Vibrancy



**Five local facilities are particularly important to rural people: the village hall, pub, primary school, shop and church. The latter has received little attention in either research or policy development. This study, supported by the UK Government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and undertaken by Coventry University in partnership with the Arthur Rank Centre and the Church of England, researches the contribution of people of faith, primarily those from Christian churches, to rural community vibrancy. Five locations across England were studied to understand better the nature and quality of the contribution and its limitations, using the ideas of social capital. Implications for policy and practice are presented.**

- People who attend church regularly make a significant contribution to community vibrancy through their engagement in church based activity and their role in the village. People of faith volunteer to lead or help organise a wide range of activities contributing to rural life. They also give time to caring for others and contributing more informally to a better quality of life. Boundaries between church and community life are frequently blurred.
- The church, through its cycle of prayer and celebration, involvement at crucial stages of life, its ministers and buildings, contributes to a sense of belonging and well being for many people.
- People of faith are involved in the rural community for a variety of reasons. For some it is a practical expression of their faith; others talk of social obligation or that it is 'just part of life'.
- There are constraints on this contribution. Some stem from the older age of the contributors. Younger people often have difficulty in accessing local housing and, for some who attend worship, there is a tendency to commute to church as well as to work and to shop.
- There is a suggestion that some church people are less willing to acknowledge issues of exclusion in their rural communities. They also display a mix of enthusiasm and scepticism towards the practice of local governance.
- Policy makers in government and activists in the voluntary and community sectors need to recognise and acknowledge this contribution of faith to rural community vibrancy. Their challenge is to learn more about faith and to work more co-operatively. Churches themselves also need to recognise the contribution.
- Responses to rural issues, concerning quality of life, care in the community, affordable housing, village schools, community meeting space, the desire for democratic renewal and community empowerment, must not ignore the contribution and the critique of people of faith.
- Churches also face challenges in sustaining their contribution, working in partnership and in recognising and responding to exclusion.

## Background

Five local facilities are highly rated by rural people as strengthening their communities: the pub, village hall, shop, primary school and church. It is the latter with which this research is concerned. The activities of faith communities in rural areas, usually but not exclusively the various denominations of the Christian church, have been neglected in both the development of policy and in research activity. This investigation explores and assesses those factors that encourage and those that discourage faith contributions to vibrant rural communities.

Ideas of social capital provide a useful means of understanding the contribution of faith communities to vibrant villages. The approach emphasises the importance of relationships between people if a community is to work well together, developing trust, ideas and successful activity. The research considers the extent to which people of faith encourage community vibrancy through helping residents to bond with like minded people, bridge to different groups and link to people and organisations with an influence over village life, such as local authorities.

## The research

The research focuses on what people of faith are doing that contributes to community vibrancy.

Five locations were selected for study across England: **Acle** in Norfolk, **Austwick and Clapham** in Yorkshire, **Bridge Sollars** in Herefordshire, **Fence** in Lancashire and **Iddesleigh** in Devon. Interviews were held to understand the faith communities and identify issues of local concern. Focus groups with people of faith explored participants' experiences and motivations.

Finally, data from faith group members was cross checked through interviews with people from outside the faith communities concerned, including village store keepers, parish councillors, local authority officers, and school teachers.

## Contributions to community vibrancy

*"I mean, there are not many people [in the village] that I don't know because I'm involved on so many levels that you get to know the people who are coming in."*

*"People do not perceive a boundary between the faith community and the village community. These projects benefit the whole community. However, people are not necessarily conscious of the work being put in or the difference it makes, until it stops!"*

*"I think that actually in rural areas you have to have these contacts and connections. I mean the Age Concern group is part of a larger network. We recognise that we need to look across a broader base to get the things and services that we need."*

People who attend church regularly make a significant contribution to community vibrancy, one which is nurtured by their beliefs. There is considerable evidence that people who are involved in the church also volunteer to lead or help organise a wide range of the other activities, such as the parish council.

This is also expressed informally through everyday life which gives time to caring for others and helping them to experience a better quality of life. Additionally, many interviewees mentioned the important role played by ministers of religion in visiting, organising and simply being there.

Village history and tradition help to shape identity but some aspects of local rootedness come from the presence and involvement of the church at crucial stages of life. The annual church cycle of prayer and celebration contributes to a sense of belonging and well being.

These contributions to community vibrancy should be seen in context. Other people, who do not share the faith of the churchgoers, also make vital contributions.

## Limits to the contribution

*"Whenever you go to anything, you see the same faces. Sometimes we say it is a sad thing because we wish more people would become involved."*

There are limitations to the contribution of faith communities. Many churchgoers are at the older end of the age profile. This reflects rural communities generally and many congregations. The local housing market has a negative impact on the numbers of younger people able to live locally and thus on the householder profile of the worshipping community.

This profile is reinforced by a tendency for some young families to commute, not just for work and shopping but also to church in nearby towns and cities.



