

For the next generation

May 2011

Introduction

'There is something about genuinely caring about your neighbour and genuinely wanting to deliver excellent quality services out of a pure motivation that touches people in a way that other things don't.'

Angie King, Springfield Children's Centre Manager

'It doesn't matter that we don't get the funding but what matters to me is that for the first time in my life somebody's wanted to do something for me.'

A traveller parent in conversation with Sheenagh Davis, Centre Manager at HOPE Family Centre

This paper is the result of a focused piece of research, designed to find out the range and diversity of family support provided by the Church of England and its members, to explore effectiveness and reach, to identify any barriers to further work. Family support work, in this case, covers provision of a wide variety of services and activities for the under-fives and their parents or carers.

Three contrasting dioceses, Hereford, Oxford and Birmingham have been selected for their varied socio-economic and ethnic contexts. The challenge of responding to the effects of rural deprivation on families in Herefordshire and Oxfordshire, for instance, contrasts with what is required to support young families in multi-ethnic Birmingham.

Because this focused piece of research is designed to uncover what is going on at the level of **Church of England** family support, the question of what these projects deliver in terms of benefits to children and young families will be asked, unapologetically, in that context. What quality of service to young children and their families are local churches enabling, promoting or achieving? What, if any, distinctive characteristics or 'added value' do Church of England family support

projects offer in terms of provision of services for young families? What challenges do projects face and how can they be strengthened in the face of obstacles and especially in the light of current economic uncertainty?

There are a variety of ways in which churches are involved in family support work. Each project I visited was different at the level of its original vision, self-understanding and levels of identification with the local church. One project, for instance, is housed in a stunning 12th Century church, in Peterchurch, a remote rural area in Herefordshire. St Peter's has been strikingly re-ordered. It now houses Local Authority Sure Start provision on a three day a week basis. On Thursdays, the local authority team quietly set up their services in the nave, while a service of Holy Communion takes place in the chancel. When the clients leave their parent and toddler sessions, they are greeted by the friendly team of church volunteers who staff the church's Community Café and befriend the young parents. In an area where 'nothing ever happened' at the level of service provision, there is now a 'real buzz' in terms of the church community and in the wider community.

Another Herefordshire project, HOPE Family Centre, although it receives some Sure Start funding, is primarily an independently funded charity. It is housed in a stand-alone modern, American-log cabin style wood-built Family Centre and run by Sheenagh Davis, a creative and highly energetic Christian social entrepreneur. A local vicar is Vice-Chair of the Board of Trustees but the Centre's initially strong links with that specific local Anglican church have now weakened, in tune with Sheenagh's own personal journey, and HOPE now receives a broad base of ecumenical support from Christian groups across the area. The relative freedom afforded to HOPE by its independent status is now allowing Sheenagh to push the boundaries and to model new approaches to provision of family support

This paper will aim to highlight headline aspects of each project and thus to build up, incrementally, a big picture Church of England family support 'story'. What are the

particular achievements of projects and what are the shared lessons they highlight for those who seek to offer family support services today?

However in order to understand the context in which the Church of England offers support, it is necessary briefly to note the development of wider family support given by statutory services, particularly since the announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1998 to bring together quality services for children under 4 and their parents and to offer support for parenting with substantial funding under the banner of Sure Start. These services have tended now to be focused on children's centres, of which there are, currently, approximately 3,600, mainly funded by local authorities.

Research Methodology

The areas and projects were chosen in consultation with Rebecca Payne at the Archbishops' Council's Cathedral and Church Buildings Division. Rebecca had carried out extensive nation-wide research into the use of church buildings for a variety of community projects. Wendy Coomby, Community Partnership & Development Officer for Hereford Diocese, was also instrumental in pointing me to HOPE Family Centre.

The research questions (see pp 36 - 39 in the Appendix) were designed to establish a project's story and ethos, activities and aims, management and funding structures, the level to which it identified with the church, and that to which it espoused explicit Christian faith values. Ruth Visick-Evans was a great help here and pointed me to the thinking of Thomas Jeavons, about the distinctive characteristics of religious organizations.¹ My questions were refined in consultation with Lynda Barley of the Archbishops' Council's Research and Statistics Division and Dr Sylvie Collins-Mayo, Principal Lecturer in Sociology at Kingston University.

¹ Thomas Jeavons, 'Identifying Characteristics of "Religious" Organisations: An Exploratory Proposal,' in N. J. Demerath, Peter Hall, Terry Schmitt & Rhys Williams (eds.), *Sacred Companies: Organisational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organisations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.79-95.

Project Profiles in brief

1. St Peter's Centre, Peterchurch, Hereford

Creative use of ancient church building in a mutually beneficial synergy between a church's desire to see something happen in the locality 'where nothing ever happens' and Local Authority Sure Start aims. The Vicar's inclusive vision *enables* rather than manages positive change and human flourishing.

2. Springfield Children's Centre, Birmingham

When a church project becomes a statutory service provider and maintains its Christian ethos, a platform is created for demonstrating family support excellence in a majority Muslim community.

3. HOPE Family Centre, Bromyard, Hereford

This project leader's independent, faith-based stance combined with the project's independent charitable status, ultimately, earn the respect of a Local Authority and provide the basis for trend-setting, holistic family support.

4. PACT Witney Children's Centre.

This is an account of the challenges involved when a small, local-church initiated, family centre grows, rapidly, beyond the confidence and capacity of the local churches to manage it. It becomes a successful, second phase children's centre with a strong emphasis on family support and outreach to the community. With the change of ethos and management, however, the original church volunteers leave and the direct in-put of the local churches ceases.

5. St Paul's, Crossover, Bordesley Green, Birmingham

A social entrepreneur minister in a fragile inner city context, talks of a focus on fund-raising and networking and a long-term commitment to vulnerable people and fragile signs of the transformation of life in that area.

6. Narthex, St John's Sparkhill Birmingham

In a majority Muslim area, this church's Stay and Play group is, unapologetically, Bible-based and provides not only parenting support but a message of release and hope for its clients.

Project Profiles

St Peter's Centre, Peterchurch, Hereford

'An extraordinary project ..with very few people, for a small village in a small and isolated are, in a community where people thought ' Nothing ever happens here' we've proved that wrong...we have raised morale in all sorts of ways'....

