

“The Big Society” and the Church of England

The Big Society – Background

1. “The Big Society” emerged as a theme in Conservative Party thinking prior to the 2010 General Election. It implied a clear renunciation of the statement that “there is no such thing as society” and was seen as part of the project to reposition the party as more compassionate and aware of human needs and desires. It was not universally welcomed within the party, nor, apparently, did campaigners find that it resonated amongst voters on the doorstep.
2. During the campaign, David Cameron explained that he believed that there is such a thing as society: but it is not the same as the State. The Big Society was seen as a foundation for policies which reduced the extent – and the cost – of direct state involvement in social and welfare activities.
3. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition is now putting considerable energy into developing The Big Society in policy terms and there have been a number of major speeches, not least by the Prime Minister, which are starting to give content to the general theme.
4. In a speech on 19 July 2010, the Prime Minister set out three main strands of the Big Society agenda:
 - *Social Action - the government will foster and support a new culture of voluntarism and philanthropy*
 - *Public service reform - getting rid of the centralised bureaucracy and in its place giving professionals much more freedom, opening up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need*
 - *Community empowerment - creating communities with neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them.*¹
5. Within modern Conservatism, the intellectual and conceptual energy behind The Big Society has come from thinkers such as Jesse Norman (now MP for Hereford) and the Director of the *ResPublica* think tank,

¹ From the Conservative Party webpage, accessed 5 August 2010.
http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/07/Our_Big_Society_Agenda.aspx

Phillip Blond, himself a theologian of the Radical Orthodoxy school.² A number of Ministers have been drawing on ideas like these since well before the General Election.

6. Although The Big Society clearly taps into a particular strand of Conservative thinking, it is not intrinsically alien to certain traditions within the Labour Party or Liberalism. Labour can trace an important part of its history in working class self-help movements, co-operatives and local action. Ed Miliband has already spoken of his aspiration to build “The Good Society”. He appears to be drawing on a similar tradition of the civic virtues whilst avoiding the overtly anti-state rhetoric of the Conservatives.³
7. Historically, the Liberal Party has also given a strong emphasis to localism. Potentially, the principles of The Big Society are capable of being “owned” across a wide political spectrum, although their adoption as the policy of the coalition government may, in practice, limit their cross-party appeal. If Blond’s arguments are accepted, The Big Society may also have demonstrable roots in Christian theology,

The Big Society and the Economic Crisis

8. Whichever party or parties had won the election this year, the agenda would have been dominated by the economic crisis. The Coalition has set out to deliver dramatic cuts to public spending, not least in social welfare. The potential of voluntarism to replace some state welfare provision may make The Big Society financially attractive.
9. For a number of Coalition members, the intrinsic goods of The Big Society are fundamental, regardless of the state of the economy. Nevertheless, the economic crisis may constrain and confuse its implementation. A clear articulation of how The Big Society can be realized in a time of austerity has yet to emerge.
10. There is a widespread fear, especially within the voluntary sector and those working with the most vulnerable people, that The Big Society is an attempt to shift responsibility for welfare and social cohesion from the State to the voluntary and charitable sectors. Whilst there are many who contend that existing welfare provision has fostered too much dependency, it remains that simply withdrawing welfare does not tackle the dependency problem without other, potentially expensive, measures to address behavioral patterns and economic opportunities.

² Norman’s thinking can be found in his book, *Compassionate Conservatism* which can be downloaded from his website (Accessed 5 August 2010).

http://www.jessenorman.com/downloads/Compassionate_Conservatism.pdf
Blond is best known for his book, *Red Tory*. ResPublica’s contribution to the debate may be found here: <http://www.respublica.org.uk/blog/2010/07/what-does-big-society-value>

³ See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/28/ed-miliband-speech-maurice-glasman>. See also the chapter by John Cruddas and Jonathan Rutherford in, Rowan Williams and Larry Elliott, *Crisis and Recovery*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

11. Some fear that, whatever the relationship between The Big Society agenda and budgetary austerity, the programme of cuts will prevent the voluntary sector from responding adequately whilst simultaneously creating greater social need and distress.
12. The Comprehensive Spending Review of October 2010 has been described by the Institute of Fiscal Studies as, overall, regressive in that poorer people will be hit more sharply by public spending cuts than richer groups (with the exception of the very richest). Communities, especially northern cities, whose post-industrial regeneration depended heavily on public spending, are likely suffer more than areas with more mixed economies. Overall, poverty, unemployment and social exclusion seem likely to increase rapidly. There are many doubts whether the hoped-for resurgence in private sector activity will be sufficient to offset the impact of public expenditure cuts. The rather tentative concept of The Big Society faces an immense, and growing, challenge.
13. Yet, despite such caveats, many agree that the ideas behind The Big Society are necessary in a civilized society and that the erosion of community values and intermediate institutions has gone so far that basic social structures need rebuilding. Such structures are essential partners to the state in any political economy. Some blame the depredations of an inadequately regulated market economy for the breakdown of social bonds: others blame liberalism's disregard for authority and tradition. This is another sign that The Big Society themes may have the potential to attract those of different political persuasions.

The Government's evolving agenda

14. The Big Society currently appears to be a work in progress. The Prime Minister has staked a good deal of his personal capital on its success. The appointment of Lord Wei as a working peer with responsibilities for coordinating The Big Society agenda across government departments is another sign of the importance the government is placing on the matter.
15. Nevertheless, some contributions by Ministers to the debate suggest that The Big Society is not understood in the same way by all. David Cameron has indicated that he regards the development of stronger social structures as compensating for a permanent and very large reduction in public spending. Lord Wei emphasises the release of local potential rather than making budget savings.
16. Some policies announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review for example, the proposal to end lifetime tenure for council house tenants and the cuts in Housing Benefit which will push claimants out of some high-cost areas – are hard to square with the idea of building stable communities. In education, the new government's plans for Academies leave little room for local communities to be involved in their governance.

