

**Revitalising civil society  
through social capital formation  
in faith based organisations:  
research findings from Northern Ireland**

'How can we draw on the strength of faith communities for the revitalisation of civil society?'  
(Blunkett, 2001)

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This working paper draws on a project examining the voluntary action of twelve church congregations and other faith based organisations in Northern Ireland.  
Section 1 outlines aspects of the place of religion in that society and introduces the notion of social capital.  
Section 2 profiles three faith based organisations (FBOs), a congregation, a limited company and a charitable trust, two of them working in Belfast and one in a provincial town. Each finds itself in a developmental process as it engages with its local community. Some descriptive findings provide a picture of the frontline presence of churches and other FBOs in Northern Ireland as they address issues of social exclusion and disadvantage.  
Section 3 begins to explore the extent to which the concept of social capital may be a useful means to understand the work of such bodies.

## **Section 1. Northern Ireland: faith based voluntary action in an uncivil society**

The United Kingdom is currently experiencing a revival of government interest in the role that faith groups may play in policy delivery and community development. In an echo of trends in the United States, British policy makers are recognising the significance of the local initiatives in which faith communities can often be engaged and the potential synergy between the aims and practices of faith groups and policy objectives relating to neighbourhood renewal, social exclusion and 'the revitalisation of civil society' (Blunkett 2001). However Westminster's view of the global concept of civil society, with its ring of the benign, does not dovetail easily into the localised realities of the Northern Ireland arena in which two separate communities, each with a religious tag, compete for space and power. There 'within the political infrastructure of a divided society, where, by definition, there is more than one single community, more than one single set of politico-cultural values, people may be so interested in *their* community, *their* society, that they become willing to kill those within the *other*, whom they perceive to be threatening or antagonistic to their political, social, or economic position' (Cochrane, 2002). In such a scenario, strengthening community cohesion, supporting associational life, fostering a sense of civic responsibility, these processes have wider ramifications. Joining the group or having a strong sense of community can have a wholly different meaning and outcome when, amongst the most powerful constituents of civil society there are paramilitary organisations like the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) or the Provisional IRA (PIRA) and cultural/religious organisations like the Orange Order or the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA).

This paper addresses Christian faith based organisations for the simple reason that religious minority groups are not implicated in the historical fracture of the province. Also, though they are becoming more visible in Northern Ireland they are as yet small in numbers. For example, according to the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum, there are just over 50 members of the Sikh community and about 1000 Hindus. Islam has around 1500 adherents and there are an estimated 1000 people with a Jewish family background (Richardson, 2002).

Of the UK resident population of just under 59.8 million, Northern Ireland, with an area of 14,000 square kilometres, is home to some 1.7 million people (ONS 2002). There are around 5,000 NGOs, an estimated 440,000 formal and 750,000 informal volunteers (NICVA 2002). It is probable that religion is a major motivating factor for voluntary action in an organised form (James, 1987; Greeley 1997). Certainly there is a significant level and range of voluntary welfare activity among churches (Bacon, 1998; Hamilton, 2002). However the words of the British Prime Minister to faith communities, 'we want you as partners' (Blair, 2001) would seem not to have permeated this corner of the UK. Central government policy objectives to build the capacity of faith based organizations, to facilitate and promote neighbourhood partnerships that include faith communities and to reduce barriers to faith communities accessing public funding for community initiatives are barely discernible at regional level.

At a recent Belfast conference the Secretary of the NI Department for Social Development said that churches have much more to offer people beyond the

traditional rites of birth, marriage and death. He went on to speak of his Department as 'keen to work in partnership with the community sector'. He did not say 'keen to work with the churches' as such, despite the fact that he was speaking in the premises of a church based organisation to an audience of church based community workers (Salt and Pepper, 2002). It is fair to say that reasons for not embracing churches explicitly probably have little to do with nice arguments over whether they are to be included within some theoretical third sector. They perhaps have more to do both with a general unavailability of hard information about what exactly churches are offering to society and with widespread perception of them in Northern Ireland as conservative and inward looking.

It is precisely to plug some of the information gaps that the research project providing the empirical base for this paper was undertaken. The profiles in section 2 of the paper provide examples of faith based organisations (FBOs) engaged in a wide spectrum of voluntary activity that supports and enriches local life. This activity goes beyond traditional services and programmes to include efforts at building local rootedness and pride in community life, enlarging the channels for the empowerment of citizens and contributing to partnerships with other agencies working for community revitalisation. Prima facie evidence seems to indicate that not all churches in Northern Ireland make this level of involvement in community a priority. Rightly or wrongly, the impression has grown that most churches secretly wish to be left alone with the form of 'comfortable apartheid' they have inherited, separated from each other and from the rest of society. So the suspicion persists that the values which lie at the heart of voluntary action, insofar as they emerged from the Millennium Debate organised by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action – equality, democracy, pluralism, social justice, participation – are not those perceived as being uppermost on the agendas of the churches. Organised religion, rather than a cohesive and healing force, is adjudged part of the problem. One contention holds that, in its concrete church form, religion 'solidifies the opposing alliances in an exclusive way and precludes a common state form, thus providing the structure of violence which such divisions entail' (Fulton, 1991).

Research would support this view. Responses to what has been called 'the believers enquiry' confirmed that 'no church in Ireland has made peace and reconciliation in the country a driving, determining imperative' (Kenny, 1998, p 181). More recently, a six year study by a team from the Irish School of Ecumenics traced the structural parameters of sectarianism in Ireland, finding it endemic within the churches (Liechty & Clegg, 2001). And a report on the work of church based groups in Northern Ireland that are supported by the Community Relations Council found it unlikely that many churches would have tackled sectarianism within their congregations without an external stimulus. The issue, it claimed, has been 'swept under the carpet' for many years at senior church levels, and this would probably have continued (Williamson et al., 2001).