Simon Lockett, Vicar of St Peter's Church and Chair of the St Peter's Centre, Partnership Group

Already referred to in the introduction, this innovative project is attracting a lot of attention *'there's a lot of buzz'* says Vicar Simon Lockett, since the newly re-ordered Grade 1 listed 12th century church building was opened in January 2010 to house Sure Start provision, a library and various other complementary services.

Mutually beneficial service provision

Simon Lockett talks about the mutual cycle of benefits that comes from Sure Start being housed in the church for three days a week:

'At a very simple level we provide a space and they (Sure Start) then provide the services but what happens on a more intuitive level ... there is a lot of partnership

working. So I will pick up on issues that might be happening within families within our parishes and be able to make a pastoral visit and vice versa.'

The Community Café, Inspire, provides a natural, multi-generational, meeting point between older church volunteers and the young parents emerging from their various classes. Clearly, Jean Jones, the Church Warden and her husband, David, both in their seventies, enjoy the opportunity to meet with the young families and befriend them.

Simon talks about one of the many Sure Start classes, Baby Yoga. Apparently, he laughs, he made a baptism visit and asked how the baby was sleeping – the parents told him that their baby has slept really well all through the night ever since attending the class and learning the technique of the parent lying on the mat and holding the baby upside down above them by the ankles!

Other complementary activities provided by the church, include a thriving, Iyengar Yoga class (a particularly user friendly version) is attended by locals and people from surrounding areas, aged between 16 and their sixties. Cori, who teaches yoga says that she was drawn to the church by Simon's inclusive attitude. She tells me:

'People think it's fantastic that the church is being used for a community resource that they relate to'...

Cori feels welcome in the church thanks to Simon and inclusiveness. There is a library, staffed by trained volunteers housed in the bell tower, a community outreach worker is based at St Peter's Centre once a week and also a weekly belly dancing class for women only.

Sure Start at St Peter's Centre

'We find it's a two way thing because people that wouldn't normally access our services are going round for other things like the café, like the library, and seeing

what we offer , so we're getting people that way and vice versa ...It's beginning to flow really nicely now as we're all developing.'

Sure Start manager, Carol Amos:

Sure Start provides a wide range of classes and services, the only constraints are that the design of the building doesn't allow for some forms of confidential interventions.

Carol tells me about the Sure Start team and the commitment to providing fun, sociable learning activities such as Time for Play. Here, the team of experienced childcare workers provides activities based on child development principles. Play tasks are designed to help children learn early maths, early language and early creativity. The team role plays and demonstrates these activities, which are all very low cost and easily replicable at home. Building a big boat out of cardboard boxes, for example, creates an opportunity for children to learn about working together, being sociable and being creative.

Bums on seats?

4 out of 6 of the projects visited had seen very little *direct* movement between their family support work and the growth of the local church community. However, in a rural context and with the high degree of synergy between church and Local Authority service provision, St Peter's has seen its family service congregation double as a result of young families being drawn in via involvement in the re-development project ('the best Alpha Course I ever did'). There is also crossover too via families, who come to the centre, also coming for baptism.

'We have not done anything 'managed' to make the crossovers work, (I mean you're talking about small numbers here...it's all small numbers) ...maybe that's why... (Simon laughs here).'

'All the ducks in a row'

Prior to my visit, I spoke to Wendy Coomby, Community Partnership & Development Officer for Hereford Diocese. She talked about the catalytic impact of

the Archbishops' Council's report, *Building Faith in the Future*, upon her and how she became a 'serial botherer' in the diocese. Sure Start approached Wendy Coomby and her team, together with the diocesan social responsibility people, because of her high profile in advocating the creative use of church buildings in community projects.

Sure Start's approach, in turn, coincided with a receptive NSM minister and the arrival of Simon Lockett with his inclusive vision and leadership style. The existence of a small team of dedicated church members was also fundamental to the project's success.

This positive constellation of the right sort of people, and the right sort of leadership skills, lead to St Peter's Centre becoming a reality.

Springfield Centre, Birmingham

Will we continue to be God's love in our community? I think largely they have managed to square the circle by delivering statutory services but with a Christian ethos.

Revd Tom Thomas, Chair of Board of Management and Associate Minister at St Christopher's

'79% of people are from a Pakistani Muslim background. It is unusual to have such a big mono-culture ... the majority of our families live in quite a lot of deprivation, a lot of private landlord rented housing, quite old and in very poor condition, a lot of families in extended families, high mobility ...workless households. We have poor indicators of health like high obesity. There are low figures of breast feeding ...Some of the highest infant mortality in the country.'

Angie King, Springfield Centre Manager

In November 2008, an imposing, glass-fronted modern children's centre adjoining St Christopher's church, was opened to the public by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The

Springfield Children's Centre resulted from two approaches made by Birmingham City Council to the church. The first approach was rebuffed by the Parish Church Council. There were fears about the constraints of delivering statutory services. The second approach was accepted and then advantageously negotiated by some highly experienced professional members of the PCC.

Faith-based values and statutory service provision - in synergy

Revd Tom Thomas, associate minister at St Christopher's, points out a usefully illustrative example of synergy between Local Authority provision and the project's origins in church parent and toddler groups, the church-based Play and Stay, Seedlings:

*'Seedlings is **unique**. It is both a church stay and play group and part of the centre's offer and delivered by church volunteers. There is no question that they are seeking to offer friendship, acceptance and love and so on to the carers and children who come there. They are seeking to transmit their faith but it is mainly the caring side of faith. If you took the Christian bit out of them most of them wouldn't be here.'*

At the very simplest level, it is possible to be part of this project as a person of Christian faith and for that to be valued and supported because it is part of the ethos of the managers and the project itself:

'Faith is valued whenever we go away for an away day, usually Angie will speak and stress the Christian roots of the project and because this is a faith-based project there are certain values which we cherish and hold and which we allow to guide us. People of other faiths are welcomed and are affirmed in their faith'.

Tom Thomas

It is, moreover, in this context of valuing faith that the project has achieved a remarkable level of service and acceptance by a largely Muslim community. Angie explains the 'short hand' for how this works from a Muslim perspective:

'We know about Christian values, because we're people of faith. We prefer to come here because we are people of faith like you...'