17. Some of these diverse viewpoints may be compatible, but not all are obviously so. Although every government department is being asked to look at the implications of The Big Society for their work, not all are as securely “on board” as others.
18. Concrete policies to deliver aspects of The Big Society are only slowly emerging and many will be dependent on the detailed outcomes of the Comprehensive Spending Review. Some are small ventures in partnership with others (The *Near Neighbours* programme, outlined below, is in the vanguard here). Lord Wei is proposing a Big Society Bank which will be funded in part from dormant bank accounts, and which will help provide working capital for community ventures. Four “pilot areas” identified in July 2010 are likely to be the first recipients of funding from The Big Society Bank.⁴
19. In March, the Prime Minister launched the Big Society Network as a “campaign for social change”. The Network is conceived as independent of government (although the extent of its independence is disputed within the charitable sector) and aims to mobilise existing organisations to push forward the Big Society agenda. Its “flagship” project is called “Your Square Mile”, designed to encourage people to engage with issues in their immediate geographical locality.
20. The substantive content of these initiatives is still emerging. Overall, the rhetoric shows real commitment to change the terms of the debate about society and government – but policy detail seems thin at present.

The Bishop of Leicester’s debate

21. On 16 June 2010, the Bishop of Leicester initiated a debate in the House of Lords focussing on The Big Society thinking. During the debate, Lord Wei made his maiden speech and Bs. Warsi summed up for the government. Her speech referred to a wide variety of social policy options, and gave the impression that The Big Society may be seen as a kind of “brand” under which disparate policies could be brought together.⁵ This confirms the impression that the government is trying to generate a “narrative” about the nature of society in order to underpin specific policies which, themselves, may or may not conform to a single political or social model. This has been borne out by later conversations and encounters.

Bs Warsi and Lord Wei at the College of Bishops

22. On 15 September 2010, both Bs. Warsi and Lord Wei addressed the College of Bishops on the subject of the Big Society.⁶ Some early policy

⁴ The four pilot areas are: Liverpool, the Eden Valley (Cumbria), Sutton, and Windsor and Maidenhead.

⁵ The full text of the debate, including speeches from the Archbishop of Canterbury, The Bishop of London and the Bishops of Leicester, Chester and Salisbury, can be found at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/100616-0004.htm#10061677000453>

⁶ The text of Bs Warsi’s speech can be found here: http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/09/Warsi_speaks_about_the_importance_of_faith.aspx

directions emerged, but it was also interesting to compare the rather different social models which informed the two presentations.

23. Bs.Warsi stressed the role of religion as a force for good in society. Her aim is to restore religious life to an honoured place in the life of the nation and the thinking of government. She was alert to the ways in which the Church of England understands itself to be embedded in English life.
24. Lord Wei looked more to a kind of postmodern social model in which local communities are empowered through the new opportunities offered by technology. He envisaged the internet as a democratising force in which myriad ideas competed for attention and in which the best ideas would always triumph. This is not a universally-held analysis of the impact of IT on political and democratic life.
25. Lord Wei's social model is strongly shaped by American thinking, including the work of Saul Alinsky which has influenced Barack Obama.⁷ His understanding of religion in society also appears to reflect American, rather than European models. This is not to suggest that Britain cannot learn from America, only that religious life in the two contexts is manifested very differently and that social policy does not always translate directly if underlying social institutions differ radically.⁸
26. Neither speaker made any connection between the strength of social bonds and the workings of the wider economy. The impact of aggressive competitiveness in business and the workplace, the impact of growing material inequality, and the crushing effects of large-scale unemployment do not figure, as yet, in the public depiction of *The Big Society*.

Preliminary assessments

27. If the impressions given by these encounters are correct, two things follow. First, there may be tensions ahead within the coalition (and within the Conservative Party) – first, between those who see *The Big Society* as an article of political faith and those for whom it is merely expedient in the current economic climate and, secondly, between those committed to localism but whose social models differ considerably.
28. Secondly, the churches are not being asked to sign up to, or approve, *The Big Society* as a single policy programme. However, there is potential for us to use the political narrative of *The Big Society* to shift the relationships between the state, the individual and intermediate institutions in ways which reflect a Christian understanding of society and reinforce the church's place in a healthy social order. Aspects of the Government's agenda, epitomised in Bs.Warsi's speeches, appear to be moving in this direction, but the overall trajectory is less clear.
29. Whilst some government ministers have expressed strong support for the Church of England's social role, one test of their seriousness about localism is whether they promote the flourishing of communities and

⁷ See: Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, Random House, 1971.

⁸ See: Grace Davie, *Europe, The Exceptional Case*, London: DLT, 2002.

bodies which may disagree with, or actively oppose, some aspects of central policy. For example, do mutual organisations like Trade Unions have a place in The Big Society? The jury is still out: but some such understanding of plurality is necessary if the church is to be true to its prophetic calling as well as serving the common good.⁹

30. Many have observed that the rhetoric of devolving power to regions and local communities, deployed by governments of different political persuasions, has almost always foundered on an overwhelming trend towards greater centralisation. If The Big Society can turn around this trend it will have succeeded indeed – but the historical odds are against it.

