



## For Such a Time as This – Working well with Civic Authorities

### RESOURCES

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#### **Understand this is a new day**

There was a time when churches may have been treated with some suspicion and ignorance by civic authorities, and there was a general unwillingness to engage. That attitude has fundamentally changed in most places over the last few years. Churches are seen as a significant service providers, with staff, buildings and large numbers of volunteers. The financial crisis and now the Covid emergency has given even more impetus for authorities to partner with churches. With budgets being cut, they are having to find new ways of delivering services and the door is wide open for dialogue, partnership and effective engagement. There hasn't been an opportunity like this for decades, and it's time for the Church to walk into this arena with humble confidence and seek to serve the city to which it has been called.

#### **Do it in unity**

The consultation involved some of the key unity movements around the country who are effectively engaging with the civic authorities, and they all underlined the importance of approaching the statutory authorities as a group of united churches, and not just as individual churches. The authorities want one phone number to ring, one group to deal with, not several individual churches all competing for time and resources. It is not only strategic to do things in as joined-up a way as possible, but it is, of course, witness to the gospel that when we are in unity we better express the love God has for this world.

#### **Go to the top and work down**

Take the initiative and ask to meet with the chief executive and leader of the council, or the chief superintendent of the police, or the CEO of the housing trust. If you go as a small team on behalf of other churches, they are often more than willing to have a conversation with you. Try to begin the engagement at this level, then work down to the more local and junior level. If you get the buy-in with those in most authority, it will make your local work much easier. It's important, of course, to work with local civic leaders and officers on the ground, but often they need encouragement from the top before they can commit time and resources to local needs.

#### **Ask them what they need**

Don't focus so much on your needs as churches, but go to the authorities and engage them in a conversation specifically asking them about their key priorities. Ask them to give you three things they are concerned about and you could possibly help them with. You may not be able to meet all those needs but you should be able to meet some of them. We are here to be a blessing to the place God has called us to, and not a drain on it. The authorities often feel pressurised by local groups and charities to serve their own priorities; it will be a welcome conversation for them to be asked about *their* challenges and how the Church can partner in serving society.

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## **Be professional**

Be professional in your approach, do your research into whom you are meeting and what you want to talk to them about. Make yourself aware of other third-sector organisations operating in your community, what other statutory authorities are involved, and the agreed action plans already in place. You need to avoid being seen to be amateur in your approach, or needlessly duplicating services others are providing.

## **Deal with the elephant in the room**

If they do have hesitations about working with you, it may be because they have had experience with some church groups who sought to use public money to proselytise, or who were not inclusive in the service they offered. It's often best at the start of the engagement to name the elephant in the room and deal with these misconceptions.

It's important to state that you are here to serve everyone and not just one group and that, although sharing your faith is important to you, you will not use publicly funded initiatives to do that. If the people you serve wish to connect with your other church activities, then they are very welcome, but assure them no one will be forced or coerced into church. If there is a very negative history, you may need to go into much more detail and develop a code of practice.

## **Building relationships is vital**

A long-lasting fruitful engagement will only be achieved through building strong relationships with the key civic leaders in your area. This is simply about making friends beyond the meetings, taking an interest in their lives and serving them when needed. It's about a calling to be pastors of the area, not only of the Church, to care and pray for people with significant leadership responsibility.

This friendship will also be a two-way relationship and you will learn so much about providing services, leadership skills and being professional and strategic in your approach.

## **Build the case for Church partnership**

Generally in society the level of faith literacy is very low, with little understanding of the nature and value of faith groups. You may need to state consistently that faith groups provide the largest voluntary cohort in the area, they probably employ the most youth and children workers, and studies<sup>1</sup> have shown they provide over 50 per cent of any social capital in the area (the social infrastructure of what make a community flourish). They are on the ground, with buildings and volunteers, and mostly pay their own way. Some unity movements have conducted very helpful faith audits that scope the work of the faith sector.

## **Learn the foreign language**

If this is your first time in engaging with statutory authorities, you have just entered a foreign land where you need to learn the language and culture of civic organisations. The jargon is at times impenetrable, and the cultures are very complex. It's even worse if you are dealing with several authorities at the same time, with each one having its own distinctive language and culture. We need also to understand that Church culture and language to the outsider is just as bewildering.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

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The important thing is to keep asking questions, challenge the jargon and learn as fast as you can. Some unity groups talked about specific people who worked in the public sector in their congregations who greatly helped them in understanding the complexities involved.

### **Get the right attitude**

It's very important to approach the engagement process with the right attitude. Most civic authorities expect local community groups to be negative, perhaps demanding, and at times critical. If you can be positive, appreciative, thankful and respectful, you will go a long way in enabling a long-term relationship to produce some significant fruit. A number of groups began with an event that invited the key civic leaders together to simply thank them for their service to the community. We don't have all the answers, we often haven't engaged in the past and we have much to learn about the process of building community; cultivating an attitude of humility will pay long-term dividends.