All this is of note because in Northern Ireland nine out of ten people identify themselves as belonging to a church (Brewer, 2002). In Britain the figure is two out of ten. The churches then have an important place and reach in society. Their response to social need is correspondingly significant in terms of people and premises. However it is organised largely within two distinct communities whose boundaries are at once cultural, political and religious. Not all Catholics are Nationalists, but 63% of them describe themselves as such. Not all Protestants are Unionists, but 74% of

them say they are (NI Life and Times, 1998). Thus political interactions in NI are never totally free from association with religion and inter-church relationships may be understood to have a political significance beyond the churches themselves.

For generations the Catholic and Protestant communities have been assembling their own social service infrastructure, often centred on their churches. Taking the example of Belfast, we see the Catholic population expanding dramatically in the early nineteenth century with the industrial revolution. There was cooperation between the authorities of the Catholic Church and Presbyterian Church leaders in response to the extreme circumstances of the cholera outbreak of 1847. But growing religious polarization ensured that by the end of the nineteenth century parallel structures of benevolence had emerged with little collaboration between the two communities (Williamson, 1995). This is reflected in housing occupation, with a religiously segregated pattern becoming established by 1851. Today some 63% of the city's population lives in enclaves that are more than 90% Protestant or Catholic. At the time of writing, the newspaper headlines provide a daily reminder that, far from dissipating, tensions between the communities have in fact increased within these areas.

The process of social reconstruction and peace building that is now fitfully under way confronts the churches with a dilemma. They have become representatives of ethnic identity and loyalty and markers of separatist communities. They understand themselves to be at the same time resources to cross the chasm that separates them. Where they do want to contribute towards social cohesion and the resolution of division, how are they to do so? 'I sometimes think that in spite of our ecumenism and in spite of our will to be friendly with other people we tend to be imprisoned within our structures' (Kenny, 1998).

The faith based organisations examined in this study are all in some way struggling with the dilemmas in this situation and are being changed as they do so. The developmental process that they are in has its own inherent interest. It is also of note for at least two wider considerations. The first has to do with the churches themselves. Until the 1970s the religious world of Northern Ireland was stable. Church leadership was trained for a familiar task in a system undisturbed for generations. There was little call for experimentation or specialist ministries of the kind more taken for granted elsewhere in the UK. Thirty years later, with the traditional model no longer working as it once did and their central bodies under-equipped to offer incisive support, local churches are struggling to meet the demands of a world conditioned by realities they were unable or unwilling to foresee. As they do, new patterns of ministry and mission are evolving. This relates to the second reason why the developmental process is of note. These new patterns are opening some churches up to new connections and collaborations. They then become of signal interest to government policy makers whose attraction to social capital underlies their promotion of voluntary action and they draw attention both to religion as a source of social capital and to faith communities as potential instruments of policy. This is another more positive side to the story of churches in Northern Ireland.

'Community and social capital are built and maintained through organisations and churches. Non-profits and churches are both recipients of social capital resources available in the community and generators of community and social capital. Both types of places often serve as the venues where community is practised, social

capital created and used, and cultural capital is transmitted' (Uslaner, 1997). But what is meant by 'social capital'? There is no single agreed definition, no universal model of its formation or means of measurement. It has been identified with such features of social organisations as trust, considered as an aggregate of behavioural norms, viewed as social networks, or thought of as a combination of all of these. It has meant different things within different disciplines, usually things that are desirable, cared for and approved of (Dasgupta & Serageldin, 2000 p. x). Of the three major figures associated with the re-emergence and development of the concept, Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam, it is the last who has caught the popular imagination and given social capital the aura of a public good with accompanying policy relevance and appeal. His definition is deceptively succinct: 'features of social life - networks, norms, and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives' (Putnam, 1996). It is clearly the basis for the British Cabinet Office description of social capital as 'all those institutional arrangements, networks and relationships which promote understanding, trust and mutual respect: allow communities to pursue shared goals more effectively; improve information flows; and generally improve the quality of life' (Stutt et al, 2001, p11).

Three types of social capital, important for our purposes, have been distinguished within a vigorous ongoing debate. 'Bonding' social capital is characterised by strong bonds like those between family members or members of an ethnic group. 'Bridging' social capital designates weaker, less dense but more cross-cutting ties like those between business associates, acquaintances, friends from different ethnic groups. 'Linking' social capital (Woolcock 2000) refers to connections between people at different levels of power or social status. The capacity of individuals and communities (say, the general public) to access resources, ideas and information from formal institutions beyond the immediate community radius (say, the political elite) could be said to depend upon 'linking' social capital. To the important differences between types of social capital may be added the distinction between social capital as a 'public good' and as a 'club good'. Social capital is not to be seen as the exclusive property of a single individual, but as shared by a group, or by groups of individuals. To the extent that all members of society or a community have access, it may constitute a 'public good'. Where groups of individuals can control access by other individuals, it may be more in the nature of a 'club good' and a force for exclusion. Thus, social capital is not without its downside (Portes & Landolt, 1996) and if it is to bring benefit to society as a whole, it must be accessible by all society's members and not appropriated by sectional interests.

Profiled below are a congregation with a neighbourhood project, a limited company that emerged from a congregation with local focus and a charitable trust that grew from parish street level concerns to adopt a vastly wider agenda. The questions put against the profiles in this paper are these. Is social capital being generated by such organisations? If so, what type of social capital is it? To what extent do any benefits accrue to the wider community beyond the FBO itself? Can the work of these FBOs be said to be ameliorating or exacerbating the divisions between groups with strong bonding but little bridging social capital? Is the work connected in to networks of other local organisations and linked constructively with agencies further afield?

