Curating Spaces of Hope: Finding Common Cause in Disconnected Communities.

On Thursday 20th October 2016 professionals from Stockport, Cheshire, Manchester, Lancashire and Yorkshire convened at St Thomas Church in Stockport in order to explore current community contexts and the possibilities for faith working, public service reform and co-producing partnerships.

The symposium, entitled Curating Spaces of Hope: Finding Common Cause in Disconnected Communities was designed to bring together thought leaders and practitioners to engage with the Spaces of Hope framework for the purposes of partnership generation. The focus was to explore the connection between the visions for hope for the local community, with what that means to the local community, with a way of working, which facilitates both.

The event was organised by The University of Chester Centre for Faiths and Public Policy, The William Temple Foundation, St Thomas Church Stockport who hosted the event, HOME Community Café and The Wellbeing High Street.

Thought leaders and practitioners from the research community as well as the faith, third, public and private sectors convened to listen to and discuss material from emerging research agendas and emerging practices within faith based community development. The purpose of sharing in this way was to establish
resonances with existing ways of working and policy trajectories, which speak into our shared contexts, with a view to curating spaces of hope in community.

**Key Note Addresses:**

**Matthew Barber,** a researcher and practitioner from the Centre of Faiths and Public Policy at the University of Chester and St Thomas’ Church Stockport introduced Space of Hope. Matthew used ideas of people and place to define what we do, why we do it and how we offer ourselves out and discover meaning through building relationships. Matthew said, “At the most basic level we are each looking to offer something, without knowledge of certainty that it will work, or that it will resonate. Our offer is imbued with a sense of Hope.”

Matthew situated our sense of hope and relationship in both solid and fluid organisational forms, delineating a theoretical and practical access point to liminal spaces of engagement in community. This applied to all of our circumstances as we engage at the micro or grassroots level. Using examples from the night-time economy and addressing issues associated with social isolation, we learned how developing affinities with others and building common cause in shared space is rooted in our offer of hope. Through acting in community our hope becomes centred on and defined by a given focus, the manifestation of hope in practice. Examples of these might be, spaces of community, spaces of care, spaces of wellbeing, spaces of hospitality etc. All of these spaces being underwritten by what hope is. To this end, we could ground hope in the context of our lives. We heard that curating spaces of hope starts with a relational rooting that allows us to seek what is beyond the immediacy of our circumstance and is defined by the common causes that emerge.

**Prof Chris Baker,** William Temple Professor of Religion and Public Life explored partnership and co-production in the context of progressive localism. Prof Baker used drivers, including austerity, greater diversity within communities and a deepening sense of individualism in community, to situate the offer of faith groups as one that can reconnect people.
Prof Baker noted that, local authorities are increasingly turning to the wisdom, the energy and the assets of other non-statutory partners in order to deliver safe and flourishing communities. Faith groups come into their own in this context, as they are organisationally self-sufficient, have access to differentiated funding streams and possess resilience and entrepreneurship to engage at the deepest level with those who are isolated and hard to reach. The impact of faith audits has helped to broadly quantify the value of the offer that is available.

Deepening individualism, issues of mental health, loneliness and a wider narrative where activities in the public space have over time become divorced from wider values and ethics, emphasising the value of the offer that faith groups can make. The promotion of equality and building relationship, based on our affinities requires a shared understanding of what might be achieved together. To this end, Prof Baker argued, people are looking for spaces to invest their Spiritual Capital. This is the why that energises what people offer. People are seeking to embody and practice their beliefs, in a real way that makes a difference. He noted, “You can’t look at what faith groups do without looking at Spiritual Capital. You can’t hide it. You can’t occlude it. If you do that to somebody, you are denying an essential part of who they are”.

To conclude, Prof Baker explored progressive localism, not as a manifestation of austerity, but as an outlook of mind, being outward facing and coming together to organically and cooperatively find common cause in community, not as a structured response necessarily, but as a sense of what might be. As one public sector contributor in some of Prof. Baker’s recent research has noted, “you find the sweet spot, where there is energy around collective issues, working with sweet people with fire in their belly”.

**Community Case Studies:**

Hannah Heasley, The Director of HOMe Community Café in Didsbury, and Steve Horbacewzski the Founder of The Wellbeing High Street in Ellesmere Port, provided a practical grounding for the research led material from the opening speakers.
Hannah Heasley addressed the question of How do we Curate Spaces of Hope? In opening Hannah describes HOME as “a beautiful space that has emerged from a church that was run down and leaking, dark and boarded over and is now cosy and welcoming and is a hub as lots of things happen there”.

Hannah also reflected on the day-to-day running of the hub as something that challenges the foundations of your offer. As part of her introduction Hannah said, “there are undeniably times where [HOME] does not feel hope filled on a day-to-day level”. Hannah took the delegates on a journey that placed the work of HOME on the inside and outside of the church, public sector, third sector and private sector, one at a time and all at once. The sense of otherness and expectation is a powerful place of solidarity and sometimes a place of opposition on every front as the identity of HOME is found in “in-between space, which is sometimes quite hard to understand”.

