

Making the Most of Localism in Cambridgeshire: opportunities and challenges for Faith Groups

Closing address by the Bishop of Huntingdon to the “Faith and Stronger Communities” conference organised by Cambridgeshire County Council and the East of England Faiths Council on 15 November 2011

A very big thank you to the County Council and the Faiths Council for organising this important event and to all of you for coming to it. It is a beginning not an end, and I want to sum up some of what has been in our discussions today and give some pointers for the way forward, which I would like to link three simple words: **provision, partnership and principles.**

Provision is the obvious truth that there is a whole range of opportunity opening up for faith groups to do what comes naturally to them and serve others in their local communities. This might mean language courses for new migrants, transport schemes for the rural elderly, meeting places for new community initiatives, even more work with young people. Every situation is different, and we have noted that it would be very helpful if the County and District Councils were to share their thoughts with us about what needs were pressing where, as they see it.

Developing new provision comes naturally to most faith groups, but we need self-awareness here about our strengths and weaknesses. We may have warm hearts but weak hands, or need skilling up in new ways. Being sensible about these will help others to trust us to deliver the services that are needed. A key factor, as I see it, in initiating new provision is entrepreneurial vision. There is no necessary conflict – in fact there are increasing examples of symbiosis – between even commercial activity and volunteer endeavour. Social enterprises are likely to be more important as we go forward together. I suggest that to enable such vision we would do well to first enable a network of key community entrepreneurs who can then mentor and support others in seeing opportunities and responding to them. Some of that network is already in place though not named as such: headteachers, ministers, publicans, WI leaders. Sometimes a paid post might be needed for at least a period of time, but it would give rapid repayment on the investment it represents. Let’s begin by identifying some pilot projects and places and seeing if they can succeed – doing a few things well – and that will give heart for more work to follow.

Partnership comes naturally too to faith communities. At their heart is their common life, fellowship in their faith, and care for one another. “You” is usually a plural word in the New Testament... We need, though, to become better at loving one another beyond the boundaries of our immediate fellowships. It’s in our DNA, but we also let ourselves down far too often and even define ourselves by what divides us – like the Welshman who was found on a desert island and had built two chapels. When asked why two, he replied that one was the one went to, and the other the one he did **not** go to. There is a clear community cohesion benefit here if we can get it right, but it will take commitment and care, partly because smaller faith groups in particular are fearful of losing their identity and distinctiveness if they work with others. That is not the point of inter-faith work. Our clear aim now is let every note sound in this great tune, even when we are wholeheartedly committed, as I am, to the truth of our own faith; and I accept that there is a special obligation on larger groups such as my own to help

smaller ones find their seat at the table. I am also grateful that groups such as faiths councils are being taken increasingly seriously by statutory bodies, and hope that we can work together to help them thrive and draw on their strengths at a time when their own funding streams, which have often been regional, are being cut.

Finally, **principles** matter. I am heavily involved in helping make sure that our new developments have places of worship built in to their landscapes. They are places from which community can be built and where the vulnerable can find support; but they are also pointers – like the traditional church spire – to what I believe is a deep truth that there really are universal values of right and wrong, good and bad, a sort of grain to the universe and humanity, and that we will build the common good better when we are able to talk about those values together. Too often we fall into the obvious bear-traps of avoiding such talk, perhaps by looking only at the process not the principles underpinning it; by plucking a few old chestnuts from the fire but not engaging more deeply and asking why we have named the values we have; or most damagingly by leaving it all to market forces. There are huge riches here, both theological and philosophical, and I suggest that a rich common good needs a rich discussion of them. I am very glad that the County Council has used its power of invitation to enable today's discussion, and hope that it will continue to do so, even in the area of principles and values, to help identify what we might all agree was our common good.

I have myself taken the initiative in calling together such a *Cambridge Conversation* on Saturday 11th February at Emmanuel College for around 100 participants, who will include MPs and the Leader and Chief Executive of the County Council, local faith representatives and local leaders of all sorts. Let the conversation begin, and as we debate our principles so we can forge the partnerships that secure new and excellent provision for our communities.