

The Ecumenical Margins

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Re-learning Unity - Lessons from the Secular Voluntary Sector

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The Passing of Charity as Faith in Practice?

To look at modern Britain's voluntary sector is to survey the history of how the Christian Church has repeatedly steeled itself, to ensure that (in a Christian humanist sense) everyone is embraced in the Christendom, nobody is excluded from the providence and mercy of God. So grace - free gift, *charis*, charity, unconditional and unmerited - becomes the template for the cohesion of society, from the prosperity of the powerful to the relief of the poor.

But there are problems of perception. The term 'works of mercy', or indeed the very concept of 'charity' - ideas which could at one time unify our society - can sound irredemptibly paternalist in the context of a society, where the main framework is choice and the person in need is no longer a passive recipient of bounty from above, but a client engaging a suitable service provider.

In such a setting, at first sight, it looks as though the traditional idea of Christian philanthropy has been left high and dry, cut off from the world in which it is set and which it feels duty bound to serve. Two reasons suggest themselves.

First, people nowadays are not much in the mood to be grateful, or even responsive, to those who think they are in the position of helping those who are less fortunate than themselves. Conceiving of charitable motives in this way, let alone expressing it, does not merely sound patronising or conceited; there are those who detect in this

attitude a deliberate policy of maintaining people in dependency. For example, the USA is one of the most Christian and charitable places on earth. Yet, in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, you see a misplaced sense of rights keeping thousands of homeless people rendered immovable from out of unemployment and shelter-style accommodation because, in the first place, the right of the individual to live as a homeless person is accepted and therefore should not be challenged; and, in the second, the duty of the neighbour is to bear the cost of this. In San Francisco, a great liberal city, until May 2004 this thinking was enshrined in a system to keep the residents and the homeless bound in an almost feudal hierarchy of mutual obligation and rights, that has only now been dismantled because it simply can no longer be afforded, not because it failed to offer social development for the poor, or to advance equality. Even where no such system has been formally erected, attitudes can still show a society where the required role for the most vulnerable is not so much that of fellow agents in social development with the rich and powerful, as passive recipients of their *largesse*.

Coming at this from our perspective of twentieth century English social history, where great people consciously believed they were putting the highest Christian humanist principles into practice - the universal suffrage, the social services, the cross-party consensus, the National Health Service, the state pension, sickness and unemployment benefits - it is strange to hear our expectations of how a humane society should work rejected as socialist. But I reckon that our understanding of society - however much it may nowadays have lost sight of this - is deeply rooted in 1500 years of the doctrine of the Incarnation, which sees all humanity without distinction united in the man Jesus with God the Son in Christ. By the same token, it is all humanity's suffering that is taken to the Cross of Christ; and it is all humanity, all creation, which is restored in the Resurrection - not just the lucky believer.

Even an alternative model of philanthropy, also Christian in origin, actually misses its specifically Christian point. It is a well-meaning assumption that charitable activity is our way of putting our faith into practice, or of exhibiting the integrity of that faith. Without getting into a technical discussion on grace or of the relation of faith to works, this assumption is only half the story: the full story is that to be a

disciple is not for the benefit of the believer, but to serve the purposes of Christ. The reason this matters is that there are people who are suspicious of Christians who say that by working in the world, even with no strings attached, they are putting their faith into practice: it sounds like code for covert proselytism. Why should the Christian rely on, or be moved by, faith to do what needs to be done in any case? Why, in other words (and being forgetful of the term's modern historical origins), does humanism need to be Christian or faith-based at all? So it is important to bear in mind that Christian philanthropy or charity is not about my needs or inspiration to express my faith, its quality, or its quantity. Christians in the world may be a cities set on a hill, but what they cannot hide is not their *own* "lightfulness", their *own* identity (classically, the error of a Lucifer); and the purpose of the Christian's belief, presence, activity and business in the world is much more than acts of charity and works of mercy. It is the sanctification of the world and the unity of humanity and creation in Christ. "Father, may they be one, as you and I are one, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me." In other words the entire mission of Christ is the unity of God with all the people of the world.

Christians and their Charity – Not Faith, but Unity in Practice?

