

ARTICLE

Characteristics of a 'common good building' Church of England church: a case study in a UK southern coastal town

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Abstract

This paper investigates the question, What does a “common good building” church, that partners with others to serve homeless people, look like? This investigation will assist church leaders in focusing resources and training on an outworking of the *Missio Dei* that aspires to common good building. The method employed for this investigation was a critical correlation which prioritized the givenness of God within the constructivist approach of producing a qualitative grounded theory. This theory tested qualitative data from focus groups against theoretical sensitizing and further tested it in a “common good building” conference and in abductive reflection with a range of theologians. The research outcome emphasizes the significance of respectful listening in empowering, particularly those with subjugated knowledge of themselves. Further conversations are needed between understandings of mission and those of work. How power is used and abused is critical; subsidiarity is central to mission.

Keywords: Partnering, Common good, Empowering, Listening, Human dignity, Work, Subsidiarity

1 Introduction

In this paper I explore those qualitative characteristics of an Anglican parish church which have emerged from fieldwork focused on what to do about homelessness. The fieldwork was central to a research project exploring churches building common good in partnership with others. This research project was a personal and professional response to my repeated horror at finding homeless people all around me in my daily life as a parish minister.

Homelessness was very much in the public eye in the UK southern coastal town where I ministered. Homeless people camped in churchyards and slept in shop doorways, under the pier, in the woods and on park benches. Soup kitchens were so well established that there was competition between them. Food banks proliferated. The same people were seen, year after year, and some were vulnerable teenagers. Although this town had a tourist industry, finance and creative digital sectors, and thriving universities, nonetheless, there were also two residential areas of significant deprivation. I felt impotent at the increasing complexity of the problem, locally as well as nationally. What became obvious to me was that homelessness was a bigger challenge than any one agency could solve by itself; partnerships with others were necessary. The question for me, leading a parish church, was “Can a parish church build such partnerships?”

First, I explored that question in practice by beginning to build relationships locally. Secondly, I analysed the effectiveness of those partnerships in addressing the root causes of the national problem of homelessness. In doing this, I discovered common good thinking, as set out in Catholic social thought, as a tool for analysis. As I delved more deeply into understandings of the common good it became clear that because all human context is contingent and continually changing, so “common good building” is a process. It is most effective for change as a process in which one actively engages with others to build what is agreed upon as the common good, rather than as a system of thought that one might apply in practice. Agreeing can be elusive. In my daily ministerial practice, this took me some time to learn. As a result of that learning, I use “common good” primarily as part of an adverb and will refer mostly in this paper to “common good building”.

I discovered, after some well-intentioned failures in offering practical help, that “common good building” is about negotiating inclusive empowerment. In this way of trial and error, I realized that partnerships for sustainable empowerment of homeless people must include them as active agents for their own good. This became a guiding principle (the research ethics principle, “not about me, without me”) as I researched inclusive partnerships for “common good building” in the coastal town in which I was parish priest.

My experience as a parish priest suggested to me that partnerships with others are fundamental to “common good building”. In the research project described here, I tested this initial hypothesis by taking a sample of practical partnership workings. The focus of that partnership working was on homelessness in the town. During the research project, it became clear that for churches to be effective in partnerships for

common good building they must aspire to, and demonstrate in practice, characteristics that I shall draw out in this paper.

Research Ethics

The source of my research ethics cover was the doctoral programme (DTh Winchester) in which I was engaged. Informed consent was obtained from all participants; it covered future publication of research outcomes as well as the initial recording and transcribing of conversations in focus groups. In describing the research to participants, at this very early stage, I summarized the main common good principles as understood within Catholic social teaching (CST) and invited participants to comment in focus groups on their experience of the practice of those principles. Thus, participants were explicitly invited to contribute in two ways: first, to share their own lived experience of homelessness; secondly, to frame it, to whatever extent they were comfortable, within understandings of common good building.

