

# Stepping Out in Faith



## Critical Reflection and Key Lessons from the Faith in Our Communities Initiative in the Durham Diocesan Area

By Robert Errington with Paul Southgate, Bernadette Askins and Jim Robertson

Summary report July 2010

## Introduction

This summary report aims to highlight some of the key lessons and achievements from six neighbourhood Projects that have formed the Faith in Community Project [FIC] The FIC projects are located in the North East of England and fall within the Durham Diocesan area. Durham County and the North East have many neighbourhoods that are disadvantaged and indicate structural poverty and inequalities in health. The FIC Project selected 6 such areas for faith support and church community development. [A fuller more detailed project evaluation report can be obtained from the contact details on the back page].

**“It’s been a wonderful experience to be part of this project – to see relationships grow and friendships formed. The future however will be most exciting when we get to the point of introducing a Luncheon Club and a Befriending scheme for elderly people, especially those who live on their own.”**

**(Community Worker)**

## A Mission Oriented Perspective – Rooted in Faith

Churches and other faith communities have a long and rich tradition of addressing social issues. The concern in the Gospels for the powerless and the excluded teaches us to love and respect, value and care for the marginalised and poor in our society. From the campaign to abolish slavery to the creation of model communities, Faith has provided the impetus and moral framework to tackle injustice and transform society.

The FIC Project set out to sustain and continue this tradition. In 2006 officers from Church of England Durham Diocese, Churches Community Work Alliance and the Churches Regional Commission in the North East conceived this imaginative project. Through the Church Urban Fund [CUF] they secured funding for a project which would explore ways of practically responding to the needs and concerns of those parishes and neighbourhoods which put themselves forward for selection.

Some were former mining communities and all had been subject to varying forms of 'regeneration' and 'area improvement' schemes. The areas which have become known as 'FIC Parishes' are in Shildon, Sunderland Pallion, Hetton-le-Hole, Stockton Hardwick, Stockton Newtown and Houghton-le-Spring.

## **What did the Project hope and imagine through the fruits of its efforts?**

FIC aimed to increase the capacity and capability within the 6 neighbourhoods by developing:

- the skills and confidence to use their personal and collective resources to tackle some of the issues in their respective neighbourhoods
- insight into the potential of a community development approach to parish development and forms of social action
- access to professional consultancy and support from the FIC Project infrastructure arrangements
- opportunities to be involved in a structured 'learning programme' that would introduce new ideas about 'mission engagement' and 'working in partnerships'
- a community development worker to be a resource person. This person would be appointed from within the parish area, have some experience as an activist and good local knowledge

**“We are embodying the Christian Faith in our community.”  
(Management Committee Member)**

**“Give something back to the community, to share what we have been given with other people.” (Management Committee Member)**

## **Why take a Community Development Approach to Mission?**

Community development is a long-term, value based, approach to tackling social change. It aims to address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion. The intention of FIC was to build on these community development values. It aims to achieve change through the process of empowerment and participation; not by doing things for people, or running services that people engage with as consumers, but by supporting people to achieve their potential as equal partners and creators of change. The FIC theology underpinning its actions was that all the participants involved were engaged in 'mission' activity – whether they were members of this or other church congregations or not. Thus in one particular project, involving nineteen project volunteers supporting families with personal and social difficulties, only four of the team were formal church members. But they all have an identity which they are proud to express that they are part of the church and faith driven project!

## Learning from Experience

Learning from experience is a value that the FIC Project has recognised from the beginning. Involvement in monthly reflective learning sessions has been a requirement for the six Community Development Workers. This was a challenge for the newly appointed workers whose natural inclination was a desire to be 'set loose' to get on with the job. Two years on, much of this attitude has changed. Each of the community development workers has a perception of themselves as being 'more professional' in their approach – more critical about their way of tackling their workload – and more confident overall. The structured training programme has resulted in some rewards for the workers – all have achieved NVQ Level 3 Awards in community development work. To some extent the FIC Programme has proven to have provided access to

**“I feel that our aim of wholeness and wellbeing is ongoing and developmental. It has touched a lot of people’s lives and continues to make a difference, by the local community linking up in small and large groups ... people I know are more enthusiastic and confident in themselves and willing to go out and relate to other people and enjoy the here and now.” (Management Committee Member)**

learning and training and a recognised pathway to qualifications and occupational status. But the influence of community development is not restricted to the workers: it runs through all levels of FIC, so much so that an experienced community development worker described the discussion at one network event involving church participants from the six areas as:

“The best discussion of community development values and their effects I have ever heard amongst non-professionals (and better than most among professionals).”

