

Anglican Megachurches: Transforming society one person at a time

Sarah Dunlop

Abstract

This paper reports three key findings from the two Anglican Megachurches that took part in our project: Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) and All Souls Langham Place. We discovered that both churches are involved in a wide variety of social engagement activities. A close look at the vision statements of the two churches reveals that both aim to impact society, demonstrating an intentionality of social engagement. An analysis of the theological motivations of the research participants who volunteer within the churches reveals that people have encountered God in some way, and this encounter influences their desire to help others. Finally, although churches intentionally work hard to create family-like relationships between people within the church and with those outside the church, their main aim is enable people to have a relationship with God. This foregrounding of the church's perspectives on social engagement enables us to problematize some common conceptions of the role, motivations and functions of the church often held in wider society.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the findings from the two Anglican megachurches studied: Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) and All Souls Langham Place. These churches can both be described as evangelical in their theology, with HTB having a more overtly charismatic spirituality.

HTB

HTB is located in South Kensington and attracts about 4,500 worshippers over eleven services in a week. HTB is well known for the Alpha Course, which has been distributed to churches across the UK and the world, and is run in prisons in 72 countries around the world. In addition to Alpha, there are other courses that are run at the church:

- Relationship Central Courses
 - Marriage Course
 - Marriage Preparation Course
 - Recovery from Divorce and separation course
 - Parenting Children/teenagers Course
 - Waiting for children Course
 - Post-abortion healing Course
 - Well Course – wounds of sexual abuse and rape
- Additional Courses
 - Depression
 - Recovery from addiction
 - New ID – eating disorders
 - Bereavement Journey
 - Money Course
 - Theology courses
 - Leadership courses

All these course feed into and out of Alpha – so people may be attracted to a particular course, take it, and then decide to do Alpha. Or, they do Alpha, and discover these other offerings.

The main ministry of HTB to engage with social deprivation was the William Wilberforce Trust (WWT) which included ministries which began with Alpha Prison ministries and grew to encompass:

- Caring for Ex-Offenders
- Homeless shelters
- Debt advice centre 'Crosslight'
- Employability Programme
- Mentoring
- Foodbank
- Hospital Ministry
- Children in Care/Fostering 'Home for Good'

Paul Cowley, who was the director of WWT at the time of the research, speaking not only about the ministries based at the church but about also about the networks of ministries that other churches around the UK have developed as part of the WWT, said 'We helped over 2000 people with addictions, through the recovery course, 1500 ex-offenders, who we helped from prison through church, 460 through debt counselling service and we made over 100,000 interventions with homeless people [in the last year].' WWT had a team of forty paid staff, mostly full-time, with a budget of 1.2 million pounds a year. They have about 350 volunteers drawn from the HTB congregations.

In 2016 the board of WWT decided that in order to maximize the potential of the various ministries, the charity should close and the various ministries should fall under new structures.¹ It was felt that social transformation is an activity that cannot be packaged up to share with other churches. So, instead of focusing on helping others do similar ministries, HTB would concentrate on engaging with their own local context, and other churches are welcome to 'come and see' how it is done.²

All Souls

All Souls Langham Place draws about 2300 people over three services to their site in the West End of London. Well known for their former Rector, John Stott, whose preaching particularly on the importance of evangelical Christianity engaging practically with society had a global reach. A multicultural congregation, they run one of the largest church-based ministries for homeless people in London, All Souls Local Action Network (ASLAN). This encompasses a range of activities:

- The 'Tea Run' – feeding rough sleepers on the streets
- 'Entertainment Evenings' – meal for homeless or vulnerably housed people
- Day Centre for homeless and vulnerably housed people
- Visiting Scheme – regular befriending meetings
- Winter Shelter
- 'FREE' – a recovery from addictions ministry

Taking all the ministries together, ASLAN makes more than 200 interventions each week, over 10,000 a year, in the lives of homeless and vulnerably housed people. The ministries are intentionally relational in nature as a counter-balance to the services offered by government agencies. This was borne out not only in conversations with leaders and the literature, but also in informal conversations with volunteers.

