



WEST MIDLANDS REGION CHURCHES' FORUM

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The Spending Review, Big Society and implications for Christian mission in the Region

Regional representatives from the West Midlands Region Churches Forum met on 2 November to consider the implications of the October Government Spending Review and the Big Society agenda for Christian mission in the region. They acknowledged two responses to the recent Government initiatives:

- 1) to develop a prophetic critique of the Big Society and the current economic climate
- 2) to recognise the opportunities for Christian mission afforded by the Government's focus on local communities.

Whilst acknowledging the need to develop a prophetic critique, the Forum concentrated reflection on the opportunities for Christian mission offered by the renewed emphasis on the concept of empowering local communities. Their discussion was not an uncritical endorsement of 'Big Society' policy, but rather a recognition that the concept of empowering local communities has for many decades informed Christian action. One representative felt that a Christian perspective should be more about '*reclaiming*' community than 'growing' it as described within the Big Society.

There was a general consensus about a need to guard against responding to 'Big Society' as the latest fad from 'above', especially in relation to any injustices that require people of faith to speak out. It was considered important that we ensure there are people taking responsibility to seek out those who fall through the social support net. This highlighted the importance of organisations such as Church Action on Poverty.

Empowering Local Community: general reflections

- Long term community growth requires long term thinking, support and investment.
- Helping communities grow in confidence is a key challenge in the present climate. Confidence is an important element of a flourishing community and experience indicates that helpful and coherent support is required from the outside to enable this.
- For communities that face multiple problems of urban deprivation their chance of improvement is increased through strategic, strong, long-term partnerships between local and national government.
- It is important to recognise and guard against:
 - a) the power of unnecessary inward looking Nimbyism ('Not In My Backyard'). Strategic and joined up thinking across communities is required. It was noted that a solution for one community can displace a particular problem to another nearby community. This has happened in Birmingham with street prostitution moving from one empowered community to another nearby neighbourhood, and
 - b) the vested interests of some leaders in local communities who will compete against the broader community needs.

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Empowering Local Community: an opportunity for Christian Mission

The Forum believed that affirming community is an integral part of Christian Mission. This observation is a recognition of the contribution over decades made by local churches to their local communities. Time and time again, local churches have proved to be places that know and understand the needs of their local communities and in response have demonstrated a tireless ability to work with others to empower the marginalised. There is no need to respond by reinventing the wheel, rather we should learn from each other and share stories of good practice.

The Forum also recognised that other communities exist alongside the local neighbourhood, for example, the workplace, leisure groups and the extended family. These other communities also present opportunities for Christian mission.

Affirming local community as part of Christian Mission.

The Forum offers the following ways that local churches can affirm local community as part of mission.

1) Increase our understanding of the communities in which we belong and live in, by:

- Learning more about the informal places where people meet (outside school gate, toddlers groups, local shop...)
- Listening to the conversations of these informal places to discover issues that exist within our communities.

2) Work with others to help communities grow by

- Building on these informal relational networks to bring about solutions to local problems
- Connecting needs with resources
- Offering the resources of churches as part of these solutions, most especially time and compassion.
- Explore how individual actions affect other people within communities - this entails a moral and ethical dimension to which Christians can contribute.

3) Being distinctly Christian by

- Ensuring that time and attention in church is given to developing a response to what is needed at this moment and in this place – Christian thought and action should be **time_{ly}** as well as **time_{less}**.
- Being incarnational Christians – ‘being Christ in the world’ by engaging and building relationships
- Acknowledging our spiritual responsibility for the communities in which our places of worship belong by:
 - Walking local streets – prayer walks, street pastors.
 - Praying for the marginalised and excluded in our neighbourhood.
 - Getting to know people with influence in our community and praying for them (local authority officials, councillors, police, local employers and business people).
 - Supporting people in our churches who have significant work roles – asking them to talk about their work in worship and then praying for them – teachers, engineers...
 - offering to communities our God given resources of time and compassion.