A Christianity which calls itself out of the world to go about its own business, however much it serves and relieves the needs of the wider community, has lost its way if it forgets that the reason for its vocation is nothing short of the "unity of all humanity in the charity and truth of Christ." This resounding and telling hope, a phrase of Paul Couturier's, cannot narrowly be about gradually adding to the number of the faithful until as many humans as possible become part of the Church, however much we hope everyone will embrace for themselves the truth that we have realised. It is surely a statement about the cosmic dimension of humanity now united in the person of Christ to the Eternal Creator, by which Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection and Ascension have not just affected the lives and prospects of believers, but have become facts of life for all creation.

This, radically, means that a philanthropic dynamic that relies on demoting some humans to dependency in order to heighten the achievement of charity in others has been broken, just as much as the Passion of Christ overcame the power of

death and established the basis for Resurrection. It nevertheless persists, just as we still cherish our hopes that our works will win God's favour, or that God will side with us because we have been good.

The true motivation for Christian service and mission would accordingly not be about the needs of the donor to assert his virtue, but the way in which works of love are signs, fruits and means of grace, that activity of God in the world, which has the power to draw all people to himself and, because above all this is made visible in the one Christ, to render all humanity one. Against this, a false philanthropy, in order to be sustainable, needs a supply of people who can be envisaged as victims of a social ill, or of misfortunes of their own authorship. Keeping people as recipients of bounty and relief, keeps *you* permanently in the meritorious position of benefactor. It gives you a regular opportunity to give sacrificially, and for those who are "justified by faith alone" you have a steady supply of works to exhibit that your faith bears fruit. But such a system of charity, where donor and beneficiary are not equal partners in a mutually binding contract, is no longer the name of the game. It is a system which actually renders the recipient the object of someone else's power, rather than someone in an authentically spiritual relationship where gift is exchanged.

In a contemporary context where people are no longer deferential to the patronage of the rich, or where the high motivation of people from religious positions is no longer above criticism, people at risk and in need no longer see themselves as cases to be assessed, as suppliants, or as other people's good causes. Indeed this is how they are also coming to be seen by charitable foundations and civil authorities. They have the needs and requirements of recipients, yes; they lack all the resources to cover them. But they increasingly find themselves as consumers of services, people with a say on what is done and how the money is spent and how the solutions are to be arrived at.

A telling observation, at an autumn 2004 conference to celebrate a residential home for ex-prisoners making the transition following release, pulled a government minister up short, when discussing whose say counted over the services provided at the home. In answer to the question, "Who do we provide services for?", the minister replied that it was the government which commissioned and paid for them. A hundred voluntary sector service providers, called back "No!", because the point had been forgotten that it is the

people who use the services that are the true clients. The only effective measurement of their usefulness is after all in the extent to which they utilise them. So that is the first reason why Christian engagement with those at the margins may have lost some contact.

Christianity Distrusted as the *par excellence* Model for Humanism

A second reason why traditional ideas of Christian philanthropy may have been neutralised in society is that the attitudes to it have been coloured by a shift in the popular usage and therefore the meaning of the term “Christian”. As a result, the venerable Christian tradition of disinterested service to the world, regardless of creed or potential for conversion, but solely out of obedience to the example of Christ, is nowadays highly suspect in secular society. Unfortunately, those who have confused mission with conversion have given our non-Christian neighbours a picture of a religion which is exclusive, judgmental, in which help comes with strings attached and where services to the wider community are geared to an expectation that the recipient will accept and practice Christianity as a condition. This is stronger than the suspicion of covert proselytism mentioned earlier: this is analysis from a liberal secularist religious standpoint of what Christians are about. When I was a child, “Christian” applied to the whole of society, and to the very best in it; and to be “not very Christian” meant you were unforgiving, uncharitable, intolerant or dishonest. Now the word “Christian” means someone who is distinguished over and against the rest of society for being self-righteous, anti-inclusive, narrow-minded and having ulterior motives, using charity and education as a front for making converts. We have cited so often the words now realigned to cast doubt on our ethics compared with the values of current society which, ironically gave them birth: “By their fruits shall you know them.”

Is the Secular World Un-imagining the Role of Faith in Humanity’s Advancement?