¹ <https://www.williamwilberforcetrust.org> accessed 23 March 2016.

² Informal interview with Communications Director, 24 March 2016.

The Clubhouse, opened in 1958 by John Stott, is a community centre within the parish which runs a variety of ministries within the local community:

- Youth clubs / drop-in
- Children's after school clubs
- Day Centre for elderly
- Club Care – visiting isolated or housebound elderly people
- A church

All Souls Langham place also run a variety of ministries:

- All Souls Anti Trafficking
- 'Living Room' – meals for students
- English lessons – for international students
- 'Jellybeans' and 'Jellybabies' – carer and toddler/baby groups
- Sole Sports – variety of informal sports

Vision

Defining Social Engagement code word cloud

One of the outcomes of our study has been that these large churches have compelling statements of vision that function as one of the primary means of motivating people to be involved in ministry. When the people who volunteer in the social engagement activities are asked to speak about why they do it, they often will refer to the vision statement. But these visions are not contained within the church community – in fact we discovered them to be quite broad and far ranging statements of intent. For example, the vision statement of the two Anglican churches are:

HTB: 'The evangelisation of the nations, the revitalisation of the church and the transformation of society'.

All Souls: 'Growing an international community to reach a multicultural society for Christ'

- Come together to learn to live Christ across our scattered networks
- Send out to serve and speak Christ along our different networks
- Send on to witness and work for Christ in new networks

What do the churches want to do through their ministries? They are more than well-meaning moral do-gooders who want to help a few poor people. If we listen to them, we find they want no less than to transform society - for the common good. For example, a Church leader spoke of the Church as a force for change:

'I think our social engagement is the commitment to holistic change in society. Society is made up of individuals and individuals can be changed and find their lives enhanced and then work together with one another to try to have a positive impact. Then that is the way that society changes.'

There is a very specific missiology at work here: a vision of the church's relationship to the world, in light of the coming Kingdom of God. The theology is that the church is in service to the world, working in partnership with God to usher in his Kingdom. We would argue

that this is a point of departure from wider sociological/public perceptions of the role of church in society, which in some cases sees the church as a social institution for like-minded people – with the government as the overarching force. Our empirical research has shown that these Anglican megachurches see themselves as overarching forces in society, not least because the Church of England has parishes that cover all of Britain. This is of course a broad generalization and these views are changing. However, it should be kept in mind that they are also motivated by a big vision of time - God created the world and is re-creating the world. People spoke about notions of *shalom*, the kingdom, restoring wholeness, etc.

HTB in particular is very good at communicating their vision in a media savvy way, drip feeding through a variety of mediums, so that people quote it and set their theological motivations in the context of the church vision. There seems to be power in a vision, because people expressed that they want to be involved in things that connect them to others and operate in order to help others.

Theological Motivations

Theological motivations code word cloud

We asked volunteers, ‘Why do you do this? What motivates you to give your time to this project/ministry course?’ One of the surprises of the project outcomes was that we expected to find an ‘us and them’ perception of social engagement, i.e. ‘we the good (middle-class) church people help you the (poor) people from the fringes of society’. Instead, people explained that they work for the good of others because they have personally experienced God’s help. Many people were themselves affected by the social issue of the ministry in which they volunteered (bereavement, depression, homelessness, addiction, etc), so they in turn wanted to help others. This meant that these ministries were very often more like small communities around an issue rather than a form of service provision. Thus, these social engagement activities are often motivated by an experience of God, putting energy and resources into serving the common good of London.

The mechanism for starting the ministries is often bottom up, meaning that people in the churches saw a need, gathered other people with a similar concern around them, took the idea for a response to this need to a church leader, who offered support. The megachurch infrastructure then propels this social engagement activity forward. This ‘pushing down the tracks’ works best at HTB, where Alpha has paved the way and other ministries follow the set form, although recently this mechanism has been called into question for certain courses/ministries.

