

Faiths for the City Conference 2009 *Families and Neighbourliness: A Postcard from the Community*

A City of a Thousand Communities

Birmingham has often been described as a city of 'a thousand trades'. In an arguably post-industrial era perhaps we can now speak of Birmingham as a city of 'a thousand communities'. The A45 is a major route from the National Exhibition Centre and Birmingham International Airport towards Small Heath and beyond towards the city-centre. Until recently the road was marked with adverts from the city council, 'Birmingham: a Global City with a Local Heart'. This may be aspirational, but it does express an important feature of family and community life in Birmingham. In this city of a million people we meet the world in all of its diversity. The people of our city trace their roots to every corner of the world and the issues that once seem far away are big news in many inner-urban communities across Birmingham, re-shaping the way we think about neighbourhoods. At the heart of this everyday cultural diversity is religious faith. We are not just a city of many communities but a place where families from many world faiths live as neighbours.

How might it be possible to forge a 'Birmingham identity' that is built upon our diversity whilst at the same time honouring the particular values of different faiths?

Division and Diversity

The life of our communities and neighbourhoods cannot be adequately grasped if we fail to understand just how important religion is as a mark of identity and a source of progressive social action and neighbourliness, particularly in inner-Birmingham, as seen, for example, in the support of faith groups for the work of the broad based community organisation Birmingham Citizens or recent campaigns focusing on fair-trade and global trade justice.¹ However those of us who live with our families in diverse local communities also know that this religious and cultural diversity is feared by some and seen as a threat by others that must be resisted. So along with the reality of our diversity we also need to recognise that inclusive family life and neighbourliness can be undermined by those who are antagonistic to such cultural and religious plurality. Such antagonism has perhaps been one reason for the segmentation or localisation of our city and the rise of what could be called defensive communities which provide security in an insecure atmosphere that questions the right of some of our neighbours to belong but which also inhibit the building of inclusive communities. The pressure on neighbourhoods and families is illustrated by the relative electoral success of the British National

¹ Birmingham Citizens was established in 2005 and is a coalition of over twenty faith groups, community organisations and schools from across Birmingham working together on a range of agreed issues of common concern. The organisation draws its methodology from the broad based community organising that originated in the work of Saul Alinsky in Chicago during the 1940s. Broad based community organisations in Britain exist in London, Milton Keynes and Birmingham. A good summary of their work is found at <http://www.cof.org.uk>.

Party in local elections, debates about the character of 'Britishness' and the street-level activism of the newly formed English Defence League in Birmingham city centre during 2009.²

In what ways might the faith groups of our city be able to help us to counter a fear of difference and fashion inclusive patterns of citizenship? Are there times when the faith groups in Birmingham themselves foster a fear of difference? Why might this be the case?

The Role of the Family

In the pursuit of a cohesive society the role of the family is frequently underestimated. The foundations for building relationships with others and of forming a clear and secure identity are first laid in the mother-child relationship followed by the close relationships created within the family. Disruptions and insecurities created at the nurturing stage of life almost inevitably leads to difficulties in wider social relationships. Many of the religious rites and practices [e.g. marriage and 'naming' ceremonies] have evolved precisely to facilitate deep and sustained relationships between two persons and to create the environment where children are welcomed, cherished and loved. It is ultimately within such close relationships that disabled and the elderly members of the family first come to be supported. Civic society normally builds on these foundations and has stepped in with those whom faith communities have failed to reach and support [e.g. with civic ceremonies]. Do faith communities recognise why this has been necessary?

Is there adequate recognition of the stresses and strains on family relationships within faith communities and within civic society? Is there adequate recognition of the respective roles of faith communities and civic society in supporting families? What remedial action is being taken, or might be taken, to support stressed or disrupted families in their natural role and to help them to function effectively?

New Ways of Being A Family

Birmingham is made up of a wide variety of family forms. A focus on families can often major exclusively on 'nuclear families'. Whilst this is a key building block of neighbourhood life it is important to recognise the rapidly increasing numbers of single person households and lone parent families in the city, representing not just older people or lone parents living in inner-urban areas but also single professionals living in renovated or new-build apartment blocks.³ Where do such people fit within a city that seeks to be 'family-friendly'? One expression of family in Birmingham is the

² Web site <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk> accessed 1 October 2009. In the 2008 Birmingham local elections the British National Party gained over 10% of votes cast in the following local government wards: Kingsnorton (10.7%), South Yardley (11%), Billesley (11.46%), Acocks Green (11.58%), Oscott (13%), Longbridge (14.1%), Sheldon (14.8%), Northfield (16.8%), Kingstanding (17.3%) and Shard End (23.6%). Information about the English Defence League can be found at <http://www.englishdefenceleague.org> and a useful commentary of the group at the B.B.C News web site, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8250017.stm> accessed 1 October 2009.