Both these reasons - the need to re-focus the Christian charitable motive from manifestation of faith to exemplification of the unity of humanity in Christ, and a certain fall in confidence in the goodness of Christian intentions - reflect serious distortions of the truth, of course; and by no means all people present them. But the prestige of Christian charitability is now such that good, self-giving, ordinary people in our society either do not wish to be associated with it, or – whatever government says about the role of faith communities – voluntary and civil policy makers, administrators and budget holders see it

as a disadvantage. So how is it that the faith which has shaped our entire civilisation, even down to shaping much of our contemporary political and ethical values and institutions, no longer captures the imagination of some of the best and most active contributors to the good of our society? More to the point, how is it that the Christian vision of the unity of humanity and creation, visible *par excellence* in the life and love of the Church, is actually rejected as a dangerous template, harmful to the rights and aspirations of people at greatest risk in our world? For those who follow the teacher of the parable of the Good Samaritan, this is a stinging rejection. For those whose master came to seek out and to save the lost, it is a disaster that we find ourselves frustrated in following his example unless we do so with such discretion that the face of Christ could never be detected.

Well, I think the position is not, after all, so dire. Partly the task before Christians is advocacy, partly the need to learn a new language. And behind the language there is a need to internalise a fresh discovery of the teaching of Christ.

Over the last year, the Association of Charitable Foundations, which is the membership society for grant-making trusts, has been looking at these issues. A number of foundations recognised that what we call faith-based groups have a long tradition of offering help and solidarity within the local community, as well as at a national level, simply because the need is there. These foundations either recognise the faith motivation behind a practical project and respect how Christians, or Sikhs, or whatever, put their faith into practice, and then help them because of the wider benefit. Or else, they look directly at the potential effects of the work and reckon that the background motivation is not relevant, it being the work that counts.

On the other hand, there are those who think that funding the work of a religious group necessarily goes to supporting the practice of its core faith, and, even if it does not, could appear to endorse one particular religious viewpoint. I have some sympathy with this second position, as some church groups do themselves no favours. I once had an application from a prominent south London church, keen to do much needed work among disaffected young black youths. Much of the programme was exemplary, except that the project leaders had set, as the cornerstone of their intervention, attendance at a Sunday service as a condition. In

other words, it was not to be an act of charity, with the church reaching out to assist and support those at risk, but a means of hitting vulnerable people with heavy handed religious persuasion, again using them as objects in the deployment of power - spiritual as well as financial. To this day it offends me to recall it - for two reasons. First, it so terribly devalued the currency of Christian love in action, through which the left hand should not know what the right is doing - no Christian can attach strings to the unconditional gift of God in Christ. Secondly, it was completely unworthy of a church to go to a largely secular grant-maker, hiding behind the guise of working for youth inclusion, in order to fund evangelisation to which it would not devote its own resources. Relaying this back to the church concerned was not a comfortable truth for them, and I am sure I was much prayed for in a way I would not find pleasing. The frustrating thing was that the work could have been good - dynamic, committed, effective. It could so easily have fulfilled the objectives which that church actually shared with people in the community, who had no particular religious perspective or motivation but who likewise wanted something done. But the introduction of a religious test for accessing help looks to the secular world as sectarian and divisive. And, more truly to the eyes of our faith, it is the instinct of the Levite who does not risk ritual impurity to help those who are damaged, or of the protective ring of disciples that the Lord has to break down in order to insist, "Let the children come to me - do not try to stop them."

The other side to this, of course, is that there is a degree of anti-Christian secular liberalism at work, which reads into British society a wish list of church and state separation, foreign to our history and constitution. To those of this persuasion, church people should have no organised public role other than the exercise of their religion - they should have no collective involvement in education, social provision, community development or public debate. This leads to the odd situation where you find, say, a children's holiday club organised by a local football team eligible for a grant, yet exactly the same piece of work organised by a church ruled out as a matter of course. I find this discriminatory. It reminds me of the absurdity of the French republic which proclaims liberty - a modern liberal democracy where you can wear what you want, except a Muslim woman's headscarf, a Jewish boy's skullcap, or a Cross on a necklace, and where a priest in clerical dress or a nun in a veil can still be publicly abused. Liberty and equality ought to cut both ways.