Through observing these churches for three to four months, I discovered a host of activities of the church that influenced people’s theological motivation for social engagement:

- a) Preaching/teaching
- b) Various Courses:
 - i) Springboard at All Souls
 - ii) Alpha at HTB, particularly the session on ‘What is Church?’
- c) Advertising activities and opportunities to volunteer
- d) Telling the stories of people who have volunteered and the impact of this
- e) Prayer for different concerns in society

- f) Modelling social engagement through church giving and church leadership involvement in social action.
- g) Creating an environment conducive to social engagement, that presupposes it, which means people are socialised into serving
- h) Including it in the church vision statement
- i) Worship, singing, song writing that includes care for society
- j) Events – like Soul Survivor or Focus that have seminars about social engagement
- k) Resources – like particular books, or HTB's Bible in One Year

This variety of sources for conveying why people should be involved in social engagement activities may be of interest to those who wonder why Church attenders volunteer (perhaps more than others?) and what can be done by other churches/groups to encourage volunteering.

Connections and relationships

Connecting People Word Cloud codes

At our first Faith and Social Engagement forum I spoke about how we discovered that the feeding ministries of both churches are about more than food, they are mainly focused on building relationships. And we discovered this to be true of other ministries as well. There was a concern to meet people's needs, which included their felt needs, relational needs and spiritual needs.

All the above happen in a context of people wanting to see the humanity in others, a desire to look beyond statistics to the person beneath. This takes us back to theology - what is a person? We found that our participants see people as someone created by God and loved by God. The leaders of social engagement activities at these churches claimed that they are uniquely situated to help. But this seemingly arrogant claim makes sense within their worldview, that people's core need is for a relationship with God. This view of humanity fuels the volunteerism of the participants, who characterize their work as 'holistic', 'loving service', 'creating family', 'sharing the love of Jesus'.

This conception of personhood extends beyond the work among the homeless to a wide diversity of people - students, people who love sports, people alone on Christmas, eating disorders, bereaved, finding parenting difficult, people with questions about life. Thus, this view of humanity, that everyone is equal before God, ends up functioning as an equaliser.

Part of our remit for the study was to observe and reflect upon social capital flows within the megachurches. We observed that, viewed as a social institution, the church works harder than most to insure that people are connected. We observed bonding capital within the church, connecting people to each other via fellowship groups (which can bridge nationality, age, social situation divides). We also observed, as mentioned above, other groups that bring like people together around a situation (being a student or homeless) or around an issue (addiction, eating disorder). But these at times were also bridging opportunities. Furthermore, the churches were actively involved in trying to connect people in the local community with each other and with people from the church (baby/mum groups, sports groups, for example). Furthermore, ministries that connect people across boundaries (bridging) could be seen as 'disrupting' social capital. For example, people with little social capital gaining unexpected social capital through being connected to the church. Also, we observed what we could call 'relinquishing' social capital when people

with social capital embrace 'downward mobility', using spare time with people with less capital.

Furthermore, we observed that participants did not conceptualize relationships within the church in terms of capital, instead, they often used the language of family to talk about connectivity to people inside and outside the church.

Conclusion

But more than the flows of human connection, we observed that central to all this connectivity, and to theological motivation, and to the vision of these large churches is a relationship with God. All of the churches' main activities could be seen to aiming to help connect people to God: church worship services, small groups, courses, resources, ministries, etc. Additionally, it was often a response to a personal encounter with God that motivated volunteers to serve in various social engagement activities. But more than this, it was the conviction that what will actually help people in the long run, more than food or support groups, is a relationship with God. Therefore, connection to God is the highest concern of these churches, and all other activities flow out of this.

The implication for conversations with policy makers is that it is a misunderstanding of the context of a church to expect them to contribute to society by providing a service without proselytizing. To do so would be to undermine their central vision, their theological motivations for volunteering and their key mechanism for helping people.

Along with the above conclusions, I would also want to reflect on the methods employed. Using a case study approach enabled us to listen over time to the church leaders, ministry leaders, volunteers and those who access the various services of the church. This multi-level attentiveness enabled us to develop a nuanced view of the situation, which meant we could foreground the voice of the church before putting it into critical conversation with other voices from the social sciences and public policy.