## **Section 2. Three profiles: Where faith based action hits the ground**

### **Profile A: Benmoe Presbyterian Church (all names are fictitious)**

#### *Type*

Benmoe was established in the 1970s in Ballycarn, a market town with a population of around 60,000 people. Originally an extension of an existing congregation, it was set up to serve a newly built mixed housing area with a population of 60/40 Protestant/Catholic. It is now an independent congregation in its own right.

#### *Objectives*

The mission statement describes this organisation as existing 'to worship God, grow through discipleship, love each other through fellowship and reach out in mission'. The current emphasis is on re-engaging with people in a surrounding community that has seen dramatic change.

#### *Activities*

Members meet for worship and for religious classes on Sundays and for prayer and study in midweek meetings. Leadership opportunities for singers, musicians and teachers exist. There are uniformed organisations for young people and a youth club that attracts many with no other connection to the church. Two groups run specifically by and for women and one for men, each providing an educational and social programme. An afternoon group offers social contact for older folk. A team of volunteers shares pastoral care. This FBO operates a pastoral care centre on one of the estates in a block of flats rented from the Housing Executive. Here people may drop in any morning from Monday to Friday and many do, especially those living in nearby singles accommodation. There is a small youth club operating on the basis of one leader to three young folk. A homework club, a group for single mothers and a faith development course (Alpha) are also running. A contact centre for estranged fathers is at the advanced planning stage.

#### *Buildings*

The congregation's base is a church and hall complex located between areas of public and private housing. The minister and his family occupy the manse, some little distance from the church.

#### *Participation*

Over 300 families are members of the congregation. They provide some 150 volunteers for the work of the church. The FBO employs a part time office secretary and the full time community and youth worker who operates from the pastoral centre and is supported at the drop-in there by 20 volunteers. The uniformed organisations, Boys' Brigade and Girls' Brigade, each serve a membership of about 50. The youth fellowship, focusing on faith development, has 20 members and the more recreational youth club upwards of 60. Both the groups for women and the men's fellowship have an average of 50 members. The senior citizen's gathering attracts 70 people. The great majority of those who participate in these activities are members of the congregation. Ownership and involvement by the wider local community remains at a low level.

#### *Resourcing*

The current policy of this FBO is not to seek any external funding. The congregation presents itself as in listening mode, trying to understand the local community as it is

now and refocus its ministry to the area. It sees a need to take responsibility for establishing its work and to move a step at a time. It is therefore unwilling to surrender the direction of its policy to the demands of any funding agency.

#### *Use of research*

The responsibility mentioned above extends to learning about local needs. The activity of the community and youth worker at the pastoral care centre is, in effect, a piece of action research, through which local knowledge is being built up.

#### *Linkages*

Organisational links are extensive. Benmoe is an associate member of the local partnership. This involves all five churches in the area including, perhaps unexpectedly for Northern Ireland, both a Catholic one and an assembly of Christian Brethren. There are useful links with residents' associations, the NI Housing Executive, the youth service, schools and a further education college, a women's aid hostel, police, statutory services and various charitable bodies. A local councillor chairs the partnership.

#### *Cross community dimension*

Cross community work is focused in, as the minister put it, 'activities below the line of sight'. Clergy and other leaders meet regularly. Churches now try to do some things together where they have previously made individual efforts. The community worker is developing strong working relationships right across the spectrum. A project with Habitat for Humanity, presently under discussion, may go forward on a cross community basis.

### ***The Benmoe project***

I push the bell and wait at the door. Virtually every window in this twelve flat housing block is shuttered. All the buildings around are grey in colour. The street lights in the immediate vicinity are fitted with floodlights at the top of the lamp posts and closed circuit cameras are in evidence. There is no human being in sight. *It is difficult, but we are in here and it will change us.* The minister's words come to mind and I begin to sense something of what he meant. A remote voice checks me. The door lock is released. Inside the paint is fresh, the rooms clean, the staff welcoming, but there are grills and alarms on the windows. This is Shebeg Pastoral Centre on a weekday morning, a drop in centre demanding more than passing curiosity to enter.

Lara, the community worker, admitted that the heavy security was a challenge, a big psychological barrier. She added that it was just part of what has to be accepted for the moment. A detached house would make a better base. There are none on the estate. Taking over a semi would present noise problems to neighbours. She sees it as part of a kind of test. In post now for two years, she became a familiar figure in her first six months on foot around the estate, knocking on doors, getting to know local people, talking to anyone and everyone. She listened to them, matching her own abilities and ideas to their views. Even then, when the pastoral centre opened in November 2000, there was local scepticism. People wondered if there would be police at the drop in, or the drug squad, or social workers – somebody to check up on them. This was one of the roots of a sense of being tested that she and the volunteers staffing the center shared. Another was an intuition that they had to earn people's trust. I heard how, when the interior of the block was being refurbished, a

band of local children, aged between seven and nine, let down the tyres of the contractors' vans. The men rushed outside and the children entered the building and stole tools and keys. They repeated the trick on a later occasion, this time leaving a window unlocked for entry by night. Another element of the testing came with teenagers dropping shotgun cartridges at the feet of the centre volunteers. At a time when the estate was becoming more Catholic, when there were some very angry and aggressive Protestant people around and when paramilitary organisations were actively recruiting amongst young people in the area this was frightening enough.

There is no surprise at the early scepticism they encountered. *People's experience teaches them to look for the catch if there appears to be something going for nothing. They become disillusioned and fed up with others doing things to them or for them. They want a part in the decisions. So consultation at every step is necessary. We check the programme with the residents' association. We try to be open, honest and listening. We take time with individual people. If we don't do it that way we might as well shut up shop.*

Lara and her team of eighteen volunteers implement the programme. They keep the drop in open on weekday mornings, providing support for young mothers specifically on Wednesdays. They facilitate a faith formation group and a homework club. The evening programme involves them in work with 15-19 year olds and with a group for girls. Lara says that these young people, some with very troubled backgrounds, have slowly come to realise that the centre staff will not collude with the lawbreaking that is part of their culture, but will treat them with honesty and listen to what they might want to say about how they see the world they are living in. It is a demanding process and the volunteers have to be carefully selected for this kind of work. They are at the sharp edge of Benmoe Presbyterian congregation's millennium project entitled 'Investing in Community', an effort to change life on one of the four estates they see as their patch.