Research Methodology

Critical correlation is a methodology combining a constructivist social sciences approach of seeking empirical qualitative data to analyse and evaluate in forming a qualitative grounded theory, with the critical realist approach of my own Christian faith. Swinton and Mowat (2006: 83, 95) propose *critical correlation* as prioritizing the givenness of God within a mutually respectful conversation between theology and social sciences. From a constructivist perspective, this approach is interpretive and dialogical. From a critical realist perspective, it approaches belief with the respect that Swinton and Mowat refer to as *critical faithfulness*; that is, Christian belief, open to exploration and cherishing mutually critical dialogue (2006: 95). The practical theologian Pete Ward helped my understanding, speaking of knowledge of God as “a spiritual discipline of participation in divine being” and suggested that the pursuit of this discipline needs both subjective faith and objective analysis (2018). For me that meant acknowledging where I was situated not just geographically but also spiritually and in terms of my personal beliefs about God. Epistemologically, situation forms knowledge and understanding; and therefore I acknowledge my faith as inevitably personal. This sits, in critical correlation, alongside the qualitative analysis of grounded theory.

2 Building Grounded Theory

As qualitative analysis, I built a theory that was grounded (Glaser & Strauss (1967) 2006; Corbin & Strauss 1998), using data from rough sleepers and those who work with them; altogether, 80 people contributed. Meeting between December 2018 and March 2019, a sample of rough sleepers and others, meeting in five focus groups,

shared their situation. Themes emerging from these focus groups were shared at a “common good building” conference facilitated by the trust *Together for the Common Good* (T4CG) and also beforehand (by email) and in personal conversation. The nature of the trauma experienced by homeless people – differently for each person – renders impossible any attempt at uniformity of approach. That is usual with qualitative research. The research outcomes will therefore be like a series of snapshot photographs which make no claims for universal application. Different participants might well have given different outcomes. This research is specific and personal and should not be likened to quantitative research. Nonetheless, these outcomes can, I believe, enrich understandings of human meaning.

During the afternoon of the conference, participants talked in four more focus groups. The models or pictures, shared in this paper, of “common good building” churches emerged from my reflection on analysis of transcripts of those discussions. The analysis and the interpretive lens through which I saw the transcript data, and from which I formed these four models, inevitably reflects how I was formed by my own lived experience and the range of partners with whom I chose to reflect upon it. A significant partner with whom I have reflected has been the trust T4CG, which has its theoretical roots in Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Further, I have reflected on what emerged from the research using abductive reasoning (Reed 2010: 41) to interpret the results. I see this method, “especially suited to believers engaged reading Scripture and performing the liturgy” (Reed 2010: 41), as consistent with my pastoral and spiritual practice as an Anglican priest.

3 “Common good building” as *missio Dei*

From this pastoral and spiritual perspective, I see common good building as central to God’s whole purpose, sometimes called the *missio Dei*. Quite simply, it is about sharing the wisdom of the heart, focused on the love of God as shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

For me, in practical terms, God’s mission (*missio Dei*) was serving the town centre of my parish. I understand the whole mission of God as God loving the cosmos into fullness of life. We can be sure that God will not only love the church. Equally, it would be inconsistent with the all-inclusive loving purposes of God for the church to be God’s only agency of loving. Further, my research and parochial experience prompt me to believe that Christians can learn much from such partners. On both grounds, therefore, the church can partner with others in serving this universal mission of God for loving all the cosmos, which is the *missio Dei*.

For coherence in serving the *missio Dei*, some churches identify five marks of mission (Walls & Ross 2008). Cathy Ross argues that these marks “form a good working basis for a holistic approach to mission” (2008: xiv). In the following I will lean on this understanding. This research on homelessness is located within the working out of the fourth mark of global mission; it is seeking to transform unjust structures of society. This incorporates David Bosch’s overall view of mission, which “opens the door” for partnerships in God’s mission with a range of individuals and associations:

The missio Dei is God’s activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate (Bosch 1991: 391).

