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Faith and the Big Society

Context

In 2001, four out of every five respondents to the Home Office Citizenship Survey reported having some kind of affiliation to a faith community. So it is not surprising to find Communities Minister Andrew Stunell stressing that faith-based community action is a key part of the vision for the Big Society. In a recent address to the Faith-Based Regeneration Network [FbRN], he spoke of how faith-based organisations are well-rooted in communities and have a long track record of successful work to address social needs. He noted that they are also able to stimulate volunteering, and draw on their own financial resources. ¹

¹ Keynote speech at the Faith Based Regeneration Network national conference in London on 19 October by Andrew Stunell Communities Minister

Case study

Malt Cross

The Malt Cross is a Christian project located in a Victorian music hall in the heart of Nottingham, containing a cafe bar, modern gallery space for art, craft and other creative events, a prayer room and space that can be used for outreach into the city centre.

Through £1.97m in grants from various sources, including the National Lottery and Arts Council, the building was acquired by the Malt Cross Music Hall Trust Company in 1997, with the objective of restoring and preserving the building for the city.

The Trust aims to reach out in practical and appropriate ways with God's love, responding to the needs of people in their 20s and 30s who use the city at night, whilst encouraging safe and responsible drinking, and building community and long term relationships with people.

Other projects run or facilitated by the Trust include investment in young and local talent and emerging artists, Street Pastors, Safe Space, Clubs Outreach, Café Theologic and CAP money management.

For more information visit www.maltcross.com



East Midlands Dimension

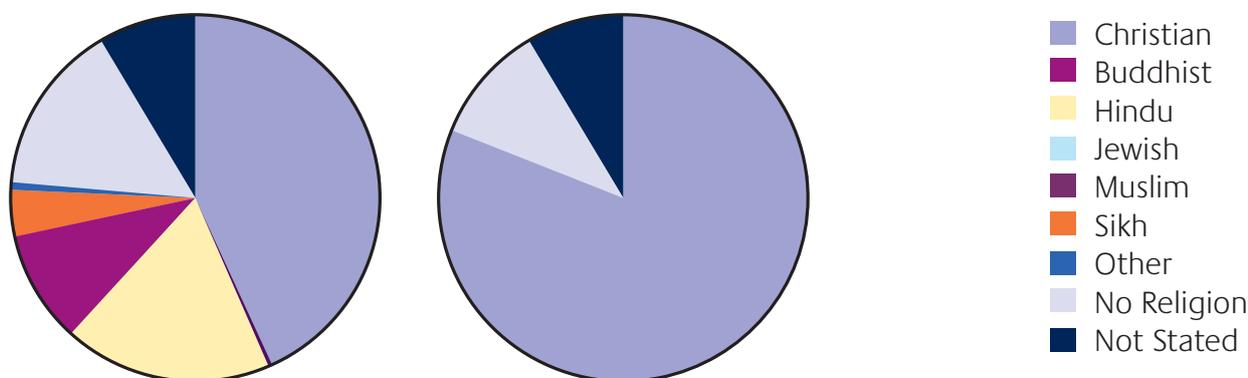
The 2001 Census shows 72% of the people in the East Midlands region think of themselves as Christian with 1.6% identifying as Hindu, and 1.7% as Muslim.

Christian	72.0%	Sikh	0.8%
Buddhist	0.2%	Other	0.2%
Hindu	1.6%	No religion	15.9%
Jewish	0.1%	Religion not stated	7.5%
Muslim	1.7%		

These figures however look rather different when viewed from a Local Authority perspective. For example:

Leicester City

Lincolnshire City



In Leicester, when compared within the rankings for England and Wales, the level of Christian affiliation drops to 44.7%. This shows Leicester to have almost the smallest population of Christian affiliation with only Tower Hamlets having a smaller Christian faith group. Hindu affiliation increases to 14.7% (3rd in England and Wales after Harrow and Brent Local Authorities) and Muslim affiliation to 11% (17th in England & Wales).

The East Midlands faith communities are supported by two regional infrastructure networks. The **East Midlands Churches Forum** supports the Churches' engagement with local government and other agencies, identifies issues of concern and opportunities for action, and works to develop dialogue and partnership between churches, church-based voluntary and community organisations, and the public sector at every level. It tries to ensure that the agendas of these organisations include and respect Christian values, the quality of life, and the views of those who would otherwise not have a voice.

