Faith in Social Action?
Faith and inter-faith responses to changing community needs.

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RESEARCH AIMS

- To explore
  - The role and resources of faith and inter-faith groups in addressing changing community need
  - The strengths and weaknesses of faith based social action: opportunities and challenges
  - What works in inter-faith initiatives
  - Looking to the future

RESEARCH METHODS

- Literature review: academic and practice based

- Individual interviews with leaders of faith (and inter-faith) based organisations and groups: multi-cultural/faith case study area, city/region and national.

- To date – interviews with 30 key informants from four faiths and inter-faith forums

- Focus group and feedback workshops

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

- A strong view from participants that debate on faith had been *'hijacked'* by:
  - Prevention of Violent Extremism agenda
  - Faith school debate and 'Trojan Horse'
  - Opinion rather than evidence
- Issues of interview access: time pressures, cuts to inter-faith structures – from paid staff to volunteers

FAITH BASED SERVICES

- **Both** broad range of 'mainstream' services; play and youth provision, older people/day care, money advice etc

- **And** strong emphasis on work with *'the most vulnerable'* or *'those rejected by wider society'*: homeless, substance use, refugees and asylum seekers, guns and gangs etc

- Largely volunteer based responses rather than contractual/externally funded

HOW FAITH GROUPS IDENTIFY NEEDS

- Research – but relatively limited
- Presence – Being *'close to the ground': 'faith buildings are often the only places left in poor communities when other services leave'*
- **Conversations**
- **Outreach**
- The lived experiences of members
- *'The numbers turning up at the door'* (foodbanks)

CHANGING AND EMERGING NEEDS

- Growth of
  - Food poverty
  - Fuel poverty
  - Debt
  - In work poverty
  - Impact of above on family as a shared focus
- Impact of benefit sanctions and 'no recourse to public funds'
- Growing divide in 'the recovery' between the 'haves' and 'have nots'

RESOURCES AND STRENGTHS

- Across faith groups
  - Independent sources of funding
  - Not working to a pre-set/contractual agenda
  - Volunteer base
  - Buildings and presence
  - Skills of staff and volunteers
  - Histories of engagement
  - Diversity
  - BUT.....

RESOURCES AND SERVICES

- Across faith groups – 4 approaches to utilise resources and develop services.

  1   Buildings for worship only

  2   Broader use of resources/services – for members only

  3   Opening up resources/services to wider community

  4   Partnership working; secular and other faiths

WEAKNESSES AND CHALLENGES

- Volunteers as a finite resource

- Financial resources declining – established churches: aging volunteer and finance base

- Skills gaps: *'faith leaders are trained theologians but lack other skills: project management, fundraising, partnership working etc etc'*

- *'A sticking plaster not a solution':* the scale of need

- Legal compliances

- Lack of co-ordination – competition for resources and fragmentation and information 'gaps'