Many long serving participants in church and village life feel they are probably doing too much, but continue to respond to local needs. Willingness to participate can be affected by age and the priorities of work and family.

Evidence from at least one village suggests that some older people have a growing apprehension, if not fear, of youngsters, which affects their willingness to relate to others. Some interviewees, in commenting on their rural communities, hint at the existence of xenophobic and racist attitudes, but without working through the implications of this for their own contribution to community vibrancy.

Some focus group members are sceptical about the institutions of the state and the church. Nevertheless, there is widespread support for and involvement with the structures of local governance, such as parish councils.

## Why contribute?

*“The vast majority who are involved in the church keep this a throbbing, thriving community – and if they weren’t here, it would be dire. They are the ones with the motivation to do things in the village, because they want people involved. They are the ones who push and drive and build the community. Without it the village would be dead really.”*

Why do people of faith contribute to the life of their local community? Some explain that regular prayer and worship provides the basis for ‘right living’. Care for others, trusting relationships, and a willingness to forgive and to accept forgiveness are all seen as vital ingredients in establishing healthy communities. Their behaviour is a practical and visible expression, in private and public life, of their personal faith. Others feel a social obligation, encouraged by the shortage of willing volunteers.

Some are keen to be involved in voluntary and community activity whether Age Concern, farmer support, village festivals or working to get broadband into the village. Sometimes the church needs to be involved to make things happen.

Other respondents find it difficult to identify the source of their motivation. They are involved in the village “because this is just part of life.” Many have overlapping motivations.

## Implications for Policy

If faith communities can make such a contribution what implications does this have for the pursuit of policies and practices that promote rural community vibrancy?

1. A wider recognition of this contribution is needed by Government departments, regional agencies, local authorities and the voluntary and community sectors. Professionals at all levels require a better understanding of religion and people of faith.
2. There is scope for greater co-operation with faith communities. Policy makers should appreciate the resources potentially available. Faith groups should relate to potential partners more openly, critically and with the help of better training.
3. Faith communities face significant challenges. With general reductions in church membership and a relative lack of younger people there are questions about the maintenance of church buildings and the changing role of ordained ministers. How might support be given without threatening independence?
4. Attempts have been made by government and others to measure the quality of life in our communities. Mutual care and support are vital ingredients and should be one such measure. Policies derived from the principles of care in the community would face considerable problems of execution in the absence of such informal, everyday, neighbourly activity. Grant making agencies should, therefore, recognise more fully this faith contribution.
5. Within church congregations people from different backgrounds and with different incomes meet regularly for worship and other organised activities. Thus, bridging takes place within the faith group as well as beyond its boundaries. How might such networks be used more fully to encourage community vibrancy?
6. There is support for faith based schools in the villages studied and the contribution of church-goers to the life of these schools is acknowledged. A more complete understanding of the views of rural communities on faith schools would contribute to the current debate.
7. Opportunities for rural communities to meet through village events and the celebration of church festivals are noted. Church buildings often provide community meeting space. How might



further support for this be encouraged through economic and community development and grant making programmes?

8. The need for affordable rural housing is a constant theme of the research. How might the church play a more active role in assessing need and making a contribution to meeting that need through decisions about the use of land within their control?
9. Churchgoers are often seen to take the initiative in responding to the needs of the young and the old in their communities, whether organised through the church or not. How might these initiatives be encouraged?
10. Faith groups have a contribution to make to promote the inclusion of people who are excluded for whatever reason. Sometimes this opportunity is not grasped. How might all stakeholders be challenged to greater engagement with these issues? Should parish plans include policies on community cohesion?
11. Churchgoers bring local benefit through their links to business, the voluntary sector and national church structures. How might these resources be better used?
12. To what extent are Local Strategic Partnerships and Regional Assemblies taking government

advice to include faith community representatives? People of faith make a central contribution to governance at the parish level; their involvement elsewhere may be limited. How might they be helped to contribute to higher tiers of government?

13. Church groups appear to be fully involved in parish plan making. How might they also be encouraged to participate in the statutory development plan process, where policies for property development and affordable housing are agreed?
14. The Government's commitment to democratic renewal, local community empowerment and devolution to local neighbourhoods opens up the possibility of church people contributing to the debate and being part of the resulting arrangements. How can this be facilitated?
15. Finally, from 2007 all local authorities will have Local Area Agreements, one of the themes of which is working for stronger communities. In relation to this, people of faith are keen to influence decisions about their locality, need to be challenged about how people from different backgrounds get on and provide a wealth of good examples of volunteering.



### For further information:

The full report, **Faith in Rural Communities: Contributions of Social Capital to Community Vibrancy**, is available on the Defra website [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk) and in printed form from: ACORA Publishing, the Arthur Rank Centre, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire CV8 2LZ. 024 7685 3060 / [arcadmin@rase.org.uk](mailto:arcadmin@rase.org.uk). £10.00 + postage.  
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