³ Web site <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk> accessed 30 September 2009. The 2001 National Census reported 129,701 one person households in Birmingham (56,808 pensioner households and 72,893 working age one person households). The same Census data revealed a total of 76,505 separated or divorced people living Birmingham.

extended family, which continues to be an important feature of neighbourhood life, particularly in inner-urban areas and outer-city estates. Do we build homes to accommodate the desire for such forms of family life? The plurality of the city is also reflected in the increasing number of dual-heritage families across Birmingham.⁴ Are there places, however, where the strength of some families in neighbourhoods can dominate streets and make life harder for other families in the area? Rooted in local communities, the faith groups of our city engage on a daily basis with the breadth of this variety of families, often providing the kind of valued informal support that more strategically oriented city authorities are unable to provide on a one-to-one basis.

In what ways do faith groups support families? In seeking to support families are there certain forms of family that some faith groups discourage? With what fresh challenges does the diversity of family forms present us with as a caring city? Are there things that Statutory providers within the city can learn from/teach the faith groups of the city about caring for families?

New Ways of Being Community

A key feature of change within the city relates to the ways in which communities are formed in the twenty-first century and where they are located. Three fluid 'spaces' are increasingly important and have implications for the ways in which faith groups, community organisations and the city council think about families and neighbourliness. First, public spaces like parks and the shopping zone of the city centre, especially around the Bullring, offer a home to youth friendship communities at a time when 'adult-free' space is increasingly threatened by re-development programmes. Second, a common interest in popular culture (and especially the production of music and film such as Earth Studios in Lozells and the Drum Arts Centre in Aston) as a means of self-expression provides an important community of interest for many young people in Birmingham. Third, a closed form of neighbourliness is increasingly expressed within 'virtual' online or gaming networks. A focus on wellbeing within families and neighbourhoods needs to be as dynamic as the variety of family and community forms we find in our city. As potentially important sources of community building the value of green public open spaces to families in the heart of the city cannot be underestimated. They can be spaces that families with young children are afraid to go to as a result of a lack of supervision and the presence of drug dealing and burnt out cars but they can also be places that are full of energy, life, activities where people meet and neighbourliness is forged. One example of such a family-friendly shared green space is Handsworth Park.

What might religious ideas of a 'good city' or interdependent communities that transcend cultural, sexual, class and geographical boundaries have to teach our 'World City'? What does the way we use or govern public space say about the way we feel about ourselves,

⁴ Web site <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk> accessed 30 September 2009. The 2001 National Census reported a total of 27,946 people who described themselves as 'dual heritage' out of a total population of 977,087.

other people and our city? Where do you see new forms of community emerging in your neighbourhood? How might our green spaces become oases of neighbourliness?

Schools as Centres of Neighbourliness

It is perhaps a truism to note that schools form part of the essential bedrock of family and neighbourhood life. They are places where adults can meet one another around their common interest in their children's education. However the schools of our city can either foster neighbourliness or reinforce separation. A key pressure on families within the city is the sometimes-painful process of finding a good school for their children. In our youthful city where young people criss-cross Birmingham to and from school the influence of schools impacts not only on pupils but also on the neighbourhoods where schools are set. Birmingham Education Authority is the largest in the United Kingdom, serving 76 L.A Secondary Schools and over 300 Primary Schools. It is also home to over 100 faith schools (currently Christian, Jewish and Muslim). Do such faith schools encourage the development of confident but inclusive religious identities amongst our city's young people or are they a source of division and separation?

How can our schools support vulnerable families and enable increased neighbourliness? Do conversations by the school-gate foster new friendships? Could schools do more to support community life? What benefits might faith schools provide for our city? Do they encourage a respect for the spiritualities that shape Birmingham or foster separation?

