

Community engagement case study – St John’s Seven Kings

Background

St John’s Seven Kings was a diverse and busy church in a diverse and changing area. The parish is multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic as it contains significant Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities. 63.05% of the population consisted of faiths other than Christianity. This made it an interesting and dynamic place to be. When that was combined with committed, caring and creative people in the congregation and community, the parish provided opportunities for ministry which was engaged and engaging, innovative and traditional, memorable and mundane.

We had a diverse medium sized congregation with 60 – 80 at our main Sunday service and 130 on our electoral roll. We were diverse in our age profile, ethnically and theologically, so much so, that one year we ran a course on dealing with disagreements. We sustained our diverse congregation through a wide range of different services plus prayer and study activities.

Over an eight-year period (2007 - 2015) we:

- celebrated anniversaries (Contact Centre, Mothers’ Union, 110 years of the Church);
- maintained our work with children and young people; drew new people into ministry in services and leadership;
- welcomed new people into the congregation as a result of our community engagement, the occasional offices of baptisms, funerals and weddings, and through people moving into the area;
- contributed to successful community campaigns for much needed local facilities;
- organised art exhibitions, bazaars, community information events, concerts, light opera performances, literary panels, a Praise Party, a wide range of social and fundraising events, table-top sales and a talent show;
- supported the setting up the Sophia Hub social enterprise support service;
- worked closely and well with our friends in the Seven Kings Fellowship of Churches and the local cluster of Anglican churches;
- expanded the range of community groups using the Parish Centre; and
- through our Peace & Justice group raised global issues relating to climate change, poverty, migration and conflict, while also raising funds for projects in Gaza and Israel.

Community engagement & fundraising

Our building had been converted internally to provide a worship area and community rooms. We developed our hiring of our community spaces until we became a well-used and well-loved community hub. We did so in a way that made the hall hire commercially viable by increasing hall hire rates, restarting bookings for one-off events, increasing the number of users and developing the Sophia Hub project. Undertaking these initiatives assisted us greatly in moving from a position of an annual deficit on running costs to a surplus in years seven and eight.

We organised art exhibitions, concerts, light opera performances, literary panels, and a talent show at the church and commissioned artworks for the community garden that we created alongside the church. Together with our cluster of Anglican churches we also created an Art Trail, on the basis that if visitors knew they could see an interesting selection of artwork in a specific area they were more

likely to visit than if they thought they could only see one or two pieces. These all increased our community profile and brought new people to our building.

Our community engagement was developed primarily through our involvement in Seven Kings & Newbury Park Resident's Association (SKNPRA) and Take Action for Seven Kings (TASK) which undertook a wide range of influential community campaigns and community improvement activities such as community clean-up actions. The two organisations supported each other's campaigns but differed in that SKNPRA was a formally constituted membership association while TASK had a less formal membership and decision-making structure.

SKNPRA and TASK, together with other community groups in the area, demonstrated that it is possible to make a difference, even in times of austerity. By working together, we contributed to larger-scale changes in the area; seeing a new library opened, an existing library saved; reopening of park toilets; and step-free access to stations. We created our Church Art Trail as part of a Fitter for Walking project and also organised two street cleaning exercises with the Redbridge Cleansing Dept. Other improvements made as part of the Fitter for Walking project including a seat at the junction of Aldborough Road South and Brook Rd, cycle rail planters the church, and a mural on the dull wall of Downshall Primary School. We were also able to convince Area 5 and 7 of the London Borough of Redbridge of the need to repair and repaint the bandstand in Seven Kings Park. The churches locally held Praise in the Park events at the bandstand. Taking a series of small actions and joining together with other groups to make our voices heard had an impact and lead to some significant improvements.

I took on the chairing of the Resident's Association, with another church member being Secretary. Outside the Church we developed a community garden incorporating artworks, benches, community noticeboard, remembrance garden and sensory planting. The community garden was developed with funding from Area committees, Living Streets and Diocesan fund. It was opened by the Archdeacon of West Ham in May 2011 as part of a Community Information event held in the garden.