The congregation put in the financial resources to renovate the centre. They pay the nominal rent and employ the worker. They also supply the volunteers and, not least, the moral support for the operation. That support has a practical edge. Six weeks after the centre opened they reviewed working arrangements and made adjustments because of the sense of volunteers at risk. One member of the congregational committee managing the centre expressed his concerns thus. *The volunteers who are accepted are usually not people with answers, but those with injuries who can in some sense say 'we know about this'. They are our most valuable resource. We need to find some way of supporting them better. We are not just doing our own wee thing for people through the community worker and leaving it all to her and the volunteers. We are trying to engage and to enable local people to emerge in leadership positions in the area.*

There are tensions of course and, as Lara sees it, not everyone in the congregation expresses the same commitment to the project. Indeed, as the profile shows, there is a flourishing traditional dimension to congregational life, with organisations holding appeal for insiders rather than outsiders. Some older members think of the centre as a matter of mission in the sense of evangelism and numbers converted or souls saved. Others express great interest in how work is actually going and how Lara is managing in the face of the pressures she is under. One member no longer living in the area confessed to being a little nervous of the estate on which the work is taking place. Yet he was also convinced of the rightness of the principle of serving the local community and the need for the church to do something, without being sure that this is the only or best way to go about it. He was uncertain about how far the venture should be shared with other faith communities and unclear about how far it should

ever bend to fit a government agenda in order to procure funding. He wondered whether the pastoral centre itself should not be more obviously Christian looking. Those who staff it tend to think that this could frighten people off. They do not want faith to be *in your face when you come through the door. We have to earn the right to share Christ with people.* To keep the congregation's interest alive and informed Lara gave a series of Sunday morning presentations on the project in order to offer her understanding that care has to be non patronising and practical.

Such thoughts are broadly in line with the minister's approach. Daniel sees himself as conservative in theology. However certain aspects of his thinking have particular significance within this setting. The first of these is his model of the church as present and down to earth, not distant and formal. Its purpose is not primarily to lead or direct but, as he puts it, *to serve as Christ was servant king.* Following from this, he encourages a sense of a call to the whole congregation to be servants in the locality. For this to be authentic they must first look and listen. They must recognise that life for many in the area is a struggle and that the church is itself in a position of weakness. It was his own looking and listening, his interpretation of the changing demography of the area and the resulting questions, that led Daniel to suggest to his kirk session that they find a community worker for the patch instead of simply taking another assistant minister for a brief period of training.

A second significant aspect of the leader's approach is the willingness to cooperate with any who share a concern or a responsibility for the locality. Benmoe congregation, along with four other local churches, is an associate member of the Shemore Partnership. Through this partnership they have developed extensive local links with police, education and youth services, with a range of charitable bodies, local councilors and residents' associations. The pastoral centre is located in the block of flats that the partnership took over from the housing executive to service community groups. As Daniel puts it, *Willingness to work together is the key thing and we are now seen as no longer working for ourselves alone, so the barriers have begun to fall. People just didn't know about resources in the church for the community.*

A third important dimension in the leader's thinking relates to those very resources. As Daniel describes it, *the church can operate as a hospital and as an army. You can come and be cared for. You can go on from there to a position of sacrificial living. A significant number of our people are at that stage. It is an individual thing and it is entirely voluntary. From such members our resources are gifted rather than requested.* Thus no external funding has to date been sought by this FBO and this is likely to continue while the base for the pastoral centre remains available at the current rent. The organisation is motivated by what it sees as a response to a scriptural imperative and this rules out being deflected from its course by the demands of any funder.

This scriptural imperative and basis is given expression in the congregation's framework for mission, drafted as part of the 'Investing in Community' project. The framework traces a line from this basis to the cutting edge of the work, the quality of relationship on offer at the pastoral centre and the attitude and demeanour of the volunteers there. On the way it emphasises the fundamental value of human beings and the specific needs of people in the immediate neighbourhood. It underlines the necessity for the local faith community to address those needs in cooperation with other concerned individuals and groups in society. It places the pastoral centre and its workers at the heart of this enterprise, acknowledging that it is a learning experience for all involved. Certain principles are added by which the work is guided along

humane and inclusive lines. Three headings from what is virtually a declaration of intent and rationale for the whole operation provide some insight into the philosophy.

Volunteers: Our volunteers are the most valuable resource in the centre. Their opinions and needs must be valued and a high priority given to the development of our volunteers.

Community Development: In prioritising workload, those things most likely to contribute to community development will be a major consideration.

Partnership: The primary function of Benmoe Presbyterian Church is to be a church. We recognise the valuable contributions that many other agencies make to helping the local community. In working alongside them we seek neither to usurp nor duplicate what others are doing. In this way we therefore make best use of the resources made available to Shebeg Pastoral Centre by the Church Committee.

