

Trust *in* the community: how churches can build social capital

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You don't have to look very far to see how worried people are about the state of our urban community life. We see politicians and the media endlessly discuss questions like 'What has happened to our sense of community?' and 'What can be done to build healthy communities?' These are key questions for churches who want to make a difference to their local areas.

Relationships and trust between groups of people are essential for a healthy community life. If groups within the community do not even talk to each other or rarely even meet, they easily become suspicious of one another. The divisions between people because of age, race, religious faith, ethnic group, or even those who simply live on a different estate, can become dangerously entrenched. Small incidents can spark major issues.

The City of Bradford, in West Yorkshire is well known for its large Asian population which has grown considerably over the last 30 years. This has meant significant changes to the way Bradford looks and feels especially for many older white people. They can wonder what has happened to 'their' local area.

St Clement's Barkerend, a church in inner city Bradford, listened to these concerns and decided to act. The women from the church's lunch club for older people decided to get together with the women from a local mosque. They organised lunches together and visited each others' place of worship. This all turned out to be a huge success. Through sharing their own stories they discovered how many concerns and joys they shared in family and community life despite their cultural differences. To add a further dimension, local school children interviewed the ladies from the mosque and produced a small book of their stories called *Journeys to Barkerend*.

On a practical level project has led to older people feeling more confident walking the streets and using local shops. They feel less lonely and anxious, and more part of the community. The lunch has left them with a more positive approach to their neighbours, and a real sense of hope within the changing city, as people realise that they share the same values after all.

This project involved the *sharing* of stories, which built *bridges* between groups who had previously seen themselves as different, and enabled relationships to *bond*. These improved relationships and growing sense of trust as *social capital*.

We all know that financial investment can make a real difference to communities. New playgrounds, improved housing and better transport make a huge difference. But by themselves these changes will never be enough to build healthy communities. This is because communities don't just need financial capital but also *social capital*. To be healthy and secure communities need strong relationships between people and a sense of trust.

And this is where churches have a key role to play, for churches are places dedicated to the building of relationships – with God and with our neighbours. When churches are able to reach across divides that fracture our society, they become places rich in social capital.

Churches often have great facilities that can be used to build social capital. As well as our Sunday meetings, our buildings can be put to great use the rest of the week with community projects that bring people together, sharing experiences, building bridges and bonding in relationships. Often it's the simplest ideas that involve people eating, talking and getting to know each other that are the best.

Let's remember how the Bible describes God's people as being 'repairers of broken walls, restorers of streets with dwellings' (Isaiah 58:12). There is no doubt that our urban communities desperately need people who are willing to be repairers and restorers. Let's be those people. While we may not be rich in financial capital, we can be rich in *social* capital and in doing so can be a shining light to the communities around us.