Economic Well-Being

The much needed regeneration in parts of the city can also have a negative impact on neighbourliness. As certain inner-urban communities have been regenerated there can be sense in other parts of Birmingham of being 'left out and left behind'. The development of new, and often very expensive, housing has in some places such as Digbeth, Hockley and Ladywood led to a feeling of two communities gathered in one neighbourhood: the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Over the last decade innovation and creative business planning has led to the emergence of new kinds of jobs for the people of Birmingham but not always in a manner that enables a positive relationship with the local community as once was the case (e.g. Cadbury in Bourneville). Many old industries in the manufacturing sector have continued to close increasing levels of unemployment, often in those parts of our city where life is at its hardest. Recent examples of such manufacturing job losses include M.G Rover at Longbridge in 2005 and LDV Vans in Washwood Heath during 2009. What can faith communities do to assist in the economic regeneration of the City? We need to recognise that during the current recession the unemployment rate in the West Midlands is one of the highest in the United Kingdom.⁵

⁵ Web site <http://www.birminghameconomy.org.uk> accessed 30 September 2009. The 16 September 2009 unemployment rate in Birmingham was 12.4%, compared with 7.5% across the West Midlands region and a national average rate of 5.8%.

How do we value people in Birmingham? Does the regeneration of sections of the city lead us to value some people and jobs more than others? As a city how do we value those who have lost their jobs and care for those who fall into debt as a result of redundancy? Are there ways in which the faiths of our city can teach us more about including those who are left out or left behind in hard times? Can we learn from past experiences and co-operative initiatives, e.g. credit unions, building societies?

A Youthful City

But amidst the complex challenges that face us there is a cause for real celebration for Birmingham is a youthful city where over 30% of people are under the age of 25 years. A pressure on communities in parts of the city is the apparent hold that gang culture, knife crime and low-level anti-social behaviour can have amongst a minority of teenagers and young adults. Projects working on these key issues that have either an implicit or an explicit faith-basis include *Bringing Hope*, the *Bangladeshi Youth Forum* and *Young Disciples*.⁶ The cultural and religious diversity of our city and its youthful nature can give us heart because it is where bridges of understandings and coalitions of action are built that the potential of our young city can be realised and a community of communities built, where we celebrate our difference as the source of our strength and an invaluable resource that can equip us to face the twenty-first century.

What challenges does the youthfulness of Birmingham present us with as a city? Do those of us who are older listen to or understand teenagers and young adults in our city? Do the faith groups of our city connect with excluded youth in ways that city authorities don't? Which young people are let down by the adults who run the City Council and the faith groups of our city? What might young people have to teach those with power about creating a more caring and inclusive city?

Pressures on Families and Neighbourhoods

A range of pressures impact upon the families of our city and shape the way we think about neighbourliness. Some of the key pressures include:

- High levels of unemployment or low-paid insecure employment
- Parks that are threatened by developers, under-supervised and a home to drug dealers
- The isolation of elderly housebound neighbours

⁶ Web sites <http://www.bringinghope.co.uk>, <http://www.byf-uk.org> and <http://www.youngdisciples.co.uk> accessed 1 October 2009.