(Framework for Mission – May 2001)

It could of course be argued that such words come easily. The crucial point is whether anything is actually happening as a result of them. Here it is very important to remember that this is a neighbourhood with a Presbyterian church and a Catholic school situated just across the road from each other and that contact between them has apparently been limited to one event in the past twenty five years. A Catholic church in another part of the town has been the focus of a turbulent Protestant picket. This is the given. There is fear. A kind of renewed ghettoisation is under way along with a push in paramilitary muscle. The perceived lack of progress in the political process can heighten anger and frustration amongst such groups, ratcheting up tension and cramping room for manoeuvre. There is the feeling that a major incident may *split things*. Someone commented, *If it breaks down I've got to watch my back*. It is not a context that encourages risk taking. Certain kinds of cooperation are not well received. Yet there is a cross community dimension to the organisation's work, *focused in activity below the line of sight*. Some initiatives, like networking, are quietly progressing. Lara has developed strong working links right across the spectrum. The groups at the pastoral centre take anyone who comes and they are a good spread. The faith formation group is a *big mix*, involving church folk plus charismatic Catholics. Daniel meets regularly with other clergy in the area. There is an interdenominational monthly meeting of folk drawn from the local churches to which information from the clergy fraternal is fed through. There is a determination that life is not to be dictated by sectarianism.

Within such a setting of division these are encouraging signs. There is informal feedback from people, anecdotal but positive, reinforcing the sense that perceptions are changing. One long term resident remarked on the dramatic improvement in the residents' association, the renewed sense of pride and a recent action taken in the face of the greatest paramilitary pressure he has seen in twenty years. He was referring to a clean up on the estate in which the people almost defiantly reclaimed the streets, clearing them of rubbish and graffiti and washing kerbs. A new concern about peacemaking has been noted, now legitimate where previously it had been considered to be simply a Republican agenda.

There was the community carol service which would ordinarily have been a non starter but which, in the light of a rejuvenated community association and the new element of cooperation, was massively supported. Organised by the partnership group, the residents association and the senior citizens club, it was advertised in the residents' association newsletter as a cross community church service. The size and spirit of the gathering surprised and delighted local people and strengthened the desire for a renewed sense of community and belonging.

Barriers do seem to have been broken down through the Shemore Partnership. The churches had to make a submission to the partnership applying for the use of the flat in as a pastoral centre. In the past a proposal from such a source would have been likely to meet with a frosty response. The tuning in of the churches to each other and to the language and thinking of local people has opened new doors. The partnership grew out of an obvious need to address local issues at a time when community spirit had all but gone. The existing local groups, including the churches, were too weak to combat the decline on their own. The clergy, wondering how best to respond, began to meet with each other regularly in order to begin to find a common way forward on social issues. Associate membership of the partnership followed. At their regular meetings a project is taking shape that may begin to make a contribution to the battle with interlocking sectarianism and drug-related deprivation. On one of the estates where the housing executive is knocking down homes because it is said that few people want to live there the churches are planning to take some land and build new homes for owner occupation through Habitat for Humanity. This will involve them in an exercise of community building so that potential buyers will have the confidence that this is a good place to live.

This is not about quantification or target setting. It is about building trust between people and raising their hope that things can be better. This is perhaps to be measured only in small ways at present. At the church building the fact that there is little vandalism may be indicative of a process under way. At the pastoral centre there is the beginning of a similar sense of ownership. People who drop in there are feeling comfortable enough to make their own cup of tea and to talk with some openness because they know that what they think counts to the team there. The community worker provides a regular report with some statistics for the management committee. But, as one voice says, *You can't quantify, it's not like a job centre. You can list people's practical problems, but the more personal matters that are talked about, you can't talk about, you have to take care. How do you put a value on the opportunity for people just to come in and sit down for some human warmth while a volunteer takes care of the youngster for a while? The missionaries back from Malawi can give a glowing account to the congregation, but you can't talk much about what happens on your doorstep. Somebody somewhere will be able to work out who and what you are talking about. What are on offer here are respect, time and honesty. Life stories are told, trust fostered. You can't measure the therapeutic value of an ear. On Monday night the kids benefit, but so does the whole estate, and their parents. And there is the satisfaction of knowing that you were the first place they called to talk after they had been in a situation.*

In the light of Lara's first two year contract the job specification for the community and youth worker post has been redrawn. The first document provides a 14 point list of what it calls duties. Of these 8 relate to conventional work with congregation based young people and 6 to encouraging links between congregation and community. There is clearly an implicit hope of adding to the membership of the church. One duty stands apart, namely 'to evaluate and report on the needs of people living in the local community'. The revised specification is a different kind of document. It speaks of responsibilities rather than duties and the focus of these is more outward looking to the people of the neighbourhood than to the congregation. They revolve around the running of the pastoral centre: the recruitment, encouragement and organisation of volunteers: promoting the facilities of the centre locally: liaising with other church groups or individuals with a community interest to encourage them to use the centre: seeking and taking opportunity to work alongside other community based

organisations: taking initiatives to address gaps in community provision – amongst others.

These two specifications relate to a job that came into being because the minister of this congregation did not take the well worn path and look for an assistant equipped for traditional ministry in the church. He began to ask himself fundamental questions about the nature of the task facing his organisation in his locality. He shared his thinking with other members. Together they opened themselves to learning from and working with other individuals and groups who, while not necessarily pursuing the same questions, had similar concerns. Their actions and their attitudes slowly became clear to those around them and caught the interest and the trust of a significant number of local people and agencies. The difference between the two job specification documents is a vivid indication of the congregation's growing understanding of the task it took on in its millennium project and of how it is itself changing as it seeks to bring about change.

## **Profile B: Oasis Care**

### *Type*

has been a limited company with a board of directors since 1997. It grew out of the Christian Fellowship Church, a congregation within the new church movement situated on the edge of a predominantly Protestant eastern inner city area of Belfast.

### *Objectives*

The mission statement presents Oasis as setting out to empower unemployed people and build up the life of families.