- *'Paid staff let the congregation off'*

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

- Demographics of different faith groups: aging versus young member profiles
- Individual faith leaders as key players in shaping/facilitating responses
- 'Faith based' versus 'faith driven' responses
- Charity versus enterprise models of working
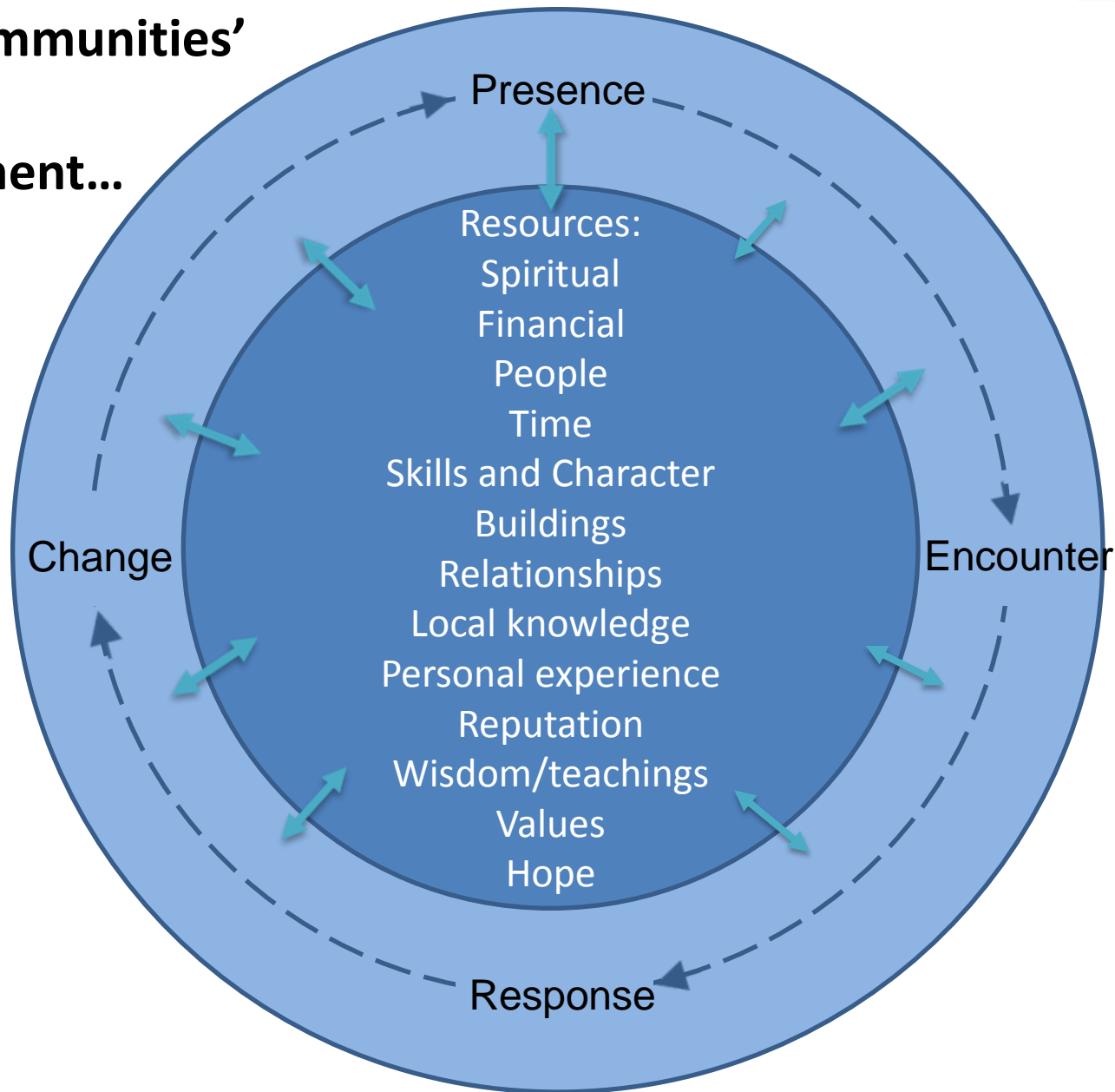- Welfare (mitigating poverty) versus social change

THE DIMENSION OF FAITH

- Can be difficult to disaggregate faith, belief, religion and culture

- Notions of social, spiritual, and religious capital (e.g. Baker and Smith, 2010)

- But, these categorisations may not correspond with the worldviews and practices of the communities concerned

- Faith, belief and received traditions as key motivators

THE DIMENSION OF FAITH

- Complex faith: 'liberal' versus 'conservative' theologies too simplistic

- Conflicted faith *'service..but it is shameful we have foodbanks. We are administering the new Poor Law in the 21st century...without the resources'*

- Institutional landscape is also contested, complex and inter-woven

Conceptualising Faith Communities' Social Engagement...

TSRC
Informing civil society

Presence

Resources:
Spiritual
Financial
People
Time
Skills and Character
Buildings
Relationships
Local knowledge
Personal experience
Reputation
Wisdom/teachings
Values
Hope

Change

Encounter

Response

INTER-FAITH WORKING

- History of formalised structures: often imposed and with 'external agendas'

- From Christian 'inter-denominational' work to inter-faith

- 'Faiths are not monolithic. Differences between dominations can be as important as those between faiths'

- Loss of energy: concentration on governance and talk rather than action

- Withdrawal of inter-faith funding

- *'You disinvest in inter faith work at your peril'*

'NEW' APPROACHES TO INTER FAITH WORK

- Informality but *'It's hard work'*

- Building relationships – not structures – from the very local level to faith leaders

- Emphasis on issues and action not dialogue *per se*

- Responding to *'aggressive secularism'*

- Common humanity not theological difference: *'different faiths have different beliefs – so what'?*

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE 1

- Challenge of Islamophobia
- Capacity to respond to increasing levels of need
- Changing demographics: young people 're-negotiating their relationship with faith'
- The media; right wing attitude to welfare
- Closing down of space for dialogue/political dialogue; challenging policy = extremism and challenging the state

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE 2

- *How long do we have to keep pulling people out off the river before we go up-stream and see who is throwing them in*?
- (Inter)-faith relations with a secular state; lacking a shared language
- Faith and its relevance in everyday lives/communities; faith alone v 'good works'
- Faith buildings: assets or liabilities?
- Other

NEXT STEPS

- For feedback after this event contact a.j.mccabe@bham.ac.uk

- Report writing (October 2014) – out for comments from participants

- Launch (December 2014)

- How to use the report……….