

FAITH AND PLACE NETWORK

Faith Groups and the Planning System Policy Briefing Launch

The Jubilee Room at The House of Commons

Responding to the briefing

For the communities that it has been my privilege to live in and work amongst for most of my life, faith (and church) has played a pivotal and unifying part of my socialisation, survival and success. For these communities faith is neither a leisure activity nor a private individual pursuit. Faith is an outward-facing and self-giving expression of belief that shapes and supports everyday life choices and decisions. History and hostility may have influenced where and when we gather, but gather we do in 2s and 3s, in hundreds and thousands, in increasing diversity for some and increasing adversity for others.

As an ordained minister, I have worshipped in homes and hospitals, pubs and prisons, in open fields and opulent settings, in cars and cathedrals, under democracies and dictatorships, in war-torn countries and in countries in relative peace. In a previous role heading up an alliance for African and Caribbean evangelicals, I was always intrigued by the diversity of faith spaces I was invited to speak at: shop fronts and schools, converted warehouses and commercial hotels, stadiums and cinemas, to name a few.

The recommendations and the supporting statements read like a 5-point sermon outline:

- Understanding one another
- Faith groups and community
- Equality and diversity
- Sharing good / creative practice
- The planning framework

I currently head up operations for my local church, which has six locations offering 12 services on Sundays and a plethora of regular activities with an estimated footfall of 8,000 in any given week. Three of the locations we currently own or use are purpose built churches. The other

three are a converted factory in built-up residential area, a Grade 2 listed theatre on a busy high street, and a commercial building on an historic industrial estate. The strapline for the Church is 'where everybody is somebody' and the operational sub-strapline is 'creating a welcoming and safe environment for worship and work'.

In my role, I need to be as familiar with ascerts of Psalm 106 as with the Section 106 agreements we have with the local authorities who are responsible for the planning and development of the areas in which we hold our services and our community-focused activity. I am becoming as conversant with the theology and doctrine of the church I work for as with policy and compliance regulations.

For established and larger churches, the acquisition or management of buildings, their heritage status and classifications for use are often delegated to experts who they can afford to employ or retain, but for smaller or newer faith groups, those resources are not so readily available or accessible, but their need for access and understanding is no different and in my view no less. It is from that point of view that the recommendations for understanding and sharing are particularly welcomed, as they can pave the way for improving the engagement of faith groups in and with the planning processes.

Whether people gather in the makeshift spaces of transition like Calais or in the majestic splendour of Canterbury, understanding the importance of collective expressions of faith can bring people and planners together in a way that should add value and harmony to wider society, while removing the negative stigma often attached to faith groups and the mis-associated fear of perceived extremism.

We are already seeing the positive impact of other regulatory bodies such as the Charity Commission, who now intentionally engage with Christian agencies and faith groups in British society. Not only is there better mutual understanding between faith leaders and the regulatory organisations in this sector, but there has been a significant shift in the way that regulations have been shaped and model documents developed. It is possible and in my view necessary to unpack and demystify terminology and processes around planning while maintaining responsibility for robust standards for safety and balance.

A wise king once said: “Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labour in vain” (Psalm 127:1, NIV). I would add to that that planning without clear understanding, or effective partnership, or due regard for the diversity of needs in faith communities, is a waste of valuable time and energy. These recommendations, if taken on board by faith leaders and by planners alike, could pave the way to improve access and contribution to the social well-being and spiritual regeneration that so many communities need.

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