### *Activities*

For long-term unemployed people there are opportunities to develop job search skills, interview skills and CV preparation as well as accredited training courses designed to provide stepping stones to work. The focus on family is seen in the provision of such facilities as a community cafe, drop-in centre with a creche and a children's used clothes shop. Free child care facilities allow women to consider enrolling for courses in personal development including health, home making, social skills, education and work. A parenting course is accredited through the Open College Network. A playgroup, formerly run at the centre by NSPCC, has been taken over by Oasis and an after school art club opens every weekday in school holidays. A variety of initiatives is offered to young people. With the support of the Probation Board, there is a drop-in facility for those who are or have been on probation. A trainer is available to provide initial guidance for any caller with a problem of basic literacy or numeracy. The centre provides a space for band rehearsals and an arts-based cross-community experiment links this project with a community group in a Catholic enclave across the city. A befriending scheme has been set up to help local people suffering from mental health problems. This pilot project employs a team of six staff under the Worktrack programme who take referrals from eight GP practices in the area. It aims to complement the work of general practitioners and community practice nurses and give more time to people's anxieties than the health professionals can offer.

### *Buildings*

These activities take place in or from the organisation's base, a renovated and refurbished former public house, which includes cafe, drop-in, shop, two training rooms, computer suite and administrative offices.

### *Participation*

The programmes occupy 12 members of staff, a core pool of 17 volunteers and 15 Worktrack employees. There is a high level of local ownership of and input into both design and implementation of projects. The centre is recognised for the delivery and assessment of national vocational qualifications (NVQs). One hundred and seventy five people have been trained through the government New Deal programme. Seventy six people have qualified in computer skills at various levels including the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). Forty eight women have gained Open College Network certificates in a range of topics, nine have won the Welcome Host Certificate from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. A typical summer scheme caters for perhaps ninety children from 6 to 11 years old, with the staff team including international volunteers.

### *Resourcing*

Funding, technical support and advice have come from BBC Children in Need, Belfast City Council, Belfast European Partnership Board, Belfast Regeneration Office, Business in the Community, Christian Fellowship Church, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, the Ford Foundation, International Fund for Ireland, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Training and Employment Agency, the Training for Women Network, the local Health and Social Services Trust among other bodies. Contracts are entered into with each funding body.

### *Use of research*

Research has underpinned each stage of this FBO's development. From the first area survey to find out what the main issues were for local people, through door to door conversations about developing a community resource, the organisation built up local knowledge and made use of it to identify possible responses. Further research took it into dialogue with statutory bodies and with other community groups in the area. Oasis looked elsewhere at church based action in cities like London and Liverpool and saw good practice from which to learn. It took up offers of practical help from people working in successful faith-based social action projects in England and, through Training into Jobs, gained insight into financial issues and learned how to make grant applications. The pilot befriending scheme, for example, came about through a combination of awareness of local conditions, contact with professionals concerned about them, and in joint response to mental health needs clearly identified through research studies elsewhere in Belfast.

### *Linkages*

Local links are in place with the Greater East Belfast Partnership, East Belfast Business Initiative, East Belfast Community Development Agency, East Belfast Churches Forum. Collaborative relationships have been established with community organisations in Canada and in the United States. This FBO in partnership with two local organisations offers 27 training places on the Microsoft Certified Professional Level in IT skills.

### *Cross community dimension*

Creative links also cross the community divide. Twenty week visual arts modules for young people have been designed to combat sectarianism. Through residential cross community workshops and the public performances and exhibitions with which the modules have ended, relationships have been built and sustained beyond the structured experience. For women, short residencies in Dublin with exchange visits to Belfast have helped overcome difference and preconceptions.

## **Oasis Family Centre**

I follow Paul on the short twisting back street drive from the church. This part of inner east Belfast is looking run down and frayed. The tribal markings are Protestant, but more half hearted graffiti than triumphant full gable ends. Here and there a gap in the intermittently occupied terrace fronts gives on to a vista of rubble, tortured ground and caterpillar tracks as the way is made for new housing. The exposed clay strengthens an impression of shell shock in the air. We pull in at a corner building and bundle up narrow stairs past what seems like an army of workmen inside. Two floors up in a small quiet office I am handed over to Cliff. This is my introduction to Oasis Family Centre in the process of creation from a former paramilitary pub.

Paul is the pastor of the Christian Fellowship Church congregation behind the Oasis initiative. Cliff is the centre manager. From conversations with them and others on that day I pieced together the story behind the constructive chaos on the floors below. What is now up and running as a much used venue for a whole range of social, recreational and training activities was at that time just coming into being. It was the congregation's third and most promising base for the work they felt they had to do. Broadly speaking, that work was to establish some mechanism through which local people could be put in touch with resources inside themselves, begin to realise their potential and change their lives and maybe their own neighbourhood for the better. The latest building offered greater scope than any previous arrangement.

Earliest approaches both to identifying a manageable task that would be in keeping with the congregation's sense of calling and to translating it into practical action were focused on a house next to the church building. Here in 1993 they set up a drop in centre, trained some volunteers to service it and waited. They were disappointed. Few people came to the house. Those who did turn up included a significant number of people with minor but troublesome mental health problems. The volunteers felt they were not equipped to cope with this sort of demand, so the house was closed and the church team began to think again.

This had not been a total shot in the dark. The congregation had carried out a community audit to try to build some understanding of local need. In response to the picture it gave them they knew an advice centre of some kind would provide a starting point for their work and an accessible presence in the neighbourhood. But after the experience of the first house they believed they needed more focus and some guidance from those with a knowledge of the area. They began to talk to professionals on the patch. They learned that teenage pregnancy rates were giving cause for concern. After discussions with Social Services the church began to offer support and encouragement to pregnant girls between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. A weekly drop-in club was run in the church house for about a year. The location was not ideal and they found the girls becoming, if anything, more dependent upon the support on offer than independent. They also identified a greater need among those aged eighteen to twenty, since younger women tended to be supported within the parental home on first giving birth. Those having a second child were often more isolated. In the light of these findings they began to look for a more suitable and strategically situated house within their target area – inner east Belfast.