Bosch’s understanding is that God’s activity is always ahead of the church and is not limited by it. Seen thus, the Spirit of God initiates and directs God’s mission. This was accepted by the Roman Catholic Church in the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* which says, referring to the social order and its development toward service to common good building:

The Spirit of God, who, with wondrous providence, directs the course of time and renews the faith of the earth, assists at this development. (Vatican II, 1966: 26)

Thus, it expounds mission pneumatologically, seeing the Holy Spirit as directing all development, in the church and in the social order of the wider world, towards common good building. The document adds:

Such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, in so far as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society. (1966: 39)

Thomas Aquinas (1948), a scholar whose writing has influenced many theologians, reconciled the political philosophy of Aristotle with Christian faith. In doing so, he argued that a just ruler or government must work for the “common good” of all. Social groups find order by sharing a common goal; this is the common good, which is the whole network of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and live a fully, genuinely human life. Aquinas argues paradoxically that while law is an intelligent instruction directed to reason, it can also be coercive. That is easy to see with both eternal and natural law, because both are sufficiently general to make disagreement in principle hard; however, legitimate human law evolves to serve changing situations and can be open to a variety of interpretations and abuses. Aquinas pointed to this danger in his *Summa Theologiae* 1:96:

Someone exercises dominion over another as a free person, when he directs him to the proper good of the one being directed, or to the common good. ... But the social life of a multitude is not possible, unless someone is in charge, who aims at the common good (1948: 4).

Whilst I agree with Aquinas that social life benefits pragmatically from there being “someone in charge, who aims at the common good”, I suggest that such power can be abused, and therefore must be subject to accountability. From my experience in governance, accountability works most effectively when exercised by a quite small (8–10) local group who can meet regularly. I suggest that relationships of mutual exchange can develop over time in such a group. I am attracted to the insights of J. Neville Figgis CR, an Anglican priest and historian who argued for seeing sovereignty in local groups or ‘associations’ (1913, 1914). This approach has been supported by David Nicholls, an Anglican theologian (1995) and by Alastair Redfern, a diocesan bishop (2009). They argue that “associations” can meet the need for local relationships of fellowship, solidarity and mutual support. Churches can be such “associations”, promoting accountability, respect for human dignity and the dignity of work. This is true both individually and socially. CST suggests that relationships that facilitate “common good building” are underpinned by reconciliation, solidarity, participation, association, the operation of subsidiarity and careful stewardship of the natural world.

I have been influenced by Together for the Common Good (T4CG), which builds its understandings of the common good on biblical perspectives (2017: 3). It appropriates to the church the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “Seek the welfare of the city ... for in its welfare you will find your peace” (Jer. 29.7 NRSV).

T4CG (2017: 15) further appropriates for the church Amos 5.14-15, suggesting that “common good building” has both ethical and spiritual dimensions:

*Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be with you ...
Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate. (NRSV)*

I suggest that these ethical and spiritual dimensions were focused sharply for the early Christian community, as recorded by Luke in Acts:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. (Acts 2.42-47 NRSV)

“Having the goodwill of all the people” (v 44) on their hearts prioritizes the welfare of all people, as does “common good building”.

This paper explains how, within a research project (DTh) on partnerships for putting common good principles into practice, I have interpreted focus group data as showing four pictures of “common good building” churches.

It will be suggested, on the basis of the empirical data, that such partnerships can benefit all concerned. The practical theologian Dustin Benac (2022: 119) shows that only two or three such partnerships are needed to improve the sustainability of Northwest Pacific Coast churches and to create a sufficiently substantial base for resourcing mission. Benac’s analysis of his local examples of churches in partnerships suggests that churches which partner to serve God’s mission can be more effective together than they are alone.

My focus in this paper, however, is on what can be learned from the research on three local churches in what was my parish. It will give a snapshot picture, valid for that sample, and for the moment at which the snapshot was taken. As such, it bears comparison with other such ethnographic outcome pictures.

As explained above (in *Building Grounded Theory*), four pictures are here outlined of churches building the common good. They have emerged from focus groups consisting of rough sleepers and others. Such churches:

- affirm human dignity, giving voices to those who are vulnerable;
- empower everyone;
- affirm the dignity of work;
- operate lateral subsidiarity, working “alongside”, sharing power.

3.1 Affirm human dignity, giving voice to those who are vulnerable

First, for human dignity to be affirmed, each person must be listened to and given respectful attention. A homeless man summed it up for me:

Talking like this is helping me. Because I don't talk about my problems to no-one. I normally keep it in. And then I'll go in the corner and cry. You've got to accept the help and talk about your problems. (Focus Group, December 2018)

Secondly, there is no substitute for listening to such lived experience. A homeless worker suggested that you do not know what it is like living on the streets until you have done it:

If we're going to collaborate, we need their voice, we need to hear them, we need to include them, because it's their voice we're representing. (Group 2, Conference)

Thirdly, one should not underestimate the boost that can be given to self-worth by knowing, in faith, that one matters to God. A rough sleeper spoke about his faith keeping him alive:

I'm grateful to the Lord Jesus for being there. Without him, there's no way I'd be alive today. (Focus Group, December 2018).