The Big Society – Shifting the Social Model

31. There are a number of practical opportunities, opened up by The Big Society agenda, which may involve or benefit the churches. At least as important, however, is the way that some aspects of Big Society thinking have the potential to shift perceptions of the relationship between the State, communities, and the individual.
32. To illustrate this, it is worth reflecting on some aspects of social legislation under the previous administration and, at times, evident in the policies of successive governments since 1979.
33. In a number of instances, social legislation was conceived in ways which:
 - failed to take into account the way in which understandings of society, and of difference, are often grounded in historic traditions (not least the Christian faith) and that there are more ways than one of conceiving plurality.
 - devalued the importance of conscience in favour of a single, governmental, interpretation of how social relationships should be understood.
 - were grounded, not in actual people's lives so much as in an abstract conception of "the individual", understood to exist outside tradition or community, and thus attempted to legislate against hypothetical problems rather than actual mischief.
34. In short, governments have often assumed an atomised society in which it is the state's job to mediate between competing individuals from a position of assumed neutrality. This view pays insufficient attention to the way in which persons are formed in communities, starting with the family and

⁹ Some in the Conservative Party may be mindful of the period in the 1980s when the Church of England was sometimes perceived as the most effective critic of the then Conservative government's social policies. (See: Henry Clark, *The Church Under Thatcher*, London: SPCK, 1993). It is possible that the present government, also committed to large reductions in public spending and welfare provision, is keen to get the church on board before the social consequences become intolerable. This analysis may have some validity, but our engagement with Ministers to date suggests that their view of the church is more a matter of political commitment than an expedient alliance. We shall see.

including schools, local settlements, churches and religious communities, and a plethora of voluntary associations. If communities and institutions are to help form moral individuals, they themselves need building up.

35. Moreover, the legacy of terrorist attacks by militant Islamist groups was too often met by an attitude which problematised all religion. Language was used in ways which suggested that all faiths were conceived as essentially the same kind of phenomenon; all were regarded as sub-rational, and the task of government was to contain, and mediate between, religious groups whose place in the public sphere was not generally conceded. Whilst this attitude was, to an extent, moderated by a more positive stance toward (e.g.) “faith schools”, the general thrust of policy and rhetoric was not “religiously literate”.
36. A historic fear, dating back to the 16th and 17th century wars of religion, was stirred by 9/11 and 7/7 in ways which excited classic liberalism’s self-image as the only defender of reason and civility against superstition. Critiques of classic liberalism, commonplace among political philosophers for over thirty years, had not yet entered the lexicon of government. This was exacerbated by a widespread inability (ideological or political) to separate aspects of militant Islam, which did indeed constitute a threat to liberal ideals, from Islam itself. Some of the rhetoric around the “Prevent” programme illustrated this quite starkly.

Key questions

37. The question now arises: does The Big Society represent a break with this entrenched politico-social model in ways which are closer to the church’s social vision and in ways which might reflect religious bodies’ own sense of their place in a vibrant and diverse society?
38. The evidence so far is mixed. On the one hand, we have supportive statements such as that by Eric Pickles who has said that, “Religion is often seen as part of the problem. The new government sees it as part of the solution; the days of the State trying to suppress Christianity and other faiths are over”.¹⁰ On the other, the mainstream view among LibDems (and perhaps among some Tories) continues to reflect the social model characterised above which is suspicious of religion in the public square.
39. A third position, present in all parties, values the churches – but only in social roles which may or may not reflect Christian theological priorities, and sees religion as a means to achieve political ends rather than an end in itself.
40. As noted below, staff of MPA, with the backing of the Archbishops, have been in discussion with Ministers about practical partnerships for building social cohesion. This is an opportunity to strengthen the aspects of the Big Society narrative which will enable the church’s ministry and mission to flourish in the long term.

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Letter from The Rt Hon Eric Pickles in *The New Statesman*, 2 August 2010.

41. The Big Society agenda has not yet secured these advances, but there is much to play for and the Church of England should continue to press its case on many fronts.

The Big Society as a theological motif

42. The theologian Luke Bretherton suggests, “It seems that what policymakers dream of when they dream of an active citizenry cannot be separated in practice from what religious groups do.”¹¹ There is a natural congruence between the impulses behind The Big Society and the way the churches understand themselves and their discipleship.
43. Phillip Blond identifies an established strand of Christian social thought within which his own work on Big Society themes is located. It runs backward from John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy, through V.A. Demant and the Christendom movement, to J.N. Figgis and others.¹² Like Figgis, Jesse Norman takes up the theme of the iniquities of a Hobbesian “Leviathan State” and proposes instead a model of the state as the “community of communities”.
44. Bretherton argues that there are three “ideal types” which can be appealed to in the debate about citizenship. The first sees the citizen as **voter**. Here, citizenship is a matter of individuals aggregating their preferences through the ballot box. The pursuit of shared goods in community barely features.
45. The second type sees the citizen as **volunteer**. This model lies behind many initiatives to strengthen social bonds whilst reducing the scale of state action – including much of the rhetoric around The Big Society. But, Bretherton argues, the focus on volunteering tends to separate the virtues of community from the world of paid work and ignores the contradictory imperatives of the market economy which demands flexible, footloose, workers, uncommitted to anything but economic gain.
46. Finally, Bretherton makes the case for the citizen as **vow-keeper** – focussing on the priority of relationships and faithful commitment to others. He shows how this understanding is not only grounded in Christian theology but is reflected in many grass roots movements, especially those which have “a symbiotic relationship with popular religion”.¹³
47. Bretherton’s conclusion is that “people of faith need to avoid co-option into being either voting blocks or service providers and be true to their own best insights by upholding a vision of the citizen as vow-keeper.” This is in line with the judgement that there is much potential in The Big Society for the church to work with, but that a residual element of

¹¹ Luke Bretherton, “Votes, vows and volunteers” in *The Tablet*, 10 July 2010.