The **Faiths Forum for the East Midlands (FFEM)** is the regional hub for dialogue and co-operation between people with different religious beliefs and worldviews who share a commitment to good citizenship and building a society where we can all feel at home, where there is respect for difference and where diversity is valued. The Christian churches have national, regional and local structures, and most are able to appoint professional ministers, so that they are better placed to bridge to other organisations and link to public authorities than the minority faith communities, which depend very much on the voluntary efforts of their members, and may not have regional and national structures and networks to support them.

Challenges and opportunities

Faith communities have a strong tradition of advocacy and support for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our society. Their immediate response to questions around the Big Society was to highlight the potential impact on these socially excluded and marginalised groups. Their concerns and also the possibilities they recognise are echoed by every area of the VCS and are discussed in more detail elsewhere.

People may participate in a faith community by believing, by belonging and by rolling up their sleeves. Communities of faith may be rooted in a particular neighbourhood, or ‘gathered’ from a wide area. The congregation of a village church is likely to be local, and its social and community activities will be directed by and responsive to the needs and traditions of the village; the congregation of a large urban mosque may be largely drawn from the surrounding neighbourhoods, and its social and community activities will be directed by and responsive to a very different set of needs and traditions; the ‘gathered’ community of a Jain temple may travel from across the region, or even further, and the focus of their activities may be different again.

Faith communities come together on a basis of shared beliefs, shared traditions and trust. They are a source of strength and resilience to their members, particularly in unfamiliar places and challenging situations. People may turn to their faith community for help, advice, friendship, support and security, and within the community people will strive to meet one another’s needs, often with very limited resources.

The churches, and in recent years other faith communities as well, may open their doors and extend their services to anyone in need in their neighbourhood. They may have resources to share: premises with kitchens and toilets, sometimes transport (minibuses), office equipment – a photocopier for example, one or more dedicated professionals, and a commitment to service to their neighbours. Faith organisations may be a source of social capital, of finance, of volunteers and of goodwill, upon which the wider voluntary and community sector can draw. In a sector with dwindling resources, faith-based organisations may be in a position of strength.

The Big Society is a vision not a plan. Faith (and other) communities of place or interest can help to define the Big Society, offer innovative ideas, tell local government what the felt needs of the neighbourhood are, which interventions and community services are making a difference, and work to determine how local needs can best be met. Faith-based organisations may be able to lead on bids to provide services, help raise funds to buy valued resources on behalf of the community, or act as advocates for local people in challenging inappropriate bureaucratic decisions. All this will depend on partnerships and networks, because faith groups are often small, and like other VCS organisations, have to take care not to bite off more than they can chew.

Faith communities are resilient. Where there is a need, people of faith have traditionally found a response and will continue to do so – they are already the Big Society in action. Historically the churches have provided health and social care, homelessness and education services, and more recently have been working in partnership with the welfare state, offering exceptional value added services through a committed volunteer base. In an increasingly multi-religious and multi-cultural society where the pressure to deliver more for less is ever stronger, the challenge is seeking ways for all faith communities to co-operate and do what is needed, and not feel overwhelmed by expectations. It is important that faith communities do not turn inward, and withdraw from social engagement, just as the needs increase.

Impact of National Policy

Church Action on Poverty and similar groups are campaigning against recent **Welfare Reform** announcements and faith leaders are speaking out against *'The stigmatising effect these announcements have had on the poorest and most vulnerable in society'*. The welfare reform will certainly place a great deal of pressure on the provision of support to vulnerable people, and increase the need for such support, but will leave little in the way of resources to provide it. Faith organisations may be well placed to provide an informed view on the impact of welfare reform.

The **2010 Equalities Act** makes religion or belief one of the 'protected categories' in law, so that no-one may be discriminated against because of what he or she believes, or does not believe, because of the religion he or she professes, or does not profess. The Act is intended to help us live together peacefully in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society, and to cope with both the need for fairness and the fact of diversity. For both religious people and others it poses a challenge to our capacity to respect and value the other.

The **Localism Bill** now before parliament, which sets out the new rights that will underpin the Big Society – the right to buy, the right to bid, and the right to challenge - may bring significant opportunities for faith communities to take a lead in developing the neighbourhood where they find themselves, and to work with others to make a difference to the wider society. Given their consistent and stable presence within most neighbourhoods, and their experience of caring for the sick through hospital chaplaincy, home visiting and care services, there may be an emerging role for faith communities to forge relationships that can inform the new GP consortia being created through the **NHS reform process** and bring valuable local knowledge and perspective to the commissioning process in their area.