Again, I know of one very deserving church which owns a parish hall widely used by local people for community purposes. It won substantial rebuilding funds from the National Lottery, but because the building was also used for church purposes one funder withheld a grant lest it appear to favour one faith over another. The whole rebuilding scheme collapsed because of the resulting shortfall. Supposedly exemplary equality theory achieved nothing, even for itself, as it was the local people who lost out, because Christians were discriminated against, rather than assisted to serve their locality as they had promised without regard to race, age, creed, sex, orientation or ability - classic equal opportunities criteria.

How can social inclusion exclude on the basis of faith?

At the heart of this disastrous assessment was the belief that religion in general and Christianity in particular in the modern world is the reflection and even the agent of what divides the world, generating and perpetuating exclusion and thus delivering inequality. It is as though what Plato could describe as the noble lie - religion disbelieved but retained for its civilising purposes and political benefits - is shorn of its nobility and then reviled for its supposed falsehood.

Yet by excluding religious groups, and Christianity in particular, the secular doctrines of inclusion and valuing diversity actually defeat their own objectives. In whole areas of our cities, the only way of overcoming the exclusion encountered by some very isolated communities (in our own day we could think of Orthodox Jewish women in Hackney, or Somalis in Greenwich or Tutsi refugees in Brent; in the past it might have been Irish people in Kilburn, or Flemish weavers in the East End) is by engaging with them through their religious communities.

A remarkable example of this is Interlink, a charity run by women in Hackney for serving the Chareidi community. It was set up because it found immense barriers for women and children in strict Jewish communities accessing public services. Hackney Council was running on a classic secularist model, refusing to look at people in terms of their spiritual identity and regarding this community (as well as others) as an ethnic minority *tout court*. All its tactics to overcome the social exclusion of some very poor but self-contained groups were thus wasted efforts.

Interlink found that the Jewish experience was paralleled in the Somali and other Muslim communities; it was also present among groups of people in need belonging to Christian communities who did not even merit the status of ethnic minority and were thus completely ignored by the council. Interlink forged a network across the faith groups to address the failure of the council to reach the margins in its borough. Still there was resistance to funding 'exclusive' groups, until it was at last conceded that their very exclusiveness was the only route to enabling inclusion in a wider society, which was actually in their terms even more exclusive. I am not sure that Hackney has grasped this even now, but if the social liberal concept of valuing diversity - surely derived from St Paul's analogy of the body of the Church - is to be taken seriously, it has to ensure that faith communities be allowed to develop their full potential.

The Churches Invest Capital in Society, Not the Other Way Round

Current government thinking sees only too well that, not least in the inner cities, it is the faith communities (by which, of course, in the main it means the Christian Churches) which have long term presence, command rooted support and involvement, and effect the strongest forms of cohesion. As providers of services, they are the only ones whose professionals and leaders reside in the area where they operate. Government knows that, if it is to resist forces which put some people beyond society - the mentally ill, the non-readers, the young offender, the disaffected, the young - then Churches and other faith groups are ready made agents for providing support and for altering people's aspirations for the better. A project of which I am particularly admiring is the community chaplaincy being set up through the HMYOI Feltham ecumenical chaplaincy team. When I last visited I saw a boy who had five times tried to commit suicide and at the age of 15 was on constant watch. He had tried a sixth time and the attempt had left him permanently brain damaged. For this child it was too late, but for others to whom the chaplains minister there is now a mechanism that puts young men after release directly in contact with churches near where they live, which will be equipped to welcome him with the support he needs in the critical days and months after release as the challenge of resettlement bites in. Many of these children are from South and West London's black African and Caribbean

communities which are monstrously over-represented in the criminal justice system.

Government also knows the cost if the churches and their members were not actively present in wider society. The notable social researchers, Lemos & Crane, recently undertook a survey of the support networks relied on by those who are mentally unwell. Over a quarter throughout the country were church goers, or had close links with a worshipping community. Another side of the coin is that, particularly in the South West, churches are huge suppliers of volunteers. Many charities, not least those which appear to be secular bodies, are actually sustained by help from people who also go to church – volunteers, staff, key workers, trustees and managers. It is not as though the charities themselves are formally part of the Church's work and outreach; it is that, in the context of these specialist charities, individual members of the Church conduct their own service in the world, in accordance, you might say, with the purposes of Christ.