¹² See: J.N.Figgis, *Churches in the Modern State*, London: Longmans, Green, 1914.

¹³ Bretherton means the awkward but alliterative term “vow-keeper” to emphasise how commitment to others and to strong social bonds means doing things which are time-consuming and not necessarily personally gainful (such as attending lengthy committee meetings, or even corporate worship) because they are beneficial to the common good rather than delivering one’s own wants.

scepticism remains in order. As the Archbishop of Canterbury put it, “Two and a half cheers for the Big Society”.¹⁴

48. The strength of The Big Society idea for the church lies in the extent to which it reflects a Christian understanding of being human. A Christian anthropology locates each person within a rich network of relationships and recognises the perpetual tension between our dependency on others and our autonomy. This reflects the nature of God’s relationship with human beings who remain dependent upon His grace for all good things whilst retaining the freedom to reject his love. As in so many of Jesus’ parables, God makes Himself known to us in the person of the other – and it is when we ourselves recognise our dependence on others that we understand a little of God’s love for us.
49. This kind of recognition needs strong social bonds which help ensure that those around us become neighbours and not merely others. It stresses the importance of doing things which serve the good of all rather than relating to structures, institutions and services merely as an autonomous consumer interested only in personal benefit. Neighbourliness is the first condition for treating others (and being treated ourselves) as ends and not means.
50. The church is, in many ways, a paradigm community, holding fast to the virtues of neighbourliness and fellowship because these reflect the relational nature of God as Trinity and the Kingdom in which all relationships are modelled on God’s unconditional love. But the empirical church in the world will often struggle to embody the virtues of community if the surrounding culture belittles and marginalises such virtues. The church not only models community to the world but needs there to be strong communal bonds in the wider society so that Christians have the chance to extend discipleship into the whole of their lives.
51. A Christian vision of the good society aims to generate the kind of strong social bonds that also appear among the objectives of the Big Society project. It will be important for us to stress that, for Christians, such bonds are the prerequisite of any viable human society and are not to be valued merely for economic, expedient or utilitarian reasons.

Practical partnerships between Church and State within The Big Society

52. Prior to the General Election, staff from MPA spent time getting to know key Shadow Cabinet members and prominent thinkers in the Conservative and LibDem parties. CUF also built up numerous political contacts and relationships, and is well-established within the wider voluntary sector.
53. These discussions considered the potential for creative church/state partnerships, not only for delivering social welfare programmes but as a way of enabling a richer and more cohesive society to develop. Central to any such project was the move from treating all religion as essentially

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The Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking at an event at the Oasis Centre in London on 23rd July 2010.

problematic and illegitimate within the public sphere, to a view of religion as an important motivation for good citizens and strong social bonds.

54. In particular, we stressed the ways in which the popular image of “faith communities” fails to reflect the realities of the Church of England. We emphasised the Church of England’s foundational commitment to the common good of all the people, expressed through our presence in every parish of the land and manifested in the way we use our buildings, our schools and our ministry to serve the people as a whole. We highlighted the work of the *Presence and Engagement* programme as an example of extensive commitment to the work of neighbourliness and the Church’s prominent role in inter religious dialogue.
55. Following the election, the desire to work in partnership with the Church of England has been taken up strongly by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Eric Pickles) along with his Minister for Decentralisation, Greg Clark and Under Secretary, Andrew Stunnell (LibDem) and with enthusiastic support from Bs. Warsi.
56. Our response to the Big Society policies has been to try to embody what the Bishop of London, in his speech during the debate on 15 June, called the church’s “Big Offer”. Because we believe the Church of England to hold great potential for building cohesive communities, especially in areas of social stress, we sought ways to give concrete expression to that conviction, working with the grain of the coalition’s thinking but staying firmly within the Church’s understanding of its vocational, existing structures and partnerships. On these grounds, we proposed a substantial development of many aspects of existing work.
57. This proposal appears to be one of the first-fruits of the government’s Big Society initiative. We know of no other current partnership proposals of comparable size and scope. In this, the Church of England is in the vanguard. However, the proposal does not exhaust the potential of The Big Society in relation to the Church of England by any means.

Near Neighbours – Faithful Interaction

58. The proposition under discussion is for DCLG to fund a significant expansion of the church’s existing set of activities based on the *Presence and Engagement* and related programmes, learning from, and extending, the kind of work that P&E has piloted in the past five years to encourage new initiatives. The provisional title for the project is *Near Neighbours – Faithful Interaction*. An outline description, reflecting the current state of discussions, is attached as an Annexe to this report.
59. The intention is to direct funding into four main areas – eastern London, the ‘M62 corridor’ urban areas, Leicester and east Birmingham and to work through a range of existing Christian, or Christian and other faith, partnerships. These areas correspond to the focal work of the *Presence and Engagement* programme