To best experience Hannah’s narrative journey through volunteer engagement, to engaging isolation, to curating a hopeful space for people who used to frequent daily their GP’s surgery just for company, you can visit the Curating Spaces of Hope Facebook page and listen again to the whole presentation. You will receive a sense of the depth and range of relational ranking, comparing and contrasting the vision and values of a professional and commercially successful local enterprise along with rooted theological reflection, which brought to bare the core of the message of curating spaces of hope in a hub setting. We were reminded that sharing stories in this way matters. As a taste of Hannah’s story from HOME, this is one short section addressing what hope is:

“Being there, showing up, opening the doors every morning and saying welcome to you and welcome to your despair, and not only that, but here is ours too. We are all struggling, we are all trying our best, and yet we believe that gathering around a table, not rushing through the hard times, finding a rhythm that encompasses all of life, is itself an act of hope, and creates a space where people, relationships, community can flourish and all can know and be known, perhaps that is the deepest hope, maybe it is all we can hope for.”
Steve Horbacewzski delivered a contrasting but equally inspiring study from The Wellbeing High Street. From his time in the privates sector, Steve experienced the ‘almost spiritual way’ in which industry leaders identify problems and do something about them. In his opening Steve said “[The Private Sector] don’t talk about the problem, they don’t talk about talking about the problem. They do something about it. Everyone gets around and tries to solve the problem.”

Steve shared that following his departure from the privates sector, he returned to Chester and stepped into community and was inspired to open a café. His approach was to continually reach out and offer time to people that showed up. There was nothing more involved than that. There was no ‘plan’. His approach was about just doing it. On his journey, Steve saw social enterprise. He said, ‘people just wanted to do the right thing.’ He noted, ‘it didn’t make business sense.’ People were inspired; ‘breathed upon’, ‘animated with idea or purpose’, ‘essence or being’, ‘a state of mind or mood’.

As Steve’s sense of what was, grew, he encountered other likeminded people in the academic community, private sector and faith sector. These people shared affinities and a common offer. The relationships and location developed into sourcing a building in Ellesmere Port and Steve began to host people at the centre under the banner of Seed Enterprises; ‘We nurture you grow.’ It was at this point that Steve started to look for a framework to inform what he was doing and found the Ways to Wellbeing, which speaks into public, faith, third and private sectors. These common elements guided practice that has emerged from organic means.

Steve’s experience of applying the Ways to Wellbeing was that whilst it was him that was sitting down or getting alongside people, the offers that people were making out of their contexts, however hard, were inspiring him. The relational element meant that trust was built, one to one, and then in a group and was premised on an active hope that led to new things. In practice, literally crossing thresholds with people meant ‘people were being introduced to their own community’. The work resonated across the sectors and the ability to measure
the impact and share it into academia allowed funding to be given. This was where the Wellbeing High Street was born...

To hear more of Steve’s presentation along with all of the presentations from the day, including Matthew’s, Prof. Baker’s and Hannah’s, as well as the feedback session at the end of the day, go to @CuratingSpacesofHope on Facebook. You can access this content whether you have a Facebook account or not. Simply put @CuratingSpacesofHope into your web browser and follow the link.

Establishing the Resonances:

During the afternoon session, the delegates broke off into working groups to reflect on the variety of material that was shared by our speakers. In order to direct the time, the groups were asked to consider the following questions:

1) What were the learning curves, based on experience of working with people in disconnected communities?
2) Were there any ‘aha moments’ or things that have been learned today?
3) What might the next 5 years bring?

The discussions were rich and derived a genuine sense of location, with Stockport becoming the focus. There was a strong sense that the 45 minutes afforded for working groups on the day, was nowhere near long enough, so we have treated the feedback and emerging recommendations as a considered start to a conversation that should be encouraged to continue. Comments that emerged have shown a clear sense of direction, but one that is coupled with a demand for more time and energy to be spent on developing it.

Stockport MBC generously provided facilitators for the workshops.
Cat Duncan Rees from Stockport MBC summarised key points from her group’s findings:

“Social Action, during this time of austerity, is right at the fore and is a really good way of the church restoring its original vocation”

“Emphasis on kingdom building, not empire building. Wanting to love people and to bring out the hope for their journey, wherever they end up”

Carolyn Anderson from Stockport MBC offered keywords that emerged from her group:


The experience within the working groups was one of enthusiasm and a desire for more. One delegate said that the standout element from the day was “opening discussions between faith a statutory groups”. Another faith sector practitioner said that for future events they would like “greater dialogue [with statutory bodies]” and another was hopeful of a continuation of “space to have an honest conversation without taking offence on either side”.

The research led process from the event has provided a neutral space, where people can speak from a position of experience and mutual learning. Whilst only one afternoon, the Curating Spaces of Hope event has been warmly received and based on the recommendations, produced an extremely fruitful emerging dialogue.
Key Recommendations:

- We should nurture and develop the relationship between faith-based organisations and statutory organisations and get faith-based organisations “much more around the table”.

- We should not be seeking to ‘fill the gaps’ that austerity is causing. We should seek to clarify the legal boundaries and understand what statutory organisations have a legal duty to be doing for people, and to see where we can fit as a result of this.

- We should look at how we can develop relationships between faith-based organisations and health as a social movement in Stockport, in conjunction with the CCG’s and Stockport Together, in whatever forms this takes.

- There should be a practical collaboration established, be that a peer network or a collective of some kind, where not just people from the faith sector come together, but people from the third sector and the private sector too.

- There should be a creative space to enable partnership to bring low cost improvisation, to enable creative approaches that don’t have to cost anything but there needs to be the space to develop those and build on those and have the patience to allow them to work.

- We understand asset based work and the impact that that can have for individuals, such that a skills base emerges. We should develop a skills framework for this.

- We should premise engagements on partnership and relationships and keep those relationships established consistently even when personnel move on.