Voluntary Sector Historically Informed by the Christian Tradition of Alms and Relief

Perhaps it is worth at this point revisiting the point with which I began, namely that to look at modern Britain's voluntary sector is to survey the history of how the Christian Church has repeatedly steeled itself, to ensure that (in a Christian humanist sense) everyone is embraced in the Christendom, nobody is excluded from the providence and mercy of God.

When monasteries were dissolved, so too went schools, hospitals, refuges for the mentally ill and the elderly. Many of these services needed to be refounded with newly endowed institutions. Indeed a few generations after the new landed gentry received the proceeds of the carve up of Church resources, some were feeling that they should put some of the proceeds back. Not far from here, at Temple Balsall, is the old Templar Church, which came into the hands of the Leveson family. Lady Katherine Leveson set up a foundation which to this day unites an almshouse for the elderly, the village parish community and the junior school, very much a resurrection of the old work undertaken by the monastic knights before her. In more recent times, one can consider the many household name charities established by remarkable people - a high number from Independent church traditions - to bring about reform. It was the awakening Christian

conscience in this land that led to the abolition of slavery nearly 200 years ago; Christians, too, who reformed hospitals, childcare and nursing.

The main area of social development with which I am concerned is prison and homelessness. In the mid 19th century, a great prison was built where the Tate Britain Gallery now stands. Arranged with wings like the spokes of a wheel, it was intended to abolish the desperate health conditions in the old communal prisons, to give prisoners work and purpose, exercise and nutritious food. It was also designed to end the association of prisoners with others who could have a bad influence on them. Prisoners for the first time were kept in silence and permanent isolation from each other. The wings arranged like the spokes of a wheel on a hub meant that prisoners were also kept under constant surveillance. The intention was very high minded. It exalted the level of care and supervision. It also was meant to ensure that the prisoner had endless time to reflect. Each was given a Bible; chaplains were appointed to preach to them daily; and the whole exercise was intended to produce inner conversion and outward reformation of life. But only a few humans can volunteer for so Carthusian a way of life, let alone have it enforced upon them. It was not only a complete waste of money, having not the slightest effect on crime, it also severely damaged people who were already so wrecked that they had resorted to crime as the last stage in their journey of alienation from normal society. It was the shocking rise in suicide rates at Millbank prison that led Parliament to close this great exercise in Christian concern for people at the margins down. But, fortunately, the experiment did lead to other kinds of prisons, much more humane. Many of these, like Pentonville or Winchester, are still in use, though the severe overcrowding has made them ripe for reform in their turn.

And it is in work with prisoners, their families and to some extent their victims, that the Church through her people has a remarkable influence at the most acute edges of society. There are over 75,000 people currently in prison, the vast majority of them under 25. The peak age for offending is 18 for men. 9 out of 10 male prisoners and street homeless young people exhibit signs that indicate a degree of reading disability. 20% actually have dyslexia, twice the level in society outside. 70% of prisoners are in prison because of drug-related crime connected to their own use of substances; 70% of prisoners have at least two forms of significant mental health problem.

In other words, in our society we force down a route that leads to penal custody the young people whose failure at school we caused because we did not realise they had reading difficulties. In our society we lock up in prison our mentally ill. In our society we lock away those who have fallen victim to the malign influence of drugs. As a result, the levels of self-harm (more accurately a form of tension release than a cry for help) and suicide are rising. And for those 75,000 people inside at any one time, actually 105,000 people are committed each year to prison. This means that at least 250,000 partners, children, parents and siblings are directly affected by prison and, alongside the convicted, also serve a hidden sentence.

Most people, when confronted with the facts, realise that prison is completely inappropriate for addressing the needs of damaged, vulnerable people. Only a small number are truly dangerous, and of course it is appropriate that they are deprived of their liberty in proportion to their offence. For the rest, prison makes prisoners worse or, at the least, fails to rehabilitate and resettle them in the time available for a positive, law-abiding life after release. Yet in our society prison remains one of the few tools that exist to meet educational, training, and rehabilitation needs. The work of Prison Fellowship, Time for Families, Alpha in Prisons and the Kainos Community are very effective in helping prisoners through behavioural problems and in learning parenting and relationship skills. One witnesses stories of real change in the lives of people who have been affected by the pastoral care of the Church in prison. Furthermore, a prisoner who has the support and love of his family at hand is six times less likely to re-offend.