60. As significant sums of public money would be involved, a proper system of accountable and focussed management is required. The proposals envisage that the funding will be received by the Church Urban Fund to make clear its separation from any internal Church of England finances and to provide the confidence that CUF's track record brings. A subsidiary charitable company of CUF with trustees appointed by CUF and the Archbishops' Council, will be responsible for implementation.
61. The premise of the project, shared on both sides of the table, is that (as Eric Pickles has intimated) it is mistaken to see religion as a prime source of community divisions and a problem for government to solve: on the contrary, faith communities and religious groups have potential to promote community cohesion at the level of personal human relationships. In particular, the Church of England, present in every community and committed to the good of all, is uniquely placed to promote positive relationships, particularly but not only among those of different religions, and to lead on shared ventures in pursuit of the common good.
62. The aim of *Near Neighbours*, in colloquial terms, is to "enable 'Mr and Mrs Smith, Mr and Mrs Patel and Mr and Mrs Hussain', living in the same local neighbourhood, to relate more positively to each other and to release energies for the benefit of the wider local community." It is predicated on the idea that good relationships between people of different faiths cannot be brokered from a position of assumed neutrality – one must be "religiously literate" and this literacy stems from commitment.
63. *Near Neighbours* is a chance for the church to do more of what it alone can do. It is not about the church stepping into the welfare gaps left by a retreating State.
64. A brief statement about the *Near Neighbours* proposals, agreed with the Department of Communities and Local Government and including a quotation from the Secretary of State, was placed on the Church of England (MPA) and CUF websites at the beginning of August.¹⁵
65. The proposals went forward as part of DCLG's bid to the Treasury in the government's Comprehensive Spending Review. The Spending Review reported on 20 October 2010 and DCLG is now examining the implications for its budget and programmes. We expect to hear during November whether *Near Neighbours* can go ahead. This report had to be prepared for Synod before the outcome was known.

Further potential in The Big Society

66. If *Near Neighbours* proves to be successful in its delivery and impact, there may be further opportunities for similar church/government partnerships under The Big Society agenda. Some of these may involve the church in direct service delivery; others may be opportunities to strengthen community bonds in different ways. Bretherton's distinction between "the

¹⁵ <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/socialpublic/neighbourlyproposals/>

citizen as volunteer” and “the citizen as vow-keeper” may be worth holding in mind as an indicator of how far a partnership proposal mirrors the church’s sense of its proper calling.

Schools and education

67. The unique commitment of the Church of England to education through church schools is an obvious example of how The Big Society may enable our work to develop for the common good. Recent years have seen public ambivalence towards “faith schools”. On the one hand, parents seem to want their children to experience the kind of ethically committed education which our schools embody. On the other, the suspicion of religion in the public square, already mentioned, has been manifest in the misrepresentation of church schools as divisive and sectarian in nature.
68. The Big Society offers a good opportunity to emphasise that Church of England schools are part of our commitment to serve the Common Good and not a smokescreen for sectarianism. The Big Society suggests that the government recognises that a flourishing society needs moral citizens formed in local communities and institutions, and needs its children to be educated in communities which embody virtues specific to particular traditions and not constrained by ideological relativism. Church schools, then, are clearly part of the solution and not the problem.

Church buildings

69. Similarly, the potential of our buildings to be community hubs and accessible to many, could be enhanced if there was less government suspicion about using public money to build shared resources through faith communities. The many examples of church buildings taking on important social functions, including rural post office facilities and community meeting places, show the way forward. There is much unlocked potential in church buildings (including, but not confined to, places of worship) which could be released with relatively small expenditure on upgraded facilities etc. once the reluctance to see religious groups as anything but exclusive sectarian associations has been overcome.

Widening the Big Society debate

70. The government’s outreach to churches is not restricted to the Church of England. Overtures by the Conservative Party to the independent evangelical and Pentecostal sectors (including the black-led churches), and to non-denominational Christian social action projects, have been very effective and many such groups are enthusiastic about The Big Society. This is further evidence of the trend towards new alliances among Christians, based on “horizontal” distinctions around issues and beliefs rather than the established “vertical” divisions between denominations. It may also indicate a more American-style understanding of religion in society and scepticism about the potential of established churches.

71. Many government departments and related bodies are exploring what The Big Society may mean for them. For example, MPA recently responded to a consultation set up at short notice by the Commission for Rural Communities on The Big Society and rural areas. Our submission emphasised the major, often unique, contribution of the Church of England to rural life. Further such consultations may be expected.
72. We should expect approaches to the church on Big Society themes to come from many directions and at different levels – national, regional and local. Work may be needed to help parishes and dioceses to access the right levels of support and good practice to enable them to respond effectively and creatively to overtures which seek to involve the church in building strong communities and institutions.

The Church's Prophetic Voice

73. There is always a tension between Christian engagement with others in work for the common good and the Christian calling to hold up the mirror of God's demands to the powerful in critical solidarity. At a time when the government's austerity measures are sure to have an impact on the most hard-pressed communities and on vulnerable people, it is vital that the church should not be co-opted into such close partnerships with government that its ability to speak truth to power is compromised.
74. Against that legitimate fear, it can be argued that some of the church's most effective critiques of government policies down the years have stemmed from congregations and clergy who have taken action – often in partnership with others, including government agencies – to address social ills and pursue the common good. Their critique of policies has been grounded in practical experience and they have earned a right to be heard. The “prophetic voice” need not always be that of the strident outsider.
75. Nonetheless, the line between working together and being co-opted is a fine one requiring constant vigilance. In the case of The Big Society, it will be important to ask, of any proposal: How far does this enable the church to be authentically itself, witnessing to Christ and pursuing the good of all?

Some Conclusions

76. The Big Society is, in principle, natural territory for the Church of England. In parishes all over the country, the church is already creating and sustaining a “Big Society”. What we now see is a government moving to build social policy around such local commitments. However, it is not yet clear exactly how the government will embody the theme across its policies.