After discussions the Housing Executive made a house available to the congregation in a location that suited their needs. The Executive contributed new kitchen facilities

and church folk and ACE workers redecorated the house throughout. When they opened the door in February 1996 there was barely a discernible ripple of interest in the community despite the efforts they had made to promote it as a resource. Even the small group of women who showed initial curiosity seemed in danger of evaporating and the church people were unsure about what to do. Their uncertainty came to an end when a key person, someone of influence within local networks, paid a visit to check out the facilities and talk to the volunteers. After that word seemed to get to the right ears. Women began to trickle in and to use the house for rest, tea and talk. The question then was where, if anywhere, to take things from there. The volunteers drew the women into a conversation about how to make use of the resource and what activities they would find meaningful. They tried out a range of programmes, with uneven success. Eventually a parenting course was adapted to the local context. Nine months later response had grown to the point where so much more seemed possible, but lack of space in the *wee house* was seriously limiting.

Meanwhile the group had also been sharpening its awareness of the impact of the high level of unemployment in the area. With the help of Making Belfast Work they carried out some research which showed them that, despite the existence of local ACE schemes, a growing number of families were feeling increasingly hopeless about job prospects. The question of what might be done to combat the malaise was pursued through dialogue with Social Services and with community groups in the area. They also talked to other churches in order to build connections and share ideas. This last was a slow process, confronting them with a dilemma. Were they to try to pull churches together first in order to attack the problems or get something off the ground and then talk to other churches about working cooperatively? They opted to get something moving and went out to find examples of the kind of practice they felt could prove effective in their neighbourhood. They looked to the experience of faith based organisations in other large UK cities. They found ready and practical help. One large established FBO employed a member of the congregation and placed him formally in Belfast to move the CFC project forward. Proposals now began to attract funding. The Probation Board of NI provided some support. 'Peace money' became available and then the Educational Guidance Service for Adults funded two workers for two years.

The group now had ideas. They also had the staff and volunteers to implement them. Necessary support was in place and, not least, they had built up a level of credibility amongst people on the ground. What they were lacking was a more appropriate base in which all these elements could come together. They looked over a disused factory and set about putting in a bid. It was sold before they could secure the necessary finance. They explored the possibility of sharing other church premises in the area. Then 'The Farmers' Rest', a pub closed down by police because of paramilitary connections and subsequently the site of a failed business enterprise, came on the market. They bought the building and began to renovate and occupy it piecemeal as money became available. It was one of the stages in this refurbishment that I witnessed on that first visit in May 2000.

The larger building is now a successful base for the range of activities drawn up through ongoing consultation between the FBO and potential users. The rooms manage to be both functional and inviting. The reception area and the restaurant are strikingly attractive. This has to do with more than bright colours and the smell of coffee. The staff and volunteers go about their work with a friendliness and warmth that, judging by the uptake, seem to have hit the right note with local people.

There is a sense that here is a group of people who mean business. They have after all taken up a considered position. They have made links on their own terms with the established Christian denominations, rejecting any identification with the labels 'Catholic' or 'Protestant', and opted for a fresh start with the New Church Movement. The record of development outlined above illustrates how they have shown themselves willing to take risks. They have been seen to be willing to make and to learn from mistakes. Their tenacity is plain. Throughout the last decade their respect for and confidence in the potential of the local community have been demonstrated and have brought positive response. Their faith requires them to see others as people rather than categories. Their lack of institutional freight allows a less encumbered approach to the question of what churches exist to do.

This basic question underpinned each stage of their progress to the Family Centre. It pressed itself upon the congregation back in 1990 and they took time together to lay out the nature and scope of the mission as they understood it. They identified three broad strands at that time – evangelism, reconciliation and social action. Within the third strand they singled out *jobs and families* for attention, both of which they believed to be areas of difficulty and pressure for local people. They invited one of their members with a background in overseas aid and development to facilitate the interest group on the social action strand. He is now the centre manager. The team that emerged represents an impressive concentration of energy, creativity and commitment.

Support from the CFC congregation seems to be genuine. A gap can open up when the activists leave the congregation behind. This is a danger that the elders have tried hard to combat. They work to keep everyone in the picture. A prayer support group takes time to reflect on all aspects of the centre and to follow through in a practical capacity. *It is seen as God's project, not a community minded splinter group.* The church members are encouraged to own the work, to make use of the facilities on offer, to get involved in a volunteer capacity. When the 'wee house' got going, church cell groups joined in with the pre-renovation work. The connection is real. *It's working. We're bursting at the seams at present, so it is a time to take stock again. We're not here just to keep doing the same thing. But we're not here to do things just because they're possible either. We have to know why we're doing it and it has to be within the areas we have identified as important – jobs and families.*

The best thing about Oasis was pinpointed as *seeing hope in people's lives*. This came from a staff member who knew unemployment from the inside, the accompanying loss of a sense of self, the times when he was *treated as a nobody. At Oasis people are treated as people. It's just natural.* He went on to describe how when the natural dignity of people is respected they begin to see themselves in a new light. *It even surprises them. And this enthuses and encourages us. Sometimes they ask questions about faith.*

The underpinning faith is crystallized in a verse from the New Testament. It is 1 John 3, v. 18, which reads 'let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action'. This is the mandate they take for their project, calling it love in action. When the team worked on a theological rationale they boiled down what was important to some points on a single sheet of paper. Their understanding of the doctrine of grace gives them a sense that their programme becomes a channel for outcomes beyond what they intend or imagine. All they profess to want is to be able to sustain activities that show the marks of releasing hope in people's lives. *After that, we're not after success as such. People keep coming. It's not all down to us. We serve and we leave the rest to*

*God. We're not into counting souls saved, though when someone asks about Christian faith as a result of seeing the way people are treated here we're delighted.*