In harmony with this respectful attitude towards the beliefs and values of those who attend the centre, she adds:

'I don't see it as any part of the work of the project to preach or teach about Christ, we tell our story and we talk about Christian values in a way that everyone can understand and translate into and similar values from my faith are or similar values from someone I respect are ...'

Volunteers

Local community ownership of the project includes enthusiastic levels of volunteer support. Alongside 40 paid staff there are 41 volunteers.

'Jobs are important an opportunity for people, volunteering is an important opportunity for people and it shouldn't be just be kept for the church. It's about sharing and benefitting the community.'

Angie King

Angie King talks about a 'two way draught' between church and community, Christian and those of other faiths or none:

'I think actually, the people who volunteer in the project get at least as much as they give and find that they make friends outside of their own faith circles and age group or whatever and find confidence and enjoyment in serving that maybe they weren't expecting and yeah enjoyment of life that maybe they didn't have before.'

She adds: 'it's not just a case of Christians influencing the community but the community are influencing the Christians and helping them to better work out their faith.'

Angie then reflects on the challenge of maintaining a distinctive Christian identity in the light of the project employing paid staff and having volunteers from another faith or no faith. *‘... how far do you go before the project isn’t Christian any more and has lost its roots and just gets cut adrift and becomes like any other children’s centre and loses the very thing that’s actually given it the edge and made it so excellent, which is the genuine wanting to serve the community by members of the church whether it’s through volunteering or being on the management board?’*

For her the answers lie to certain extent in key appointments of church and diocesan representatives at Trustee Board level and that of the Centre Manager:

‘ I think in the future the project would need to think if they were recruiting a Head of Centre, it probably would need to be a genuine occupational requirement that they were a Christian because there is a requirement to be able to link strongly with the church and to be able to pray.’

A platform for excellence

Angie, talks about the positive results of having a new, purpose built children’s centre. There is local pride. The existence of a parental consultation group and the way the project has been presented to the community have strengthened a sense that it is *their* centre. Also, alongside the increased levels of paper work, rigour and accountability which come with some of the statutory obligations, having a recognisable, attractive building leads to opportunities for other service providers to come under the project umbrella.

To be publicly visible and accountable as a city council children’s centre, has, thirdly, served as a platform for excellence and allowed those who work at the centre to demonstrate exceptionally high standards and to become *the* centre to aspire to in Birmingham.

Angie, says that in the first quarter of 2010, in terms of successfully reaching target families, Springfield had twice the success of its nearest ‘competitor’. She understands that very much in the context of the faith values and prayer that underpins the project. In answer to the question, ‘What would happen if you dropped the ‘Christian’ bit?’ she replied:

‘We would become just like all the other very good children’s centre services and they are very good but we have seen the highest number of families use our centre of the seventy-five centres in Birmingham... In the first quarter we had seen 500 children and that was almost double what the number 2 (in the list of results achieved by Birmingham children’s centres) was... Part of that is because we create a welcoming atmosphere and genuinely value parents and people know, people know when they come to a service whether you are just doing a job and going through the motions...’

The project is demonstrating exceptional professional effectiveness in the context of, and indivisible from, its Christian ethos. Talking about ‘going the extra mile’ values, such as taking parents and children very seriously, seeing them as people not statistics, Tom Thomas describes something intrinsic to the project’s approach:

‘Any good children’s centre should be doing that but . . .you don’t have to convince people of that. It’s in the DNA here. People want to do more than deliver statutory services. People do want to be involved in transformation.’

The HOPE Family Centre, Bromyard, Herefordshire

The philosophy of this place is really simple: ‘Never take your eyes off the child’.

Sheenagh Davis, founder and Centre Manager of HOPE Family Centre

The value of independent vision

Having had an initially rocky start with the Local Authority, delays, disappointments and an uphill struggle, Sheenagh's faith-inspired vision, *chutzpah* and ability to push the boundaries, both in terms of the geographical area serviced and flexibility about age ranges covered, have now earned her a reputation for reaching the families that other children's centres don't.

HOPE is situated in the rural Market Town of Bromyard, Herefordshire which is a pocket of deprivation within the top 20% nationally. Some of the children, who attend, are amongst the top 11% of the most socially deprived and the centre also caters for unusually high levels of children with special needs. Special language problems and learning problems are catered for. HOPE also has a reputation for working with parents who have drug and alcohol problems and they also work with the local traveller community.

Sheenagh describes the positive benefits of being able to offer a universal service rather than one uniquely targeted at families who qualify as having levels of high deprivation. In this, non-stigmatising context, alongside increased literacy and social confidence amongst the children, she has seen disruptive young children moved off the register of children at risk of being taken into care. She is very concerned that a new emphasis on targeted delivery at national government level will greatly reduce the socially beneficial effects of family support centres.

Modeling future trends

Just recently Sheenagh has heard that the council think the centre provides a '5 star service'. She says that they have had to prove themselves and adds that the Centre is delivering '*at a quarter of the price because we are match funding ... so we are great value!*'

As an independently-run charity, although their *Sure Start* funding focuses on the under-fives, if they go into a family for family support work and there is a teenager there, for example, they can offer support to the teenager too. Sheenagh tells me that

their approach is starting to be more widely advocated: *'People are saying now 'think family' rather than just 'think child'.*

Due to the strength of their relationship with the local Primary Care Trust, HOPE has been selected, also, to pilot a new form of comprehensive family support with a new co-location, multi-agency team. *'With local GP support, we are working in a far more comprehensive way with the whole family and it has become the template for other centres.'*

New modes of capturing evidence

One of the things that HOPE models is an increased participation on the part of the parents when it comes to evidence gathering. The practice of using scrap books to record the activities and progress made by families is fairly common in children's centres. However, what is unique at HOPE is that parents themselves are encouraged to make scrapbooks and to participate in the process of measuring what has been going on.

Sheenagh says:

'We had a group together, analyzed by a group from Worcester University; the thing that was really important to me was to hear their stories... A mum and dad split up. There was a new partner and new baby and Rachel from here did some family support and the eleven year old saw how much it had helped her (his mother) and he came and volunteered! If they had just written an evaluation sheet we wouldn't have captured this in-depth.'