### **Serve; don't try to rule**

The right attitude is fostered by a spirit of service to the community and its leaders. The Christian language sometimes used, 'conquering' or 'taking the land', has some negative connotations. We are here primarily to serve as Christ served, to build friendship, to seek the peace and prosperity of the place God has called us to.

### **You are part of a bigger picture**

It's important to see ourselves as part of many others in the community. We are part of the wider faith community, and alongside many other community groups and associations who often do a tremendous work in serving the needs of an area. From sports clubs to scouting groups, from allotment associations to support groups, we must remember we are not the only show in town; we do have a unique contribution, but it's alongside others. We need to engage with not only the civic authorities but also the wider voluntary sector. We must at all times be humble, modest and self-effacing, taking our part in the larger picture and not seeking to exaggerate or boast.

One unity movement had to begin the conversation with their civic leaders with an apology for not engaging in the needs of the city and working with others over the previous twenty years. That humble beginning resulted in a very fruitful relationship over the next few years, where the churches played a significant role in the transformation of the city.

### **Remember, you are unique**

Setting ourselves in a wider context then allows us to know the unique contribution we can make. We are a large voluntary force, with significant assets, serving in every neighbourhood of the area. Our faith is the driving force behind our activity, resulting in great commitment and ambition. It's vital we don't lose our unique identity and become just another type of third-sector organisation.

Faith sharing in a partly publicly funded project is appropriate when the conversation is initiated by those you serve. It can also be appropriate to advertise and invite people to other church activities you are running. Prayer is the underlying activity across all our areas of service, and the offer of prayer for individuals is often appreciated.

We must maintain our integrity to be ourselves and to be honest to our calling. The more you are able to prove your reliability with excellent outcomes, acquiring a proven track record in the process, the more this increases trust and allows you to have further freedom to express your faith-based uniqueness.

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## **Don't forget the Church**

The engagement process in the eyes of church members can appear strange, and may even be viewed by some as a distraction, or worse. As we engage with the civic authorities, we also need to engage with our local churches. We need over time to teach churches about the need to have a heart for the city, to seek its peace and prosperity. We need to encourage members to take up positions of responsibility in civic life, to highlight the Monday to Saturday callings of those already in our congregations who work in the public sector. It's good to pray regularly for those in authority in church services and to invite civic leaders to special occasions to interview them about their work and talk about their main priorities.

## **Be led by the Holy Spirit**

Engagement is ultimately not about taking opportunities, being strategic and forming partnerships, it's about responding to the calling and direction of the Holy Spirit. If our plans and dreams are not soaked in prayer, led by divine guidance and enabled by the power of God, they will not succeed. Engagement is about prayer-walking, listening to Jesus about His dreams for our area, praying for the civic leaders, battling with the principalities and powers affecting our societies. All the effective unity movements that have pressed ahead with some outstanding civic engagement work have been founded, and fueled, on prayer.

## **Under-promise and over-deliver**

It's vital that we build up over time an impressive catalogue of effective sustainable community impact. We need to be trusted, but we only gain trust if we have the credibility regarding delivery on the commitments we have made. We do, of course, need to be imaginative and dream big visions, but it's vital we don't over-promise what we can deliver. We need to promise low but deliver higher than expectations.

## **It's a marathon, not a sprint**

The dream of seeing our communities fundamentally changed over the next thirty years is not a quick fix. It will involve long-term commitment from churches and their leaders. There will be many times when you will want to give up, when the people you built great relationships with move on after a couple of years and you have to start all over again. When plans fail and partnerships break apart, we need to keep persevering and pressing on to what God has for us in the future. This is not a hit-and-run-exercise, it involves a commitment that is constant and sustainable in order to see the purposes of God for our area.

## **Remember the poor**

When the opportunities begin to grow and the options regarding service multiply, we need to make sure our greatest contribution is towards those who are the most vulnerable in our community. The pastoral care of the elderly, the homeless, the neglected and the abused is the bread and butter of what Church does best. It's the calling from Scripture to serve the least, the lost and the last, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked and visit the prisoner (Matthew 25:34-45).



## **Focus on the big picture**

Our engagement is not only about being part of the plans and actions of the statutory authorities, it's about being part of the greater purposes of God. We are drawn into God's mission to this world to bring about the establishment of His kingdom, to see a new heaven and new earth, a renewed neighbourhood and transformed borough, a changed city. This is His work and we are invited to be part of it; we are greatly privileged to be drawn into His purposes for creation.