77. In *Near Neighbours*, we have made an “earnest of intent” to work with the government in the pursuit of social cohesion. It will be up to us to ensure that the reasons for our participation, the terms of our involvement and the sticking points beyond which cooperation is impossible, are clear and help to inform any future relationships under the banner of The Big Society.
78. In other areas of church life, including the developing use and maintenance of our buildings and our unique investment in education through church schools, The Big Society offers real potential for “shifting the dominant narrative” of people, community and society in ways which will enable the church to live out its vocation more openly and constructively. There will also be many opportunities at local level for the church to engage with statutory and other bodies to develop new programmes and initiatives which enhance the common good and sustain local communities. The church needs to be prepared, at diocesan and parish level, as well as nationally, to respond constructively but wisely to a new phase in the relationship between government, church and community.
79. The Big Society may come to represent a radical and ambitious shift in the way society and government are conceived: one in which the church has more room to be itself. Whether this shift away from individualism is achievable, given the power of wider economic and cultural factors, is another question, but this does not invalidate the aspiration. Politicians who are pursuing The Big Society are playing for high stakes. The church has an interest in seeing the best elements of The Big Society thinking succeed.

Revd Dr Malcolm Brown
Director, Mission and Public Affairs
September 2010

Annexe

This Annexe contains the Contents page and Executive Summary of the *Near Neighbours* project proposal document.

NEAR NEIGHBOURS

by faithful interaction

**Draft proposals
15th October 2010**

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- 9. Near Neighbours Young Leaders**
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Annexes

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The 'Near Neighbours – *faithful interaction*' proposals described in this document are a response to the opportunities offered by the Government's policies on localism, decentralisation and the Big Society. The Church of England's commitment to society, its vocation and its ecumenical and inter faith relationships, provide unique resources to strengthen human relationships in multi religious neighbourhoods. Near Neighbours proposes a £5 million programme of connected activities to be spent over the three financial years 1st April 2011 - 31st March 2014. (We believe that the effective delivery of these proposals will demonstrate the value of this approach such that funding of further related initiatives will be appropriate and of great value.
- 1.2. The activities will be delivered by the Church of England in partnership with a range of Christian, inter faith and other faith based organisations. It will engage through its local parishes and schools which between them constitute the widest network of locally based centres and communities in the country; and through inter faith dialogue and other faith based organisations. We will use the long experience of the Church Urban Fund through a new subsidiary to ensure consistency and accountability.
- 1.3. At the heart of the proposals is the ability to work from embedded local contexts without creating new structures or multiple layers of administration, to increase the number and depth of human relationships particularly in multi religious neighbourhoods. It will better enable 'Mr and Mrs Smith, Mr and Mrs Patel and Mr and Mrs Hussain', living in the same local neighbourhood, to relate more positively to each other and to release energies for the benefit of the wider local community. The reality of many of our urban areas is that there are significant separations between communities, including religious communities. Much cohesion focussed activity in recent years has not significantly impacted at street level and has been delivered by organisations which are external to the local context. It is through the development of human relationships at the most local level that the negative impact of these separations can be significantly addressed.
- 1.4. The Church of England is very well placed by its presence, its ethos and its relationships to deliver this programme for change. It works in close ecumenical partnership with other Christian churches, and has prioritised the development of constructive links with other faith communities. The programme represents a real shift away from governmental programmes to faith community programmes; away from centralised and top down approaches to locally rooted approaches; and away from quick fix initiatives towards long term patient relational approaches. It is part of the Church of England's distinctive role to be a pioneer on behalf of and with people of faith in society and the approach being proposed will open new ways for government and faith communities generally to relate to each other. The experience of recent years has been marred by an attitude which has tended to problematise religion and then sought, often by a multiplicity of public authority initiatives, to correct the perceived problems.
- 1.5. The Near Neighbours proposals aim to have a significant impact in four key locations These are the 'M62 mill towns' corridor, Leicester, eastern London and east Birmingham. These are areas of substantially multi religious neighbourhoods and each is served by a Centre developed through the Church

of England's Presence and Engagement programme¹⁶. That programme has focussed on the equipping of churches, other faith communities and public authorities for confident relationship building. The Near Neighbours proposals will engage with the work of the Centres and on the partnerships and relationships that they have developed.

- 1.6. Near Neighbours will work through three inter related 'flows' which together will create a virtuous spiral in participating neighbourhoods.

Near Neighbours Fund

- 1.7. The first will be the Near Neighbours Fund which will provide sums of between £250 - £5000 to parishes¹⁷ for local initiatives which increase the level and intensity of local cross-community relationships. These will be through small scale activities generated locally and administered through the local church. The turnaround time for applications will be about two weeks and consistent criteria will be applied and monitored by the Church Urban Fund and the Centres. The Centres may also foster initiatives through the relationships and networks they have developed.

- 1.8. In addition to the impact of the funded activities themselves - which could include environmental, social action or sports initiatives – they will have the effect of bringing forward a range of people who are able to be active and enterprising in their communities. These might be parents in the local school, a youth worker in the church, a member of the local mosque committee, a shop keeper, the local vicar or equivalent in a faith community – any of whom could have initiated and helped to take forward a practical local enterprise.