I found this gratitude in a significant minority of homeless people.

Moving to reflection on those three insights, I looked to the practical theologian Eric Stoddart as one who not only affirms those insights from his own pastoral experience (2014: 27), but also adds another dimension, namely, that of God's future. Stoddart recognized that, instead of looking backwards to understand the present, looking forwards gives hope, because the present can be understood through what is believed about the future. This can be a transformational insight for those who have lost their human dignity, for whom looking back is depressing and further compounds their loss. Rough sleepers, whose past is traumatic, can be locked, psychologically and emotionally, into looking backwards. Looking back at past trauma does not bring hope. "Hopelessness" was said by one rough sleeper to be the main problem at the heart of homelessness.

By contrast, hope is constructed by unlocking the toxic habit of looking back at past trauma. Instead, one looks forward with hope for the future. Rough sleepers can see

themselves through God's eyes, and trust a God to whom all, with no exceptions, are of worth.

Anglican New Testament scholar N. T. Wright argues that nurturing such trust is the role of the church:

A strong sense of the dignity and intrinsic worth of all human beings, made lively through explicit eschatological hope, is what the church brings to partnerships for building the common good. (2019: 190)

A 'common good building' church can share tears and joys and find unexpected hope in the synergy and dynamism of partnerships. The Anglican theologian A. M. Allchin suggests that such synergy and dynamism are a lively participation in the love of God, where those who carry the pain of troubles discover freedom and peace:

In the descent of God's joy into the centre of our world, man's spirit leaps up into union with God's Spirit, the world's own power of life is released, its responsive and creative power rises up and participates in the eternal movement of love which is at the very heart of God himself. (1988: 77)

I agree that it is that "eternal movement of love", focused in worship, which seeks the perspective of God's love. I see the aim as to participate in God's epistemology of profligate relational love. Therefore, I suggest that the common good building church can facilitate faith in God who offers unconditional cherishing. Seen this way, all can look forward "through God's eyes" with eschatological hope. They can see themselves with hope because they know themselves held within God's epistemology of love. I have been helped in this understanding by Jürgen Moltmann (1981: 117), who embeds loving relationality at the heart of God and, therefore, at the heart of the outworking of the church's mission; and also by N. T. Wright, who writes explicitly about "the epistemology of love":

The point of love is that it is neither appraisal nor assimilation: neither detachment nor desire, neither positivist objectivity nor subjective projection. When I love I am delightedly engaged with that which is other than myself. (2019: 103)

This paper suggests that a "common good building" church can gradually enable such an epistemology of love to take the place, for rough sleepers, of their deeply debilitating subjugated ways of knowing themselves. Thus, churches that build common good empower others to reconstruct hope.

3.2 Empower everyone

Empowerment starts with knowing that you are needed and that you also need others; witness a rough sleeper:

If they need you, they're giving you dignity. But if you need them, you're giving them it. ... And you're creating and strengthening an empowering environment because you need them. (Group 3, Conference)

An empowering church builds self-esteem. A local business partner agreed:

Their self-respect is diminished. And so, in addition to providing a bed and a meal, they also need to provide some opportunities for people to regain their self-esteem, their self-worth. (Group 3, Conference)

I have chosen to reflect on empowering partnerships in company with Chris Beales, an Anglican priest who has focused on the social and spiritual impact of housing in the north-east of England. In *Humanising Work* (2014), Beales gives examples of his getting “alongside” working with co-operatives, credit unions and the challenge of mass unemployment. He affirms the insight of the Anglican theologian Timothy Gorrington (2002: 38), that “people en-story and en-soul their places” and “their settlements shape their souls”. Beales comments that in some communities, particularly where there are areas of new housing, “the place feels a bit ‘soulless’” (2014: 11). I reflect, personally, looking back on a diverse and busy town centre that I served as priest, that the soul, or essential spirit of life, in community needs nurturing no less than in each person. I suggest, therefore, that it is an empowering function of the church that it nurtures the spirit of life, personally and socially, in collaborative participation within the love of God.