'I just think we are beginning to make some in-roads. I don't think we will see the real benefits until the next generation'

Sheenagh talks about a young woman who, in the earliest days of the project, prior to the Sure Start concept, was brought as a baby to parent and toddler groups run by Sheenagh at the local Methodist Hall. This young woman now has a baby herself and their first port of call is the HOPE Family Centre. This spiral of positive effects

indicates the possibility of the project making even greater impact locally, if it keeps going. For this reason, Sheenagh is giving a lot of thought to sustainability, to putting key staff, funding and practices in place should Sure Start funding get chopped or should anything happen to her.

PACT Witney Children's Centre, Oxfordshire

This story is a tale of success - a small family support initiative grows rapidly and attains greater reach and stability. This account also illustrates something of the complexity of growing a project, and negotiating new management and funding structures, while maintaining original ethos and volunteers.

Story in brief

'The more we picked up the stones of poverty, the more we saw the need underneath and the more we could make a case for getting income to pay for that.'

Tim Edge

When Tim Edge took up a post as Witney team vicar, he thought he was moving to relatively prosperous part of rural Oxfordshire. So, he was surprised when local headmasters told him, that they had to provide pumps for children who had no shoes. They also had concerns about some pupils being inadequately nourished. Working with Health Visitor, Trudy Johnson and CPN Jane Webb, Tim inspired local churches, Churches Together in Witney, to get involved both by volunteering and by agreeing to provide seed funding for a new project.² In 1997, they initiated a "Family Centre", to serve the families of Witney, in particular to care for those in poverty and social deprivation.

Tim describes the establishment of this 'family centre' as something of a leap of faith!

² This underwriting gave confidence to Trudy and Jane and their managers, so they were permitted to apply for funding from the council and various funds they knew.

'We were minuted regularly at the meetings of Churches Together in Witney, ... but there was no formal undertaking with us as community initiative. The initial funding was underwritten in the Churches Together in Witney minutes. We had envisioned, and our visions held true, that once we got going the funding would arrive!'

The Centre began as a 'simple drop in for parents and children' and then took on the provision of pre-school breakfast clubs for children. It grew to include drugs support work, and teenage pregnancy outreach, support and education.

Witney Families Together's income eventually reached tens of thousands a year. By this stage they had charitable status, and an independent trustee board and management committee. They had employees who had been dependent upon them for over two years (including local volunteer mums who had by then received training). At this point, the original team deemed it necessary to ask PACT (Parents and Children Together, a professional agency working on behalf of the Diocese of Oxford in the area of nurturing family life), to manage the project and its finances. As an existing family centre, in Oxfordshire, Witney Families Together was made into a second phase children's centre and was re-named PACT Witney Children's Centre in 2006.

How a transition can affect the church volunteers

In the early stages, a part-time project leader, Louisa Holgate came on board along with local church volunteers. There was a high degree of commitment.

The volunteers and Louisa were willing to work for no money if there were financial problems, and Louisa agreed to work part time for almost full time effort.

However, as the project grew and required greater levels of external advice, PACT was brought, initially, just to advise:

It was at this point that (the trustees) began to feel ill equipped, as PACT guide lines were largely about employees or volunteers as simple helpers at groups.

No-one in Churches Together had the time or expertise to become trustees in the long-term. Tim also sensed that there was a lack of confidence amongst the Churches Together members in the face of a major, long-term commitment. Tim, who was a trustee and acting treasurer, could not call upon Christian treasurers, HR experts and so forth. He did manage a Christian treasurer when things got beyond the 3 year stage, but his colleague had to stop within a year due to the pressure of work

Alienation, 'procedures' and paper work

As the place became more "professional" it appeared to be less volunteer friendly. Church volunteers began to drift away. Reflecting on the issue, Tim says

'I think that the "nature of the task" itself was far from overwhelming for the volunteers: that is why they were volunteering to do the tasks (and may have been able to teach the paid staff a thing or two).'

Trying to tease out the reasons for church volunteer drift, he identifies the following possible causes:

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 1. The hassle of procedures and 'paperwork' – *'in the end it may be that stopping is easier than either putting up with tiresome paperwork'*
 2. Additionally, the 'human dynamics' of *'the "I'm paid, you are only a volunteer" type stuff'*. Christian volunteers beginning to feel a bit outnumbered by employees and "procedures".
 3. *'The management processes now in place under PACT did not contain within them an explicit recognition of the Christian volunteers or project's foundation, but were driven by the acceptance of County Council funding'*

requirements. Such requirements did not preclude Christian values, but simply did not state them.'

4. The roles both of the local churches and Christians became increasingly anomalous, despite the understanding expressed by the project's new manager, Yolanda Hampshire, who, though not a church going Christian, was sympathetic to the project's original ethos. *'I wonder if it was an excuse to stop, or an unwillingness on the part of less mature Christian volunteers to engage with the difficult task of stating your place in an organisation that was not wholly Christian.'* says Tim.

He adds:

'I would say the project's moorings are still in sight, as the Children's Centre is still based at a church, and that church does feel protective towards the project, and believes it is doing good things, but without their direct involvement ...'

PACT Witney Children's Centre today

A continuing location within the town Methodist Church's rooms, is one of the most visible indicators of the projects origins as a local ecumenical church initiative. The Methodist church have made PACT Witney Children's Centres one of the charities it supports and Yolanda tells me that Richard Donaghue, the minister there, is 'brilliant'. Clearly, although there is no direct involvement in the work of the centre, the relationship of the church housing the Centre with the project team is supportive.

Yolanda drew my attention to PACT Witney Children's Centre's strong emphasis on family support work, one to one work, going out into the community to engage pro-actively with families in an area. The team does 'a good job of getting the Children's Centre out there'. Members attend school fetes, and switch on lights at the local motor show, to attract dads. They spent a whole summer using a special van to deliver drop-in interventions on village greens in, as yet, unaccessed areas of Witney and neighbouring Ducklington, in order to get the message of the Children's Centre out there. Significantly for this account, this pro-active emphasis, while not untypical

of children's centres, stems, in part, from making a virtue of the centre's location in church rooms and, thus, avoiding the 'come to us' mentality of a dedicated building.