Developing relationships

- 1.9. The second 'flow' will be a range of more intensive ways in which these and other individuals from the faith communities will be enabled to encounter each other in short residential contexts. The Christian Muslim Forum has pioneered residential weekends in which 'pairs' of local ministers and imams from the same neighbourhoods spend a residential weekend together. The purpose is for them to get to know each other, their contexts and issues, to continue their relationship and to share it with the members of their congregations and mosque communities. Some 200 people have participated successfully in this programme and Near Neighbours will extend this and share it with the Council of Christians and Jews and with the Hindu Christian Forum. Other aspects of the proposals will enable engagement with Sikh and other religious communities¹⁸. There will also be a series of residential weeks for young adults from separated communities developed over a number of years in West Yorkshire and Leicester.

Neighbourhood relations

¹⁶ GS1720 at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/agendas/feb2009/gspapers/gs1720.pdf>

¹⁷ A parish for the Church of England is a legally defined geographic area with a place of worship, a congregation and a licensed minister. It is connected to other parishes through the diocese. A parish serves populations which may vary in rural areas from a few hundred to tens of thousands in some urban areas. The whole of England is covered by the parish system

¹⁸ There will be discussions through the CMF and CCJ with other Muslim and Jewish organisations such as the National Mosques and Imams Advisory Board, the Three Faiths Forum and the Board of Deputies of British Jews to ensure as wide as possible buy in to the programme

- 1.10. The third 'flow' will address the ways in which neighbourhoods can better equip themselves to tackle together issues which they have identified as significant for them. The Nehemiah Foundation has been developing such programmes in recent years and will extend these to the four programme areas.
- 1.11. Through these programmes and the relationships that they generate, a substantial number of people in the four locations can be reached significantly; a further significant number mobilised through the small local projects fund; and young adults, local faith community leaders and local organisers will be equipped to identify and seize opportunities for change.
- 1.12. The New Economics Foundation will establish benchmarking research in the four localities so that the impact can be measured.
- 1.13. This programme combines for the common good, the local resources of the Church of England's parishes and schools, the partnerships with other churches and other faith communities and public funding. This provides further attractive opportunities for Trusts and philanthropists to contribute in ways which will maximise their contributions. The Near Neighbours programme does not create new structures and has very low overheads, using as it does, existing organisations at local and national level and the energies and commitments of people in their neighbourhoods.

In summary the proposals will:

- 1.14.help more people talk (real talk that means real change) to each other on the streets, help them better understand their neighbour and be more tolerant of the differences between them thereby reducing the prejudice and general lack of respect that disfigures our society. We will help Mrs Smith understand some of Mrs Patel's concerns and both of them to have an insight into some of the challenges they face. From this we will see more empowered local communities and greater levels of participation in civil society.
- 1.15. bring people together to build relationships and associations that help them to bond at deeper levels so as to nurture trust, mutual support and a sense of peace and security. The proposals will help to create relationships across difference and provide support for people to build a deeper sense of their connection with others. They will provide places for these relationships to develop and thrive and for them to become the foundation for trust.
- 1.16. encourage people to work together to make their neighbourhood a better place, creating common values and a sense of participation by giving people the skills and experience they need to build the Big Society. The proposals will help them mobilise and organise both to see and to be the change they want in their locality. They will build their capacity and empower them to make real change in their neighbourhood.
- 1.17.strengthen the sense of people pulling together to make things better where they live, and in wider society. We live in challenging times and want to help people recognise that we all have to play our part in building the common good, signalling a shift of power back to the people themselves so that they can take control of their own destiny.

2. The Church of England

- 2.1. The Church of England is a complex, diverse and decentralised set of communities, organisations and institutions held together by Christian faith and practice and by a desire to see the flourishing of England spiritually and materially. It is deeply embedded in the constitutional arrangements of the country as they have evolved over the centuries; it is rooted in rural and urban communities across the country; and it has contributed and continues to contribute to the stability of English society. It has a longstanding commitment to working in ecumenical partnership with other Christian traditions, both the historic churches and more recently formed groups. In recent decades with the impact of globalisation, its congregations have become very diverse and it has engaged extensively with communities of other Faiths as they have become part of English society.
- 2.2. The internal ethos of the Church of England, reinforced in canon law and indirectly in legislation, is embedded in a duty of care for all parishioners^[2], pupils, chaplaincy patients and others whom it serves without distinction. This is a foundational motivation which is distinctive and provides the basis for engagement with all others in the neighbourhoods. It is this ethos which drives the present proposal.
- 2.3. The Church of England is essentially a Church of local churches drawn and held together by a common faith and self understanding through a series of representational and administrative structures and ecclesial understandings. These have ensured that through the parishes and chaplaincies every neighbourhood, whether wealthy or disadvantaged, has a presence through churches, church schools, education and health chaplaincies and other church associated centres; many of these are ecumenical in their structures and relationships. It is embedded in the local community in about 20,000 'places'^[3] with buildings, people, professional ministers, youth workers and educators. This is on a scale in breadth and depth beyond any other voluntary organisation and enables the Church to reach into a huge range of different groups and communities, including 'hard to reach' groups. Many independent black-led churches are hosted by Church of England churches and halls, as are other ethnic or national churches and in a number of cases, other Faith groups..
- 2.4. The Church of England has had a very strong record in both ecumenical and inter religious relations over a long period domestically and internationally. Both bilaterally and multilaterally, the Church plays a major role in sustaining inter religious engagement, both 'face to face and side by side' at national, diocesan and local levels. The Church is generally trusted by Christian, other Faith and secular communities as not being an arm of government nationally or locally, and is used to working in partnership with a range of others^[4].
- 2.5. The Church has at all levels, sound, stable and transparent management and governance systems backed by internal and external legal provision and by elected local representation^[5], which provide mechanisms for management and accountability.