But homeless people rarely feel thus nurtured. They live with what Michel Foucault called a “subjugated knowledge” (Foucault 1980: 71) of themselves and how they relate to the wider community. Within this kind of knowledge, vulnerable people can see themselves as unworthy of help. They exclude themselves from the dominant discourse about how resource might be allocated. Homeless people are typical of this epistemology of subjugated knowledge. This is akin to the practice of diminishing people by gaslighting. In this way, thought and self-perception become altered to only see oneself in a negative light – indeed, as achieved by turning down the gaslighting, and consistently presenting the one who is being dominated in semi-darkness. Epistemologically this must change before people who have been diminished in self-esteem can be reintegrated into society. “Common good building”

churches can focus their passion for justice on changing this damaging epistemology of subjugation into one grounded in love.

To counter subjugated knowledge, local church members can assert the priority of relationships of mutual respect. Alastair Redfern, from his perspective as a bishop, emphasized understandings that are germane to this:

For local churches this implies a challenge to move from beyond the network of groups which comprise a church (congregations, choir, toddlers, lunch club etc.) to serious engagement with associations. ... This middle territory of groups and associations is the place where the agenda of the heart can be encountered, illuminated, challenged and changed. ... Associations frame and interpret the encounters of the heart. (2009: 16)

Redfern's emphasis upon encounters of the heart speaks to me of mutually supportive relationships respecting dignity and empowering those who have lost self-respect. My suggestion is that this performs an epistemology of love by asserting that each person is cherished by God.

Churches are well placed to offer such encounters and doing so can be a characteristic of Anglican "common good building" churches. My intuition is that "common good building" churches that are unafraid of experiencing what the Anglican theologian Terry Biddington refers to as the "untamedness" of God (2014: 151) – the wildness and "otherness" of God – might better understand what it is to be homeless. My experience is that the "common good building" church is delighted (not threatened) to see that the "untamedness" of God is such that those outside the church often have a godly capacity to surprise 'insiders' with goodness, loving-kindness and joy.

3.3 Common good building churches affirm the dignity of work

An ex-rough sleeper emphasized the significance of having no work:

Most of the people out there are just hanging on to their dignity and are fighting to keep a job, and a home, but they're sitting in agony at home. (Group 3, Conference)

Many homeless people are diminished because they have lost their jobs. A homeless worker spoke of a man who got work, but struggled to keep it, before he got accommodation:

I wake him up at five o'clock every morning, so he can go to work. But he still gets grief as a rough sleeper. (Group 2, Conference)

Research transcripts tell me that property often cannot be rented without proof that one is in work and can pay the rent. The vicious circle is that it is difficult to get work if one admits to being of no fixed abode. Negotiating this vicious circle can be exhausting and dispiriting. Rough sleepers told me that “common good building” churches could offer personal mentoring as people face such discouragement, and also challenge bureaucracies to operate in more user-friendly ways.

I reflect that churches that provide mentoring can help people understand that work belongs to the rhythm of a fully human life. Such a life can hold together understandings of work, with leisure, with rest, with retirement and with worship. Unless work and worship are integrated, churches can be peripheral to “common good building”, worship can appear to be mere escapism and irrelevant to people’s main concerns.

I have benefitted, in understanding the implications of these reflections, from Catholic social teaching. The encyclical *Laborem Exercens* identifies four issues: What work does *for* people; what work does *to* people; how workers take part in forming the work experience; and the impact upon the poor and vulnerable (Reed 2010: 32). Further, *Laborem Exercens* affirms the dignity and worth of human beings and summarizes why that is so:

Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures ... Only man is capable of work, and only man works ... Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. (John Paul II 1981: 1)

Whilst this encyclical offers foundational thinking on work from a Christian perspective, I have also benefitted from the insights of some Anglican theologians. For example, Frances Ward comments:

It makes life worth living – when the person slows down and works in a leisurely, balanced and humane way, with proper rest and a sense of purpose ... The idea of God that lies behind this approach is a God who delights in being creative. (2019: 193)

Sadly, however, to delight in being creative is not the daily prospect for homeless people. I reflect that, for reintegration of homeless people into wider society to be lasting, “common good building” churches can promote balanced and humane ways of living, whereby one does not feel guilty about time spent delighting in creativity.