PACT (once known as the Roman Catholic-led Bourne Trust) has been pioneering support from befrienders and volunteers in prison visitor centres, and in sustaining links between prisoner and family when contact is in danger of breaking down. Again, the work of Prison Fellowship has been developing programmes of restorative justice - based on Gospel models of forgiveness and reparation, rather than on retribution and retaliation, with significant impacts on re-offending rates. Similarly, Kainos Community invites prisoners to live on a Christian wing in the prison. The support and challenge of a thoroughly Christian

environment in prison is radical, and one which the prison service found initially very threatening. Once it realised this was not an exercise in proselytism, it found that re-offending rates after release were typically being cut from 76% to under 35% (after two years). No secular programme was producing anything like this result.

If the Churches can advocate the positive benefits of the Christian faith to the cohesion of human community as a whole, I think we have firm evidence that (at least in some areas) Christianity, ecumenical in its nature, has a unifying effect on society. Thus, if only the world could envisage it, when going beyond the simply internal dimension of what it is to be the Church, it is Christians who are quietly countering the forces that divide humanity and ensuring that those at greatest risk are not being left out. Before the world our life may be hid with Christ in God; but before God the life of the world in all its wholeness must plainly be in us, as we are in Christ.

Re-learning Christianity's own Lessons from the Secular World

I think there is a need for the Churches to give far greater attention and recognition to the active presence and role of individual Christians in the voluntary sector of this country. For years, the winner of the Teacher of the Year award has happened to be a practising Christian more often than not. Time and again, I find that some of the most impressive people working to transform society in pathways outside the official services – trustees, staff, directors, volunteers, mentors, fundraisers - happen to be church goers. This is no coincidence, in view of what we have been discussing this afternoon. But it is a pity that such a significant lay apostolate goes largely unremarked and unsupported from inside the Churches themselves. The voluntary sector has been one of the United Kingdom's great success stories for changing society for the better in the last ten to fifteen years. I am sure that few of the many Christian people who happen to be driving in it see it deliberately as part of the Church's work, but most would warm to a sense of vocation in it and see it as somehow putting their discipleship of Christ into practice. And yet without the Church, as it were, savouring this salt of the earth and recognising its inherent Christian spirit and service – without trying to colonise, direct or organise it, of course, but being content to let it blow

where it lists – it could lose heart, with confidence in its value as an expression of Christian faith in action faltering and thus losing its saltiness.

There are growing concerns at the declining presence of Christians in vocational employment, from nursing and medicine, to social work and probation, to teaching and work with young people. Not even a hundred years ago, even fifty, the Christians with a sense of their vocation naturally gravitated to such work, many even seeking ordination, the religious life or lay worker posts in order to pursue it more directly. It has been suspected recently that young Christians were nowadays motivated like their peers by contemporary expectations of material success, earnings and career achievement. In teaching, for instance, it was sensed that existing, and even long serving, teachers were pulling out in disillusionment for a variety of reasons, which in turn discouraged new entrants. Among Christians, this meant that seasoned teachers were withdrawing their influence from both classroom and staff room, and younger people looking either elsewhere, or themselves pulling out and opting instead for schools work as purely Christian lay workers, not as professional teachers.

For the last five years or so, the Jerusalem Trust has been looking at this situation carefully. It found that actually a higher proportion among new graduates interested in going into teaching came from a church background. But it also found existing Christian teachers felt completely unsupported in their churches and undervalued as the key agents of the work of the Kingdom they had felt themselves to be when their sense of vocation had taken them into teaching in the first place. The Trust in response developed a programme, *Transforming Lives*, to work out how to alter the present direction, which is otherwise on course for a *de facto* disengagement of the churches from mainstream education other than in their own denominational schools.

It soon realised that, with a renewed vision of vocation and teaching urgently needed on the ground, directing things from denominational HQs would not result in a great difference in the experience of individual teachers and congregations. Equally it was clear that what was likely to evoke people's sense of loyalty, inspiration and motivation would tend to come from a range of networks, bodies,

agencies and personal contacts within but also across and beyond the bounds of their churches. Some of them would be secular networks from which a Christian teacher derived support or motivation, regardless of faith considerations. Some of these secular networks might or might not acknowledge or welcome the identified presence of Christians in their midst, but it is interesting that even without affirming a Christian teacher's faith, such contacts are more relied on for support than the body of Christians. Then again, there is the array of Christian agencies and charities, orders and societies, which do not reflect the hierarchy or structure of a Church denomination, or the congregation or parish to which someone belongs, but which nourish them socially, spiritually and in discipleship. Some call these chains of association the "para-church".