We organised several community information events at the church. These brought our community together strengthening existing relationships and, for many of the groups present, introducing them to new users or volunteers. Among the groups involved were: 5th Seven Kings Brownies, ASNET, Downshall Pre-School Playgroup, local churches, Goodmayes Quranic Study group, Kumon, National Blood Service, Newbury Park & Seven Kings Ward Councillors, Redbridge Labour Party, Redbridge Swimmers Association/Barkingside 21/Ilford Historical Society, Redbridge Voluntary Care, Scouts & Rangers, Seven Kings Conservatives, Seven Kings Park User's Group, Seven Kings Safer Neighbourhood Team, Shine Dance Class, SKNPRA, Sophia Hubs and St Johns Road Neighbourhood Watch. Alongside these events the church organised a Plant and Table-top Sale with a wide range of stalls involving others from the church and community, plus excellent refreshments. The event enabled the local community to support the ongoing work of St John's whilst enjoying the event as a whole.

Our community engagement led to the idea of and the contacts needed for the launch of the Seven Kings & Newbury Park Sophia Hub, a faith-based business hub we located at St John's Seven Kings. This provided a weekly Enterprise Club and a Timebank, whilst also offering training in initiating community projects or enterprises. It focused particularly on green businesses, arts initiatives, and

wellbeing enterprises. The Sophia Hub enabled local people to get involved as business mentors, start-ups, investors, management group members and timebank volunteers. A Sophia Course empowered people in making connections with their faith and wisdom traditions, understanding the basics about social enterprise and considering the local context, identifying resources and issues of shared local concern to generate ideas for new social enterprises.

Learning

- Church support for community initiatives generates goodwill and provides contacts and networks for other initiatives.
- Church support for community initiatives needs to be wholehearted through genuine commitment (such as, for example, chairing a Resident's Association) to be effective.
- Community engagement is not a quick strategy. It takes time to build relationships, to be trusted, and to hear the concerns that are at the heart of community life.
- Once relationships have formed and concerns genuinely heard then significant opportunities open up in which the church can play a part.
- The church doesn't have to always lead or organise. Offering support and/or hospitality can be as effective.
- St John's benefitted financially through new groups hiring its spaces and the Sophia Hub being based in the building with rent covered through its funding. Additionally, funding was found for initiatives such as the art trail and community garden which had the effect of bringing more people to the building.
- Publicise everything you do through local and social media as stories about effective community engagement as good news stories for the wider community and raise the profile of the church locally while also generating goodwill toward it.

Community Events

Community Festivals are one of the best ways for churches to engage with their wider community and can also leave a legacy of more local churches working together to serve their community. A Community Festival puts the church at the heart of the community, using a fun-filled programme that could focus on the Arts, community information or sports. Often it takes a number of churches or groups working together to deliver a successful Festival. Community Festivals can be a one day event to a full week with a variety of events. A Festival that gives a taste of authentic community has activities and games that bring celebration and fun where the participants are the stars.

Community Festivals might include: big screen showing a key event; fun for children including face painting, clowns and competitions; information stalls; sports based games; barbecue and/or refreshments; live music; arts and theatre performances. Arts Festivals could include any or all of the following: Art trails; community arts events; concerts; craft fairs; demonstrations; exhibitions; installations; lectures; performances; poetry readings; storytelling; workshops etc.

To begin organising Community events, start by dreaming dreams together with like-minded people. What follows is both a workshop exercise for now and a way of beginning the planning process for an event in your community:

- What's really important is creating an opportunity for people to feel involved and take (some)

ownership. Having a planning or 'visioning' day will help accomplish that.