I am grateful to the late John Hughes, another Anglican theologian, who makes a useful distinction between participation in the divine work of creation and sheer drudgery, which is the “necessary toil of subsistence” (2016: 60). Hughes notes that

the Sabbath is a model for the former and that “good works” for God endure into the new creation (2016: 55). Similarly, Nicola Slee, another Anglican theologian, helps me to understand that elusive work-life balance, writing about the Sabbath as “a conversational space, which includes conversation with ourselves ... but also conversation with the other” (2019: 113). I find Slee’s conversational metaphor helpful in that it is relational, dynamic and focussed on mutual exchange. Seen this way, the conversational metaphor for the divine work of creation is about creating space for a mutual exploration, a “knowing” that sits within the love of God; indeed, an “epistemology of love” (Wright 2019: 103).

This emphasis on mutual exploration coheres with the Anglican ethicist Esther Reed’s assertion that God himself works, and that, at the heart of the Godhead, “Both God the Father and the Son are said to be working as they bring salvation and blessing to humankind” (2010: 13). Therefore, Reed, continues, “work, like love, is a way of saying ‘yes’ to life” (2010: 14). The Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh similarly analysed the human condition, saying that “humans need a community of virtue in which to learn to desire rightly” (2008: 9). My reflection on what rough sleepers have said, in the light of the scholars whose thoughts I have pondered, is that “common good building” churches can be just such communities of virtue, sharing in both the hope and the struggle. Indeed, my experience is that “looking forward in hope”, as a Christian, only transcends naïve optimism if it looks to the resurrection of Jesus. Esther Reed makes a strong case for Christians to avoid naïve optimism. Rather, she says,

Christian realists derive truth not only from the observation of the things around us but from the event of the resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:1-8) and hope of God’s kingdom to come. (2010: 24)

And Reed takes the understanding further, emphasizing that it is the working love of the Risen Jesus into which Christians are called to participate. I resonate with her conclusion that ultimate hope and also “the strength to struggle for decent, humane work” can be gained from that participation (2010: 111) which can be seen as the vocation of the “common good building” church.

3.4 Operate lateral subsidiarity, working alongside, sharing power

This homeless man illustrates the difficulty of never having been cared for, nor learned to exercise agency for his own life:

I didn’t have a childhood. It’s hard for me to have a normal life. And now I’ve got St Mungo’s and I’ve got this Health Bus. I’ve got workers here that actually get to

know me ... and ask me what's best for me. They treat me like I'm a person not just a problem. (Group 2, Conference)

The *Health Bus*, started by a local GP, is parked at a church hall and it performs the common good principle that “every person is worthy of respect, simply by virtue of being a human being” (Together for the Common Good 2017: 23). It offers health care alongside other rough sleepers, where a trusting relationship can be forged with the doctor away from the stigma that rough-sleeping brings for those who need to visit local surgeries and A&E hospital departments.

Bureaucratic processes can depersonalize and accredited church representatives can have the skill, motivation and credibility to challenge that depersonalization. For example, a faith community representative told a group about the difference made by robust advocacy:

I took one client into the Housing Department. They went through the whole thing, considering the vulnerable female I was talking about, who has learning disabilities and has the reading age of an eleven year old ... Told: “Well, we’re not sure you’re vulnerable enough.”

And it was only because I said, “Well, I’m sorry. I disagree with you about the vulnerability.” Then they took it up to management, then it went higher, and then they came back down and changed their decision. (Group 2, Conference)

One participant spoke of one of the underlying difficulties inherent in helping rough sleepers to move permanently off the streets:

There are some entrenched rough sleepers that do want to be on the outside. And because that’s their norm it’s very hard to change that. One said, “Let’s have a flat so that when I feel like I’m panicking, and I feel really claustrophobic, I can go and put my tent up in the garden.” (Group 4, Conference)

It became clear from the research data that sometimes a stabilizing period can be what is needed, so that, even though housed in a flat,

We still go out on the street, because that’s a part of our lives. A transition period. (Group 4, Conference)