While there, I visited a Play and Stay group there and spoke to mothers, one of whom (see, also, pages 26-27) expressed her delight about the benefits her child had received by attending regularly and also identified the value for her of consistency of welcome and support due to low staff turnover. Yolanda, for her part, believes that the Centre's success derives from its foundational emphasis on family support and the caring ethos this gives the whole place.

Tim Edge is an enthusiastic trustee of PACT and he is, clearly, proud of what has been achieved in terms of the project's increased reach, professionalism and stability. He regrets, nevertheless, the project's loss of strong identification with the original local churches, in terms of the involvement of voluntary leadership and helpers, and the real sense of the centre both being embraced by, and feeding into a wider local church community. He misses, too, a certain level of informality and the possibility for distinctive Christian ministry. They used to be able to offer prayer to centre users, to take one instance.

St Paul's Crossover, Bordseley Green, Birmingham

'It might be organizational but it has to have a face...'

When, in 2006, ex motor business accountant, Susan Barter, inherited this church-run community project in inner city Birmingham, she knew she was coming to the 'coal face'. She also knew that, thanks to a year's worth of generous funding for the project, she had 'a year to understand' and then it would be 'challenging'. The funding stopped at the end of September 2007 and Susan knew that her role would be to establish the project's long-term future and thus create her own exit strategy.

When the business manager moved on to another role in Birmingham Diocese, Susan took on the role and put herself on a fund-raising course. She felt that it was important that someone representing the organization be a committed Christian.

In a fragile community with high levels of worklessness and a high proportion of Asian Muslims, Crossover offers a breadth of services similar to that of a children's centre. There are Sure Start 'hot desks' at the resource centre, and various other health, debt and employment advice agencies also use the premises. There is also a nursery which is self-funded.

'We wouldn't still be here if I hadn't got out there and done it.'

Almost from the outset and, indeed, throughout in my interview with her, Susan strongly emphasized the need for networking. She has committed herself to maintaining high levels of visibility at Local Authority level and that of faith and social regeneration networks. This time and energy consuming strategy requires a considerable proportion of her working week to be dedicated to networking and fund-raising:

Susan says that her business consultancy background and MBA mean that she can bring added value as 'a strategic thinker' and adds, 'I really have pushed my way in.'

As a result of her work, Susan has influence and they have funding to continue the project (although they recently lost funding that was going to take them to 2014 because of the recent change in government); they are 'slightly further up the queue' and can call upon the help of influential city movers and shakers when necessary.

'Why aren't you being our vicar...?'

Because of the outward facing nature of her role, Susan is not playing a traditional vicar's pastoral role. Inevitably that places pressure on her where there are expectations of an ultimate return to more traditional approaches to ministry. I sense,

talking to her, that there weren't many points of natural peer support for Susan within the diocese, where the perception is, frequently, that she isn't getting along to the usual clergy meetings. This has created something of a sense of isolation in the role. Her visibility, is at the level of her various networking groups and in terms of the wider local community. She is delighted that local Asian women refer to her as 'their vicar'.

Adults, Babies and Children

In terms of direct family support for those in the area, the church runs Adults, Babies and Children, a Stay and Play session. It meets on Friday morning and afternoons, for two, one and three quarter hour sessions. Led by a professional, child minder, Yasemin, it is attended mostly by Asian women, aged 18- late thirties with children from newborn to 3 years old.

The women come up to Maxine, a paid pastoral support worker and tell her, 'It is a break, just to be ourselves and have a coffee and talk about everyday things.' She adds:

'Asian women get to mix because at home they are isolated and not encouraged to express their views about this and that'.

In response to my question about Muslim people cope with ABC being in a church, she replies: *'They seem fine.... We do talk about religion, very, very lightly...It was their Ede and I was asking them about it. They chatted about God and Jesus and we were able to 'swap religions' very lightly and that's what I think it's all about.'*

Husbands occasionally come over to the church with their wives to check up on what is going on – ABC is an unfamiliar concept to them. Some husbands even get involved and there are currently 4 men, 2 English and 2 Asian Muslim men.

Maxine tells me the story of an Asian woman with a two and a half year old, little boy and a 4 year old daughter who is in a special needs school and didn't get any help and no-one dealt with the problem of her not communicating. Yasemin, the group leader,

played a key role in helping this woman. She got her an appointment with one of the health workers and a GP. *'She couldn't talk about it with her husband'*. Here, Maxine is reflecting upon a traditional Muslim discomfort, in response to 'loss of face', and anything that might reflect badly upon a family.

The Narthex, St John's Sparkhill, Birmingham

'...we have a whole person approach – body, soul and spirit. ...It's all about people who come every week they meet the same people week by week. The difference is our integrity. We don't start something if we can't continue it. We don't give hope and then take it away. A lot of prayer and thought gone into it before we start it. . It takes a long time to get things started.

Nigel Brookhouse, Narthex Centre Manager

The Narthex Sparkhill, St John's is an inner-city, church-based charity with a respected, well considered and, unapologetically distinctive Christian ministry which is well received by a majority Muslim local population. There is a highly respected Nursery, Infant and Junior Voluntary Aided School and family support provision is shared between the church and the Narthex. It comes in the shape of the church Play and Stay group, a Homework Club, debt advice and a parish nurse.

Creating opportunities for play

Little Angels, the Play and Stay group, is the main project of the church. The priorities for the group are: creating a safe space for the mums and an encouraging environment for building their parenting confidence.

Attending the group gives the children a head start when they start school. They are able to interact with children their own age and to play better. They achieve simple skills, like being able to identify colours and to write their own names.

'The ladies have got used to the church. They come thinking they could get their children into St John's school which is not true, it doesn't work like that. But they like the faith element.'

Narendar Morden, staff member and Play and Stay leader

The activities are based around bible stories, and the leaders engage with some of the stories, focusing especially on the concepts of hope and grace. At the session I attend, mums have been, delightedly, constructing boats from 'freaky foam', a colourful, mouldable, plastic. Then after tea and refreshments, using a simple flannel graph, Narendar, relates the story of the disciples' storm-tossed boat journey across the lake and Jesus' stilling of the storm. The audience of mums and toddlers is quiet and attentive. Next they join in the singing and actions for '*Thank you God for this fine day*'. Some of the children enthusiastically shake rattles and other noisy instruments. Narendar closes with a simple prayer.