^[3] 13000 parishes with 16000 buildings of which about 1000 (2001 Census updated) have more than 10% of their population as people of other Faiths, together with 4670 primary and secondary Church schools

^[4] The Church of England has initiated, sustained or partnered with others in all the bilateral or multilateral organisations at national, regional and local levels

^[5] All parish churches have charitable registration or equivalent, each has an elected Church Council and sends representatives to Deanery, Diocesan and national synods

2.6. The Church of England has over the past six years developed a national programme which draws on and values the lived experience of local parish churches in multi religious contexts. This 'Presence & Engagement programme'^[6] used the 2001 Census to analyse the religious composition of all 13000 parishes and to focus on the (then) 900 parishes with more than 10% other Faith populations (ranging up to 75%). Amongst many other activities, the programme has encouraged and supported the development of four Centres^[7] for the better equipping of churches, other Faith communities and local authorities to carry out their ministry and work in these contexts.

2.7. The programme has had a significant impact both on the equipping of the churches for their ministry of engagement with other faith communities locally; and in enabling the Church as a whole to understand better the significance of an increasingly multi religious society and how to engage with it.^[8]

3. The Near Neighbours approach

3.1. We^[9] will begin our work by mobilising people through small grants (from £250 up to £5,000, sometimes more) to those who want to engage with their neighbourhood to make it a better place. We want to ignite the passion for change in more ordinary people who have a desire to make things better where they live and work. We would expect to see new community led playgroups, clean-ups, community celebrations, luncheon clubs, befriending schemes, and much more. We will help people to dream dreams, become entrepreneurial and then make their dreams a reality. This we will do largely by adding to the structures and relationships we have in place already and through the work of the Nehemiah Foundation in providing 'health checks' which will assist churches and faith communities in considering their neighbourhood and in exploring possibilities

3.2. Next we will identify those who already have influence in their neighbourhoods and build on their capacity to change things for the better. We will work with young aspiring community leaders and help them to build bridges, develop skills of mediation and negotiation and their capacity to make things happen. We will also work with local faith community leaders, help strengthen their leadership skills, their relationships with other groups of people and help develop good governance in their organisations.

3.3. To crown what we do, we will deliver a locally based programme of activity which will skill up and mobilise communities to achieve the change they want to see in their neighbourhood. We will find and develop local organisers able to identify and seize opportunities for change. These will be people who know their locality,

^[6] Summarised in: "Staying present and engaging faithfully": A report to General Synod January 2009:

http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/pdf_lib/37_report_to_General_Synod.pdf

^[7] In Bradford, Leicester, East London and East Birmingham

^[8] A recent document: "Sharing the Gospel of Salvation" provides an account of the ways in which the Christian understanding of the finality of Christ is lived out in local multi religious neighbourhoods: http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/pdf_lib/69_resource.pdf

^[9] 'We' in these proposals refers to the trustees and directors responsible for the Near Neighbours charitable company that will be established as a subsidiary of the Church Urban Fund. They will be appointed by the Church Urban Fund and the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England

its strong points and weaknesses and are able to work with the grain of what is already in existence.

- 3.4. The Church of England already has an extensive 'infrastructure' through its dioceses, parishes, schools and in many other ways. Together with the resources of the Church Urban Fund, the Near Neighbours proposals will enable us, with others, to build on what is there and provide it with greater capacity for delivery. We know what works and the support envisaged in this document would create additional possibilities exponentially beyond our present capacity to deliver. We believe that we can bring together a number of organisations and activities with which we have relationships in ways which will together deliver a local impact greatly in excess of any of their individual activities. We are in a truly unique position to do this through the networks - the faithful capital - that we are a part of and have direct and trusted access to. No other organisation has anything like this developed network of contacts, trust and experience of working at the 'nano level' in local communities.
- 3.5. As we deliver this programme of activity we will do it with three main values to guide our decision making:
- 3.6. **Relational:** First the primacy of a relational approach which builds trust and mutual accountability. We are already immersed in the experience of individuals and the communities where we work. Our overall aim is their flourishing and we know that the quality of encounter we have with them is the key to success. We begin by recognising the value of every person we come into contact with and working from there. Hence, we will always choose long term, comprehensive solutions which take seriously the lived experience and behaviour of the people we work with, their view of the world, what they think will work in their neighbourhood and their insights and capacities.
- 3.7. **Locally based:** Secondly, we will aim at specifically local solutions to local problems. We recognise that often local people bring key insights and ideas about how to address the problems they face but do not always know how best to them. We acknowledge the value of centrally organised initiatives in some cases but our focus is on locally based solutions. Our strategy for change is one which emerges from trust, the lived experience of people and their passion for change. This initiative will give us the capacity to build for the long term future.
- 3.8. **Faith based:** Thirdly, we focus our work on faith based activities and organisations because we are a Christian religious community and because this is the key way for us to reach those who are seldom heard and hard to reach. We have called the proposals 'Near Neighbours' because this refers directly to the teaching of Jesus Christ about the twin commandments to love God and love our neighbour. We are not exclusive about this and see ourselves working with others to serve the whole community according to their need not their creed or colour, their sexuality or gender, their disability or age. We see Christian faith and religious faith in general as having real potential to be an active and integrating force for good which builds flourishing and healthy communities..
- 3.9. We see in this initiative a real potential to connect our existing vocation with the concepts of the Big Society. It will enable mutual respect, relationships that increase supportive bonds and connections and the opportunity for people from different communities and identities to create better places to flourish in and

grow. In what follows we will describe what we want to achieve, how we will do it and what we need to make it work.