- Begin with a couple of exercises for the group as a whole. First, remember how a community event has impacted you. What was it ... a visit, a conversation, something you saw or brought home? We all have different kinds of experiences and encounters. Please share a memory of an experience like that (and have one or two less shy people 'on hand' to lead the way in speaking out and sharing). Sharing stories like that plants the seeds for a whole community of appreciation.
- Now have the group imagine a top-notch event. Why is it going well? Its crowded. Tons of people (personally invited / heard about it via local media?) The visual art is very good and displayed well. The theatrical and musical acts go off flawlessly and everyone seems to appreciate them. The refreshments are fabulous. Everyone is talking about this event for days and weeks afterwards. There are already plans for another one. Other churches and communities are thinking of doing one and are asking you how it's done. Imagine this with as much specific detail as possible.
- Then, on a whiteboard or a huge sheet of paper 'write in' your dream event at one end and then draw a line all the way across the sheet to 'you are here' at the other end. Break into small groups to start brainstorming 'things that have to happen in order to make sure this goes well.' Each group will need a delegated rep who will read from 'their' list of essentials. A facilitator at the front jots these down on movable sticky pad sheets ... crucial for arranging/rearranging. There will be overlap/repetitions BUT what will emerge will be a number of overall categories of 'things we have to do/will need to happen' and you will be spacing these categories along what is essentially a timeline. Let's say you have four or five major categories like PUBLICITY, REFRESHMENTS, TRANSPORT, and so on. Each category then breaks down into specific tasks.
- Next, the small groups 'break up' and then voluntarily rearrange around those tasks, with suggested guidelines as to how to keep 'each other' on track in the group.
- Now you have a group of committed stakeholders, who are 'evangelists' for what community has meant to them and what a great event could mean for the community. Furthermore, this community of stakeholders has been engaged, informed and empowered and are taking 'concrete' steps towards seeing a top-notch community event take place in their midst.

The success of any event depends on the effort, care and skill that goes into its initial planning. It is always tempting to just plunge in and get on with the work, particularly if a number of people are involved and each person is highly motivated to achieve. But starting to run an event with no firm blueprint of action will put the whole project in jeopardy. Planning is fundamental in order to avoid disappointment and ensure that your event runs successful and achieves the aims you have for it. Another immense benefit to having planned your event is that your plan will act as an alarm mechanism when it looks as though you may not achieve something that is important to the overall success of your plan. The sooner you become aware of potential pitfalls, the easier it is to find solutions to the issues involved.

An event plan will give everyone involved a clear outline of the project and an agreed set of actions to ensure it can and will be delivered. Everyone involved is then clear about:

- a) what the event is and how long it should take to plan and deliver;

- b) who is responsible for each aspect of the event plan; and
- c) how and when key decisions are made and reviewed.

Start by agreeing the aims and objectives for the event. Aims and objectives are always linked but are often confused. They are, however, quite distinct: aims are what you hope to achieve by running your event and objectives are the activities you undertake to bring these achievements about. Outcomes are then linked to your aims, so agreeing clear aims will help you identify your outcomes. Defining your desired outcomes is part of good project planning.

Once you have agreed the aims of the event then you can identify the objectives or the activities needed to achieve the aims. An easy way to remember the characteristics of a good objective is the acronym SMART, which stands for "Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-Bound." Once you have agreed your aims and objectives you can use them to plan the actions needed for their achievement. For example, you will need to publicise the event, so decide how long before the event you need to get publicity out and that will be the latest date by which you need to have found the venue and equipment.

Conclusion

As a result of this missional activity, St John's became well known in the borough as a well-used and well-loved community hub; a church that was open, welcoming, engaged and engaging.

We achieved this together in a challenging context for the borough's churches which resulted from the changing demographics in the area. The multi-faith nature of this parish meant that Christianity was becoming numerically a minority faith in the area bringing significant challenges for maintaining church buildings and congregations as a result. While understandably, but unhelpfully, this can result in a defensive attitude developing among Christians, overall at St John's we were open to engagement and dialogue with our neighbours of other faiths through our support of the Faith Forum and Three Faiths Forum events and the work of the Sophia Hub and a Scriptural Reasoning group.

In addition, although there was resistance, we faced up to the changes needed to address the financial issues which arise from the challenge provided by changing demographics and worked our way together to a place of renewed financial viability.

In this period St John's was an example of how churches can survive and thrive in changing and challenging times and locations. What we did together at St John's over those eight years demonstrated the value of community engagement and commercial activity for churches in areas where numbers of Christians overall were declining. Sustaining our congregation, improving our finances and developing new ministry was a significant achievement in our context and showed that combining congregation, compassion, commerce and culture (the four Cs) is an approach which is relevant to each and every church and community and needs to be shared and used more widely within the Church as a whole.

Revd Jonathan Evens

April 2021