The church now receives a grant from a community development fund to teach mums English using children's faith stories. Nigel Brookhouse, the Narthex Centre Manager tells me:

One elderly grandma didn't speak English too well. Because they did stories around Abraham and Noah who are people in the Qu'ran she learnt some and she did a little jig because she could do some English. Because it was based on bible stories which they are interested in, it gives women some confidence just because they can speak a little English. It changes their whole demeanour and confidence and willingness to take part'

Parents at play

Narendar says:

'A lot of the women ... will never have played. As Muslim women they have to do the work. Girls have to be trained to make chappatis for their husbands. But they love playing .So the activities are really there for the mums! They love it... We take them away in the summer to a farm or whatever, they always have swings, it's the mums, grannies on the swings.'

The educational and socially developmental power of play is, of course, crucial to child care. Here at St John's Play and Stay, it is especially poignant to discover how play activities offer release and a new sense of self to the Asian mums and carers. Play then continues at home. As one Asian mother tells me:

'They want to do the same things at home – nice thing (sic) because I want to play with them. (I have) bought some of the stuff. It was difficult before because they just wanted to watch TV. Now they want to do activities.'

Stability and a safe environment

'Why I've come for so long is because of the staff. One of the unique things about this playgroup is because they have always been there. It gives a bit of stability to the children and to the parents. You have a relationship with them...'

Mother of three who attends the Play and Stay

One of the recurring themes of my case study visit was the significance of the trust the local community of mainly Muslim had in the team at St John's and their identification with the church as a safe place.

'Many of the women who wear niqabs (face veils), they used to veil up but now when John and Nigel go in they don't any more because they are viewed as part of the family and trust. Women felt they were given trust and honesty.'

For reflection

In the light of these headline-based project profiles, we return to the questions posed at the start of the paper

1. Just how significant is early years intervention?
2. What challenges do projects face and how can they be strengthened in the face of obstacles and especially in the light of current economic uncertainty?
3. What quality of service to young children and their families are local churches enabling, promoting or achieving? What, if any, distinctive characteristics or 'added value' do Church of England family support projects offer in terms of provision of services for young families?

1. Just how significant is early years intervention?

How children gain from Family Support Centre services might best be described in terms of a *virtuous circle* of benefits.

i. This circle is frequently initiated by pro-active family support work. For many centres I visited; the starting point of their strategy is to allocate resources to one-on-one work with parents in their homes. Trained family support workers work, collaboratively, with parents to empower them in the area of parenting skills, health, post-natal health, housing and so forth. In the process, bridges are built between these families and the respective children's and family centres.

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ii. This, in turn, means that parents, (and this includes educated, middle class parents who feel isolated or lacking in confidence) feel welcomed and supported, not stigmatised, at the centres in question. Parents know there is extra professional support for them should they need it. They have confidence in what is on offer due

to committed, well-trained and consistent staff teams (low staff turnover is typical). Providing activities for their children also enable parents to relax.



iii. So, children experience the following benefits:



so-called 'soft' benefits, hard to capture as statistical evidence, at the level of social confidence, playing with other children. Also, as parents grow in their ability to play with children, a further a positive spiral of benefits is created at the level of a newly nurturing home environment for the children.

At the Springfield Centre, for instance, they run a parenting course, called IncredibleYears, for 3-4 year olds who have learning difficulties. Angie King, Centre Manager, described a very moving encounter with an Asian mother who, because *she* could now cope for the first time with parenting, found that her husband also began to be able to cope with parenting and so could granny! Angie reports that the mother came up to her, knelt and kissed her feet to say 'thank you'.



Children also benefit considerably in terms of *measurable* benefits such as reading and counting skills. A professional, child psychologist in her mid-thirties, and mother of 3 year old Ewan, regularly attends a Parent and Child Drop-in at PACT Witney Children's Centre. She has seen huge improvements both in his social confidence and his reading and counting:

'He was very shy with people a year ago and ... now he'll interact with other children and talk to other workers here...he wouldn't even go to my mother or other sets of grandparents and I was getting concerned about him... I started to think he was delayed. But now, it's astonishing, he can count from 1-25 and tell you more things about the computer than you would ever want to know. You can tell by the way he interacts. I try to bring him here at least twice a week if I can.'

I'm sure if you tested children at the beginning and then again at the end of each year at the level of self-esteem, it would go up like this (indicating upward trajectory) with an enormous bell curve where it was going up. ... I have been bowled over by the provision here. '

2. What challenges do projects face and how can they be strengthened in the face of obstacles and especially in the light of current economic uncertainty?

People were overwhelmingly positive. However, here are the main areas where they face challenges to future growth and sustainability:

- Funding
- Relationships with statutory bodies
- Diocesan costs
- Personnel

Funding

The kind of short-term, target driven programmes are very, very difficult for communities to get their heads around. Parents say things like: 'Before you know it's on it's gone'...there was just funding for six months, just funding for a year....
Angie King, Springfield Centre

Clearly, in the current political and economic climate, the question of funding is central to most of the projects I visited. Angie has worked in Sure Start local programmes and children's centres in the community for quite a long time now. She really thought that children's centres were going to be different, 'particularly when we got on the statute book'.

But actually children's centre Services are to be delivered but there is no commitment to funding us in the same way that health or education are funded.

You've got to provide a sufficiency of childcare but what does that mean? 'You want to get parents into work, that's the way out of poverty, but we are not going to subsidise your day care in order for your daycare to be available for those parents to have childcare to enable them to go to work.'

In the light of this palpable frustration and future uncertainty, the management team at Springfield is now beginning to seek to diversify their funding.

Time and energy-consumption

Susan Barter at St Paul's Crossover, related her time-consuming commitment to fund-raising. Simon Lockett at St Peter's spoke of the project's reliance on Enid, the Church Secretary:

'Enid is close to burnout. Enid is completely professional, highly skilled and even she has struggled with the amount of work, the amount of knowledge that you need and therefore...if you are talking about money coming into communities where you probably don't have the skills, which tends to go hand in hand with rural deprivation or urban deprivation, it's very difficult to get the funding. Because you need to be very highly skilled.'