## The Importance of Learning from Each Other

An interesting feature of the FIC Project is the consistent involvement of FIC Project Parish Group members in what the project calls 'open learning days'. These events attract around 40 – 50 participants and have addressed topics and themes such as 'what is mission?' - 'weaving communities – the contribution of faith groups to enhancing social capital' - how do you 'work in partnership with non-church groups' – 'evaluating projects' The open learning days have all been held midweek and during the day. Social networking has obviously been a feature with cross parish dialogue a feature over the shared lunch and refreshment breaks. The learning events have enjoyed the contribution and wisdom of the respective 'church leaders' in the six areas. They took part as equal participants in all the learning sessions and along the way have recorded their appreciation to the different 'learning group facilitators' for introducing new approaches to engagement and learning.

**“Now the local community, or at least some of them, know that the church is open to them. They also know me, my face, what I do and have made links and offers of help with supporting the new drop-in we are hoping to start.” (Community Worker)**

### **What are the Projects doing practically ‘on the ground?’**

The six projects involve church members and build links with non-church going residents. They work with people of all ages, from toddler groups to older people’s homes, and have developed a wide range of activities, from keep-fit classes to food growing schemes and developing allotments. They support vulnerable adults and engaged people ‘missed’ by mainstream services. And they show that church-based community development provides unique opportunities to address issues of social justice for both individuals and communities.

All six projects are rooted in the values that come from their Christian faith but they are not confined to church buildings and community halls. Workers, management committee members and volunteers have been living out their faith beyond the walls of their own churches; in a variety of ways they have been ‘Stepping out in Faith.’

### **Lessons for Parish Development from the FIC Project**

The FIC Project Partnership Steering group have been considering the question – What next? The Church Urban Fund and the Senior Diocesan Boards are appreciative of the achievements of FIC and that overall it has been ‘good value for the resource input’.

Guidelines and a framework have been offered to the diocese and other denominational structures in the North East relating to parish development. The following offer a flavour of the sentiments in the guidelines:

- Ownership of development needs to be built in at the start. It can’t be added in later
- People must be prepared to learn from their experiences and try again
- “Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.” (Management Committee member reporting to the evaluation researcher)
- Small steps are sometimes more effective in the long run. Some projects learned hard lessons from being too ambitious too early
- Developments must be informed by transformative narratives
- Assets in local parishes and groups include wise and able people and buildings and plant. How can these riches be harnessed and deployed?
- The characteristics and nature of ‘leadership’ are crucial and important

**“We are embodying the Christian Faith in our community.” (Management Committee Member)**

**“It’s been about starting activities and letting them grow and flourish.”  
(Community Worker)**

### **The Faith in Community Project - a critical reflection on achievements**

The FIC project evaluation has evidenced much achievement from the work of the respective projects. Some activities have worked well - others less so – but each activity has contributed to learning for the project overall. This learning has been catalogued and captured for the respective projects in their evaluation reports and the project performance managements systems:

- Some achievements in profile:
- Creating employment opportunities for residents in disadvantaged communities
  - Practice recognition - six workers achieving Level 3 NVQs in Community Development Work by July 2010

- Activities and projects responding to the face to face concerns of local people and community concerns
- Enabling partnerships and working in cooperation with other practitioners from non faith sectors
- Developing and enabling services promoting health and wellbeing
- Creating, providing and delivering volunteering opportunities
- Organising and facilitating a range of capacity building activities including 'open learning opportunities'
- Structuring, developing and delivering reflective learning programmes
- Building and enhancing social capital in faith groups
- Promoting and contributing to community cohesion
- Engaging with socially excluded groups and marginalised individuals
- Disseminating good practice through contributing to regional conference and workshops

**“A large part of the success of this project has been due to the trust people hold in the Church to deliver activities and support communities. The project has no other agenda than supporting the local community.”**

## Faith in the Future through the FIC Model? What Next and Why?

A theological basis for a Church Related Community Development approach is built upon the central imperatives of love and concern for our neighbour, whatever their faith or social status. Essentially, if anyone suffers, it affects us all. The concern in the Gospels for the powerless and the excluded teaches us to respect, value and care for the marginalised and poor in our society. The individuals and groups pushed to the fringes of our society are often adversely affected by decisions made by people or institutions with little awareness of how their attitudes or policies impact

on the lives of others. The 'radical Jesus' calls for people of faith to advocate their commitment of love and concern for the world around them and help create a fairer and less divisive society. This, as the FIC Project has illustrated, means starting with the communities in which they live and pray. It means also addressing the 'other poverties' which tend not to be too evident in more disadvantaged communities – the poverty of 'generosity', 'tolerance' and 'hospitality'. To some extent there is a tendency for these poverties to engulf more prosperous neighbourhoods and our increasingly politically and socially structured self-interest.

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## Contact details and Further information

For a copy of the full report or for further information about FIC please contact:  
bernadette.askins@talktalk.net  
jimwrobertson@yahoo.com

Reports are also available at:  
<http://www.northeastchurches.org.uk> and  
<http://www.durham.anglican.org>.

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