The Parachurch

The aim of *Transforming Lives* over the next few years, as a national programme to promote the Christian vocation to teaching, will be somehow to harness the various distinct Churches, the Christian voluntary sector, the "para-church" organisations (incidentally, the Association of Christian Teachers has pioneered school, FE and university career fairs, bringing together nearly 60 associations promoting a particular profession or trade in terms of Christian vocation) , and the various secular networks together, in support of individual teachers in the present generation and the next. It will require a determined change to the culture of Churches, at the top and at local level, to re-envisage Christians in teaching as vital organs of the Church living and working in wider society, not as short-cut missionaries, or as fodder for running Sunday School or the Children's Liturgy, but as apostles of the Kingdom by their very presence and existence in the world's mainstream. As I said, time and again the Teacher of the Year happens to be a church person: the significance of this is a huge lesson for the Church. For the Church to remain engaged in society it must find some way of sanctifying the lives, faith and discipleship of those who are called to be its leaven.

The *Transforming Lives* process has shown all too clearly that, seeing itself solely as a visible institution in the world, the Church is not reaching where it needs to have an impact, nor those within it needs to affect. Neither, in the British context at least, can any one denomination go it alone. From the outset it was recognised

that a concerted effort would be needed. The “para-church” networks, both those formally organised as charities and associations, and those which are personal or more informal, tend to be ecumenical (at least up to a point), or non-aligned with a particular denomination. In just the same way as do many other charities or informal networks throughout the community, they represent Christian people “defaulting” to solidarity with each other for a given purpose or set of purposes, not so much on the model of the organised Church structures (and adherence or loyalty to these is not at issue) but on the model of the ordinary voluntary sector. To me it is extraordinary that a vital part of contemporary UK society, which once came into being as a result of putting Christianity into practice, but is now largely unconscious of religious origin or ethos, is proving to be a workable model for Christians as circumstances demand they find a way to come together and collaborate to serve their purpose of being Christ in and for the world. In other words, the so-called secular voluntary sector is reflecting back to the Church an image of how the Spirit of Christ is at work in humanity and of how the Church which embodies Christ in the world be more revealing of its Unity, if its discipleship and apostolate are to be authentic and effective. In still further words, “Father, may they all be one, just as you are in me and I in you, so that the world may believe it was you that sent me.”

The Ecumenical Principle in the Voluntary Sector?

Three years ago, the Ashden Trust commissioned research on homeless people’s “networks”. By this was meant their families, friends, peer groups, key-workers, the services they accessed, the homelessness agencies they were involved with and the other agencies they related to, such as public authorities, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and treatment, mental health workers, training programmes and social or leisure groups. Conducted at Thames Reach Bondway, Alone in London and St Basil’s, the research studied a wide range of men, women and young people, and those working with them, in London and Birmingham, culminating in the report from Lemos & Crane, *Dreams Deferred*.

What it uncovered was a received wisdom, that people’s friends and families were seen as part of the homelessness problem, which just did not hold. It found that restoring links with family and friends contributed towards the process which

breaks the cycle of street homelessness and brings more secure integration into regular society. It found, too, that for decades there had been a habit of addressing homeless people's situations mainly just in terms of their need for housing and shelter. In other words, so-called 'clients' were not being treated as clients at all: they were being identified with 'needs' in terms of services this or that agency had to offer – not as people with their own view of their requirements or, indeed, their aspirations. Traditionally this has tilted services for people at risk in the direction either of ideological perceptions about root causes, or a well-intentioned but nevertheless slightly paternalist model in which can fully feel we are more blessed to give than to receive. This latter is all very well as far as it goes – and in its day pioneered what later became modern nursing, the school system, most of the voluntary sector and statutory social services. But without development it relies on leaving the 'needy' continually as passive recipients and so there can be a co-dependency between those whose need is for an outlet for their sense of being generous and 'those who are less fortunate than ourselves'. It is a misreading of 'Blessed are the poor'. I do not think that that in saying 'the poor you have with you always', Jesus meant for this cycle to be perpetual. The justice he embodies contrasts the elevation of the humble and meek with bringing down the more powerful a peg or two. In other words and contemporary jargon, the poor and at risk need confidence and capacity building; the rest of us need some self-awareness and humility - and to remember that, like the rich who were sent empty away, what we think and have to offer can be utterly beside the point.