Nigel Brookhouse at the Narthex, has now partially outsourced his funding work to a small fund-raising company and has found that it has worked very well.

Relating to statutory bodies

Meeting the various ministers and project managers, it has been clear that there has been a mixed experience of relating to local authorities. On the one hand, there have been very positive accounts of a wonderful synchronicity between a church project and statutory bodies. On the other, there have been accounts of uphill struggles and the need for a faith-based project to work especially hard to prove its value.

The projects that do the best seem to have a clearly 'boundaried' sense of what they have to offer, and the professional support and legal expertise to negotiate deals that are advantageous to them and protect their Christian ethos.

Nigel Brookhouse, identifies what he sees as an unnecessary mutual mistrust between statutory bodies and faith-based projects:

'Faith groups feel they have to sell their soul. So they don't apply for it. And then services don't want to give money because they think we are going to preach. Although we keep true to our principles but its all about relationships'.

So at St John's they try to hold an annual *networking buffet* for statutory services and for projects and some small groups. 'Some voluntary organizations don't talk to each other' says Nigel. The session is based around food and hospitality. They get between one hundred and one hundred and fifty people attending and 'it gives people encouragement to do these things. Now a lot of places have started to do this.'

Diocesan costs

Two ministers, both operating in areas with high levels of deprivation, spoke about the burden of the parish share and the unreality, for instance of St John's, Sparkhill, being asked to contribute a Common Share payment of £20,000 for the third poorest parish in the diocese.

Simon Lockett too, at St Peter's, Peterchurch, raised the question about what sort of strategic thinking was happening in the Church nationally and at diocesan level around its structures and the way they do or do not support entrepreneurial ministry.

Personnel

Leaders

People with vision, commitment and leadership skills were, and are, crucial for the inception and sustainability of each project visited. Such individuals are exceptional

and require recognition and support at diocesan and national level. Frankly, successful and distinctive projects are reliant upon them and their ability to inspire and attract others.

Volunteers

There have been varied accounts of attracting, keeping and refreshing volunteers in these case studies. None of the stories are sufficiently alike to present neat comparisons, but it is clear both from stories of volunteer retention and from the account of what happened to cause volunteer 'flight' from a project, that volunteers require a sense of support. They require, too, an explicit congruency between their values and aims and the family support project in which they work.

There are 42 volunteers at St John's Narthex . They are thinking of employing a volunteer coordinator to meet the many and varied needs of the many people who offer time and energy. They feel they currently attract so many people because of the broad base of projects that people can get involved in not just one type. The place also offers somewhere that people who have a heart for mission can get involved in but don't have to set things up. The Springfield Centre has also received Tearfund money for a Volunteer Coordinator.

3. What are the added benefits of *Church of England Family Support*?

... 'we create a welcoming atmosphere and genuinely value parents and people know, people know when they come to a service whether you are just doing a job and going through the motions...'

Angie King, Springfield Centre, Birmingham

As someone who has only briefly visited these projects and listened to their stories, I am not able to offer a complex analysis of what, precisely, constitutes the added value of Church Family Support. It is clear too that attempts at over simplification should be avoided at this point in the project. I am reliant on the testimony of those who

work in and for these centres and it seems, therefore, appropriate to draw, again, on headline themes from the interviews.

So here are four qualities that I feel can be associated with Church family support:

1. Exceptional service provision

There is clear evidence of excellence of service provision. To highlight just two examples: this was seen in relation to the Springfield Centre, where a faith-based ministry has astonished some onlookers because of its outstanding results at the level of statutory service provision. The HOPE Family Centre is now recognized as offering a 'five star' service by the local County Council.

2. Unique benefits of distinctive faith-stance

Clearly evidenced in the three Birmingham-based family support projects, were the advantages of operating with integrity from a distinctive faith-stance. This is the basis for greater social cohesion in areas where that would not be anticipated normally. In response to the question what would happen if your project weren't here, Angie King replied:

'There would be some little child graves...We have worked with some families with some very big issues. There would certainly be some women who are experiencing extremes of domestic violence... Our community would not have the atmosphere it does have, where issues get talked about instead of people operating in their community and faith silos and not speaking to one another...there would be a lot more violence and a lot less dialogue.'

Observing the transition of the PACT Witney Children's Centre away from local church community involvement, some may regret the loss of this aspect of the project.

3. Getting results, going against the grain

Sheenagh Davis' distinctive, faith-inspired, whole family emphasis at HOPE Family Centre has led to them now modeling new modes of family support for the whole region.

Susan Barter at St Paul's Crossover, is committed to championing the long-term needs of people in an area which has not attracted service provision. She chooses again to do so on behalf of the church, independent of Local Authority funding, seeking results in the long-term, in the lives of local families, rather than short-term measurable evidence. Her vision:

*This is about, long-term, this is about carrying on doing this for years and then being given a right to say why... It is about those little things, seedlings, getting them to grow and flourish ..that's what we're about. But as the **church** doing it.*

4. Attractive synergy

For many of the projects there was an almost palpable sense of synergy between the statutory aims of a project and the wider aims of a church or minister. This operated at the level of shared or enhanced commitment and a discernible sense of energy and enthusiasm around certain activities.

Revd Simon Lockett, for instance, is able to talk about a mutual benefits flowing from housing Sure Start in the church. This possibility itself grew out of his inclusive vision, ability to attract and enthuse a variety of people in a remote, rural locality to work with him:

'Churches need to have an understanding of how people can flourish when working together...and, often, what gets in the way of that, in terms of the church community, is that there can be a little bit of a 'you're either 'in' completely 'in' or you're 'out'' and you have to tick lots of boxes ..it's usually theological boxes. But we've been very open about it's got to be partnership working not just between the organizations but between people ...There is just this sense in which

every one has skills and gifts ...and we've had that kind of theory behind us and it's brought people in and all sorts of things have happened'...

Sheenagh Davis and Angie King both spoke to me in different ways of the harmony between the core aims and values of a children's centre and the belief in the potential for human flourishing and relational wholeness at the heart of the Gospel.