My interpretive suggestion is that churches that are determined to build common good will not have an easy ride with people in authority, particularly if they can

access funding; but it is essential that they have the motivation and courage to challenge any approach that questions subsidiarity and reinforces power exercised from a depersonalized distance. An approach that is “alongside” and fluid might be able to meet traumatized people where they are. “Alongside” and fluid describes Pete Ward’s model of “*liquid ecclesiology*” (2017). Ward sees his model as expressing “the dynamic and fluid understanding of the church that comes from the complexity, ambiguity, and nuance that characterises the lived expression of the Church” (2017: 5). This “liquid” model facilitates holding alongside each other, in lively lateral subsidiarity, the distinctive and developing contributions that each local partner brings to “common good building”.

Further, liquidity in local associations will involve what Swinton and Mowat call “complexifying” (2006: 13), in that it “takes account of the multi-layered and often contradictory data that qualitative research generates” (Ward 2017: 56). Here paradoxical embodiments of the common good can collaborate with mutual respect. Ward finds paradox as suggestive of “the being of God in the world” (2017: 56), and he is clear that “Paradox is not an incidental or an unfortunate byproduct in ecclesial existence” (2017: 56). For Ward, this essential paradox requires fluidity in both ecclesial vision and operation. Fluidity in lateral collaboration with others in local associations is best served by recognizing that people learn by doing, and they build the common good through sharing participatory forms of knowledge (2017: 69). This form of epistemology necessitates a church predicated on subsidiarity, with vocation seen as given by God, in creation, to all human beings.

My suggestion is that this fluidity of approach can positively impact how church communities see themselves and the extent to which they welcome outsiders. Churches aspire to be comprised of people of all ages. Their members are human, and subject to peer group pressure. Should they be tempted to make their church an “in-group” – and such temptations exist for all groups, with churches no exception – let them take to heart the common good building principle that “everyone is included, and no one is left behind” (Together for the Common Good 2017). Indeed, any “common good building” church aspires to be comprised of people of all ages, and “all sorts and conditions” of people. Therefore, considerations about ultimate purpose are germane to churches, and they are intertwined with the extent to which one is subject to the power of others. For good or ill, this affects people of all ages. Do children feel empowered at home and at school? To what extent do young people and students find lasting purpose as learners? What about those of all ages who are ill, disabled or members of minority groups? What self-understandings need to adapt to being at boarding school, in hospital, in prison, homeless or in a care home? How is purpose found in the inevitability of aging?

All these matters impact the “common good building” church. How does each one respond to these questions?

4 Conclusion

Homelessness is the problem; there was a superabundance of empirical evidence all around me in my parish that to be homeless was traumatic. The obvious questions were, “What’s going on?” and “What can I do about it?”

You start from where you are. I was leading a church. Partnerships with others of goodwill seemed to focus energy in positive ways. So I tested it out. I discovered “common good building” as a tool for analysis and a bonding of common purpose. And this study was born. It is a study of the viability of partnerships for the common good, not about homelessness, as such; although I learned much on the research journey. The journey began with me starting from where I was, as leader of a church, and setting up friendly conditions (with normal research parameters, as described above) to see what emerged. A number of suggestions for addressing the problem emerged. Some, focused on the central question about partnerships, are described in another paper. In this paper I have scrutinized, analysed and evaluated what emerged about the church.

So it is that I have described qualitative research with rough sleepers focused on missional partnerships for “common good building”. I asked, “What might be the characteristics of a common good building church?”

What has emerged emphasizes the significance for the church of respectful listening in empowering, particularly those with subjugated knowledge of themselves. There is a suggestion that further conversations would be fruitful between understandings of mission and those of work. Equally clear as suggestions for further research are the questions of how power is used and abused and the centrality of subsidiarity to mission.

My suggestion is that the “common good building” church can be local in its decision-making and in enabling all participants to be active in deciding what is appropriate for their own well-being. Hierarchies can be subverted in their controlling uses of power; sometimes it is local bureaucratic processes that are the problem, but very often it is churches, and making the problem an opportunity for empowerment can be as simple as ensuring that people have optimal agency for their own well-being. There is much more of this road to be travelled. I have suggested a few steps forward.

About the Author

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