Of course, all the best charities involved with homeless people offer a rich range of services, like training, health, or dependency programmes, either to help move people up from the street and its attendant problems, or to provide the same access to normal social life and a purposeful time as the rest of us take for granted. Even so, it was apparent that agencies have been unfamiliar with working with each other in order to widen the range of interventions available. And lying behind this were staff not equipped to take the whole of a user's life, needs and desires into account in the search for putting them in touch with the right solutions.

Dreams Deferred developed a toolkit, based on the experience of workers delighted that the research “gave them permission” to get to know a “client” not as a case, but as an individual with a personality, interests, associations, a history, hopes and a future. This has empowered workers in many charities to put together tailor-made solutions for individuals, suited not to the one-size-fits-all mentality of a top-down service provider, bringing in a variety of partners and other charities according to identified wishes and potential for next steps. For the charities, too, it has meant not operating so much in isolation, ploughing their own furrows, but developing tactical partnerships, aware of each other’s distinctive programmes in different fields, complementing one another, avoiding duplication, and arranging between them comprehensive support for a wide range of need, as well as highly specific support to the person seen as a whole. As Gerard Lemos remarks, “Why should someone who has no fixed abode be prevented from joining the Ramblers’ Association?” What sense would it be to exclude them from regular life, when you want to include them in the community?

When one considers this kind of movement, terms spring to mind like “united but not absorbed”, “not doing apart what we can do together”, “unity, not uniformity” and so on. An important part of the secular voluntary sector, through the very process of working with people most at risk, has put them all into practice. If my thesis - that Christian charity is essentially about revealing the dignity of the human person and the unity of humanity and the cohesion of human society in Christ - holds true, the evidence for it is at the margins of society, where the cutting edge is genuinely ecumenical and has our community’s voluntary agencies showing the Churches not only how it can be done, but where and why it is both indispensable and inevitable. Unless the Church learns from the sector which it originally inspired, as Father John O’Toole reminded us, it is the Church which is at the margins of society for most people. Nor are we planning to be ecumenical at the margins for *their* benefit: unless we go there to find and forge our unity, we will fail in *our* purpose to be Christ in and for the world.

Charity Mergers – Christian Reunion

Of course, there are hundreds of local ecumenical partnerships and national, regional or international programmes which are notable in enacting the Church’s

unity through common cause in service at the world's sharp edges. What is called of us is not to leave these instances of union at the margins, but to cause them to transform the centre, the mainstream. Again, the voluntary sector in this country, developing in pace with people most at risk, mirrors onto the Christian community its hints of what the Church must do to be true to itself. One thinks not only of the strategic partnerships between charities working with the homeless, but alliances that have formalised into organic unity. London Connection's network of support for people on the streets found a complementary partner in the famous crypt services offered at St Martin in the Fields. Now they are the highly regarded Connection at St Martin's. Alone in London's family mediation and teenager runaway support work has gone in with Circle 33 Housing, thereby strengthening its basis, but also extending its services through a major network of housing associations across South East England. Again, the Dyslexia Institute has merged with the Hornsby Institute, ensuring that DI as a respected nationwide agency can fully benefit from the training programmes pioneered by Hornsby. This may not be 'Reunion all round', but it indicates movement that is instinctively unitive, because, for those at the margins, this is absolutely vital.

We have compared what is happening in the world, the "para-church", the margins and the parts of society where the institutional Church does not easily reach. We have surveyed various patterns for Christian charity and reviewed our Christian purpose in areas where the presence of Christ in his people is crucial. So the Church, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, cannot afford to maintain itself in its separations. The lesson from secular society is clear and must be re-learned from those to whom the Church originally taught it. Be rich and diverse, but as you are complementary, give maximum effect to it by being one. "Do not stop them; let them come to me." For "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to me."