Conclusion

I have visited and learned about a wide variety of Church family support projects: from independent, church-based and church-staffed Play and Stay groups such as ABC at St Paul's Crossover to a church-based parent and toddler group which has led to a large purpose built Birmingham City Council funded children's centre and from Sure Start provision being provided in a 12th Century Church to an independent charity, set in an American-style, wooden complex, modeling new trends in family intervention.

All of these projects are touching the lives of families in a variety of ways, both measurable and beyond the scope of statistical evidence gathering. Their stories provide initial answers to the main questions running through this paper.

Just how significant is early years intervention?

Clearly, in the light of an 'out-ripple' of benefits to children and parents and, by extension, to local communities, early years intervention is of inestimable value, both in the short and long-term, for this and the next generation.

What challenges do projects face and how can they be strengthened in the face of obstacles and especially in the light of current economic uncertainty?

The key challenge for most projects is that of funding uncertainty. Affirmation of the critical value of family support at national and local government level is called for.

Clearly, to ring-fence family support again would be the clearest indicator of the government's support and long-term commitment to these projects. Projects too need to think creatively about new routes to obtain funding and new business models.

What quality of service to young children and their families are local churches enabling, promoting or achieving? What, if any, distinctive characteristics or 'added value' do Church of England family support projects offer in terms of provision of services for young families?

It is precisely and inextricably because of faith-based values that exceptional professional standards are achieved in these projects. Church-based projects offer, too, a unique interface with those of other religious communities and the potential, therefore, for greater social cohesion. The creative independence required to innovate, coupled with the unique vision of some leaders, has provided the basis for trend setting practices in family support. Finally, there is an attractive synergy between the church's wider commitment to human flourishing and the measurable aims of early years intervention.

Recommendations

For the church

'A city set on a hill...'

In addition to their primary focus, many of these family support projects are doing a wonderful job of actively re-depicting the significance of the church and Christian faith in their localities and modeling new ways of being church in challenging times.

I recommend that these projects are both valued and *strategically* supported, both at diocesan and national level.

For local authorities

My recommendation is that these projects should be welcomed, without suspicion, in the light of the demonstrable value they bring to the provision of support of families and the way they offer the possibility of inclusive communities of support to vulnerable members of society who might not otherwise access help; and new hope for human flourishing in areas where ‘nothing ever happens’.

Appendix I

Sample questionnaire and tick box questionnaire

Church Family Support

Summary of project aims

To find out the range and diversity of family support provided by Church of England and its members, to explore effectiveness and reach, to identify any barriers to further work

Questions

My questions relate to the following:

1.) 'Range and diversity' of projects

a) Management

- Funding
- Level of church involvement in or current relationship with the church.
- Level of church volunteer involvement
- Level of church leadership on Board of trustees
- Level of church involvement at management level?
- Proportion of volunteers in relation to professional staff?
- If volunteers are trained, how does that happen?

2.) Vision for project

What is the story and identity of the project?

How does the initial vision for the project relate to the vision for the project *today*?

What are the projects explicit aims? E.g. areas such as:

- Social support
- Financial support (sharing of clothes)
- Help in parenting skills?

Public facing vision (PR, language on web-sites) and privately owned vision? Are there any distinctions?

Any conflicts between initial vision and current professional requirements? How resolved?

3.) Effectiveness and reach (again users will be asked these questions too in a more indirect and open-ended way)

How does the current project correspond to the vision and goals set for it?

Who uses it?

4.) Barriers (to the above)

What are the barriers you encounter when it comes to achieving your goals?

How is this project affected by possible changes in government funding?

5.) Questions around distinctiveness

What would happen if your project wasn't here?

What would happen if you dropped the 'Christian' bit?
(However that currently operates at The Springfield Centre)

How has the professionalization of the project affected the Church roots/ Christian nature of the Springfield Project?

As far as you can answer this, how has the professionalization of the Springfield Project affected the perceptions of those outside the church who come to the centre for support.

Similarly, how has it affected local support or the support you can give to families?

What happens if the project ceases to be a channel for transmitting faith? How is a church community project Christian? Do the volunteers bring the faith? Do they pray for what they do?

If the church is doing social work but not transmitting faith is this a problem?

Which way is the traffic flowing? How does the work of the centre impact upon the life of the church?

6.) Tick box questions for situations where I cannot access a group of users

I have drafted a very short questions sheet with tick-box answers so that it's easy for people to fill and allow me to get at least some handle on the project from the user's perspective, say:-

Please tick the answers that apply and fill in any extra details you wish to share.

- What is your age?

1. 15-20
2. 20-29
3. 30-39
4. 40-49
5. 50-59
6. 60-69
7. 70-79
8. 80-89
9. 90-99

- What is your ethnicity?

1. White English
2. White Welsh
3. Other white British
4. White Irish
5. Other White background
6. Mixed: White and Black Caribbean
7. Mixed: White and Black African
8. Mixed: White and Asian
9. Mixed: Other Mixed background
10. Indian
11. Pakistani
12. Bangladeshi
13. Chinese
14. Other Asian background
15. Black Caribbean
16. Black African
17. Other Black background
18. Arab
19. Gypsy/Romany/Irish Traveller
20. Other Ethnic Group

- How long have you been coming to this group?

1. 1 year or less
2. 2 years
3. 3 years

4. 4 years
5. 5 years

- Do you bring children here and if so, how old are they?

1. 0-11 months?
2. 1 year old?
3. 2 years old?
4. 3 years old?
5. 4 years old?
6. 5 years old?

- Do you have any other dependants?

1. Adult
If so, how old are they?

2. Children
If so, how old are they?

- What for you is the best thing about the service provided by the Centre?:
e.g.

1. Being confident of a high quality of care for my children?
2. Well-trained staff?
3. Friendly staff
4. Good food is provided?
5. My children can make friends?
6. My children are growing in social confidence?
7. My children are learning new skills?
8. The play activities?
9. I make friends with staff and other parents?
9. Some other thing?

- What things might be improved

1. A change in opening hours?
2. Better local transport?
3. Different activities?
4. Something else?

- Is there anything else that makes it difficult for you to use the Centre?

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