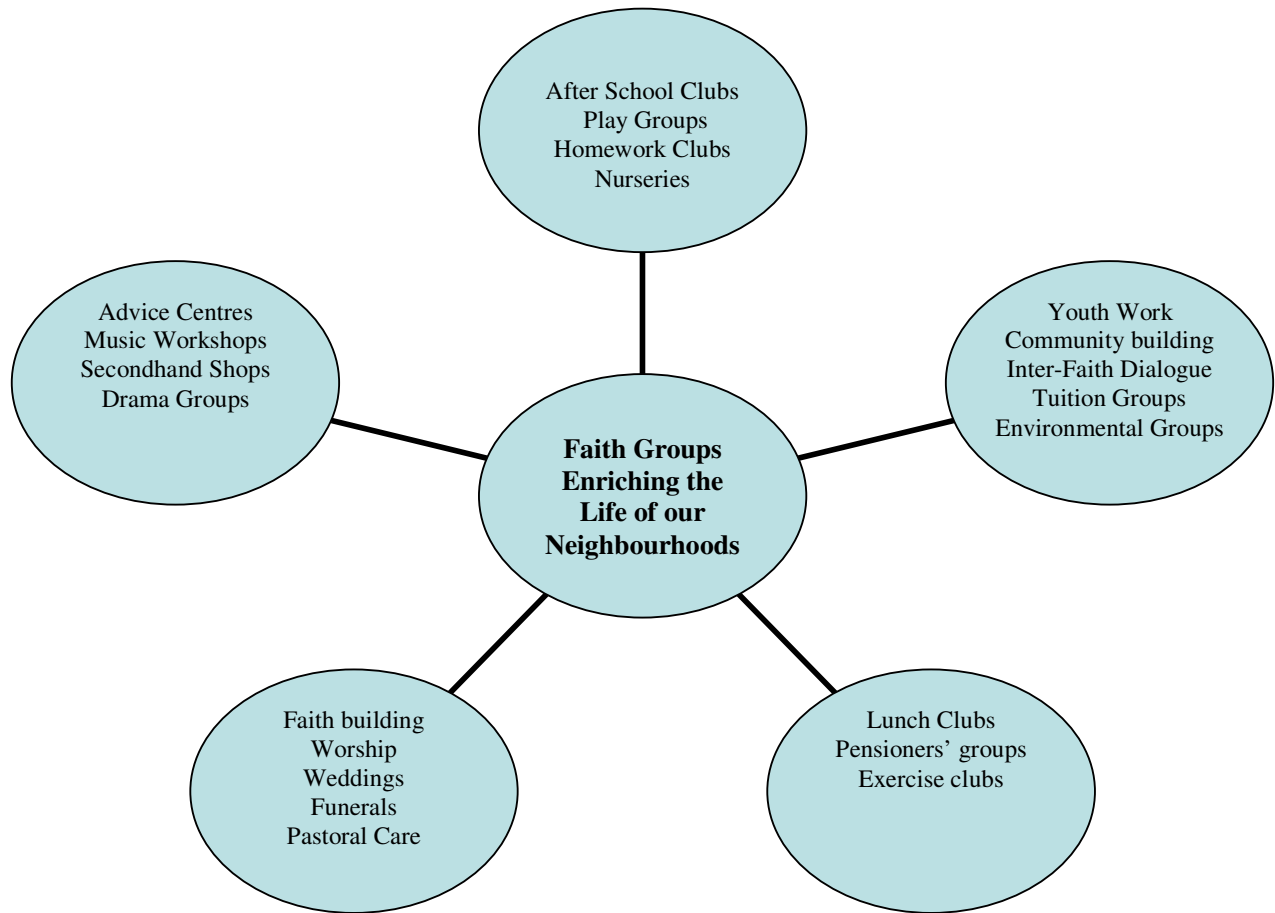
- A fear of difference
- A lack of interaction between different social groups within a neighbourhood
- A fear of violence (amongst older and younger people)
- A lack of good quality affordable housing
- Personal/family debt within a consumption driven culture
- Concerns about the safety of children playing in their own neighbourhoods/streets.
- Living in underdeveloped communities that border regenerated neighbourhoods
- Access to G.P's out of hours

The Role of Faith Groups in our Neighbourhoods

At the heart of the life of our city is the role played by faith groups in the building of inclusive and healthy communities where the most excluded are given value and our difference becomes a source of strength. Community building, counselling and holistic healthcare, informal education, campaigning with and for asylum seekers, the homeless and the unemployed, green community projects, youth groups, care for vulnerable pensioners, campaigns for racial justice....So much would be lost without the work of the faith groups that are rooted in local communities right across Birmingham. It is important to understand however that the faith groups of our city are not perfect communities. They too can foster division. They too can enclose people within defensive communities that inhibit inclusive community relationships. They too can find themselves frustrated by a lack of funding, by seemingly insensitive legislation and by the burden of responsibility for often large buildings. In spite of these pressures in an arguably individualised culture the faith groups of Birmingham represent invaluable grass-roots communities where people can feel a sense of value and belonging. These intergenerational and multicultural communities, at their best, challenge the forces and processes that can foster inequality and increase divisions within our city. As a direct result of spiritual convictions such faith groups through their inward life and their community development activities are a source of invaluable bridging social capital that can foster dialogue between social groups and enhance strong and inclusive community relations. The buildings owned by many faith groups provide vital landmarks and places of hospitality to a range of community organisations.

How would our sense of neighbourliness be different if there were no faith groups in Birmingham? Do we value the spiritual motivations that encourage people of faith in our city to work to build up community life and neighbourliness or is such spirituality a purely private matter? How can small faith groups be encouraged to be more outward looking?

Some faith contributions to the life of our Neighbourhoods



Questions for us to consider

- *What progressive impact could the religious diversity of the city have on this search for an outward looking Birmingham identity in the 21st century?*
- *How might the faith groups of our city be able to help us to counter a fear of difference and fashion inclusive patterns of citizenship?*
- *What fresh challenges does the diversity of family forms present us with as a caring city?*
- *What does the way we use or govern public space say about the way we feel about ourselves, other people and our city?*
- *Do faith schools encourage a respect for the spiritualities that shape Birmingham or foster separation?*
- *As a city how do we value those who have lost their jobs and care for those who fall into debt as a result of redundancy?*
- *What challenges does the youthfulness of Birmingham present us with as a city?*
- *How would our sense of neighbourliness be different if there were no faith groups in Birmingham?*

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