In an area that is 96% Protestant, how far this love in action can reach out to bridge entrenched positions, especially when tensions rise, is a moot point. The year 2001 was a difficult one. Things were bad from early May with a pattern of frequent rioting close by and the murder of an Australian tourist. A fence had to be erected around a street on the interface area. Oasis joined in weekly talks between of local churches and two Protestant paramilitary groups. Two youth clubs, usually closed in the summer, were opened up to 4am nightly *for kids otherwise on the loose*. Programmes continued at Oasis, but *two people locked up rather than one. We want to build bridges, but we need to be careful. It's OK to go away somewhere, but within the local scene it can be dangerous. We are into a long process of trust building. It moves very slowly.*

It appears to be moving steadily amongst community workers. Significant contact across the divide has led to a real expertise in the creation of joint projects. One of these involved Oasis in work with the community association from a local Catholic enclave to train people in basic IT skills (up to NVQ level 2) to equip them to staff a call centre established in the area. Work placements were deliberately mixed to include Protestant and Catholic people. Oasis took the lead role in this cooperative project because at the time it had funding capacity that the other organisation did not have.

Cooperation like this is an outworking of the congregation's inclusive philosophy. It is a reflection of the serious cross community networking that goes on in the church itself. The church is organised on the cell model and the local cells have their own way of bedding in within their local area. Then there is a Sunday night forum once each month when the congregation hosts a meeting at which an invited speaker makes a presentation and engages in dialogue. In the past three years parties from across the whole political spectrum have been drawn in to these events, as have representatives from other groups like the Garvaghy Road residents. The programme, like the creative arts work with young people, sets out unapologetically to increase understanding, to open minds and to turn people into *agents of change*. The faith development course is open to people of any religious background and worship along with members of a Catholic church takes place regularly.

This project can now point to a bank of statistics on numbers of people in training, numbers trained and in work. It is probably true to say that the staff and volunteers take more satisfaction in the fact that training rooms are well equipped and perceived as non threatening. It is important to them that unemployed people are addressed individually and issues of confidence building, job search and interview skills are looked at with care. Each person's training and re-training options are discussed and advice and support offered on a personal basis.

'Preparation for employment' is one module of an education programme written specially for the Oasis project and accredited by the Open College Network. Another is 'Bridging the learning gap' through which some women have taken a step into life long learning. This module, like the course that enables parents to read successfully with their children and to choose the best material, takes the long view and lays down seeds of hope for future germination.

Work of this kind is difficult to measure. It is about confidence building, changing thought patterns, nurturing hope. So it is hard to make real for potential funding bodies

whose project based approach seeks specific outcomes. Oasis was *too busy at first for us to keep detailed records of what difference was being made*, but they have started what they call a *credibility file*. It reports that hearsay would indicate medium to high local ownership. (95% of their activists are local people). They are perceived now as well earthed in the locality (BBC got in touch at the time of street violence). Judging by the comments on the drop in area for children, the quality and turnover of stock in the re tog shop, the numbers in the restaurant on each of my visits, Oasis has established a reputation for friendliness, enthusiasm and high standards.

## **Profile C: Flax Trust**

### *Type*

Flax is a charitable trust with a twelve strong board that was born in a Catholic parish in the late 1970s. It is located in Ardoyne, a predominantly Catholic area in the north of Belfast that has seen several hundred sectarian murders in some of the most intense civil unrest in Northern Ireland.

### *Objectives*

Reconciliation is the long term underlying goal of this organisation and it seeks opportunity to bring together people with different viewpoints, Catholic and Protestant, community and professional, lay and religious, to develop and implement an appropriate strategy for social and economic regeneration within and beyond its locality. The mission statement of Flax Trust states that it exists for the relief of poverty, dependency and chronic unemployment and under-employment in Northern Ireland as well as the reduction and elimination of community tensions and religious prejudices engendered by the economic depression of the area.

### *Activities*

The trust oversees the manifold activities of a range of autonomous business and community organisations. On the business side, on-site live-in accommodation is part of the package for deprived young people undergoing training towards IT industry standards that the organisation's business school offers. Programmes are provided which will guarantee jobs for those in training. An employment facilitation project allows for long-term unemployed people (up to 59 years of age) to volunteer to enter a work preparation scheme. Open Learning resources encourage adults back to education. Two in-house internet servicing companies provide training, consulting and banking facilities otherwise unavailable to those with lower budgets. On the community and cultural side of the operation, there are craft units and an arts centre comprising theatre, dance studio and gallery which are used as vehicles for inter-community reconciliation. A drop-in centre offers programmes for adolescents and young adults perceived as being outside the main line in youth provision or 'not wanted by other clubs' in the area. A cross-community group oversees services to disabled people, single parents and senior citizens, including preparation and delivery of meals on wheels. A community magazine is produced monthly.

### *Buildings*

These activities, along with the administrative headquarters, are based in a former linen mill, purchased in 1977 and converted into units for the incubation of small businesses. It is situated at a notorious flashpoint on one of the many interfaces between Catholic and Protestant communities.

Beyond the central mill buildings, this FBO runs a shopping complex which includes a health centre incorporating a GP and practice nurse service, a dental surgery; a

women's programme; bereavement support; services for elderly people, respite for carers, and varied social activities. There is also a housing association. The community association with a group of locally elected street representatives, dating from the beginnings of Flax, constitutes a crucial arm of its work. Through a community house it provides advice on welfare benefits and housing and other problems. Other activities include a home safety and energy scheme for elderly people and low-income families, a cross-community environmental landscaping project, a housing improvement programme and local traffic calming measures. The association has cross community and cross border contacts. Its women's forum has brought out a book entitled 'Living with Poverty', written by women from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds.

#### *Participation*

On a daily basis over 1500 people are said to engage in the commercial, social, educational or cultural activities of this FBO, whether as employees, volunteers or clients. The founding director could do no more than estimate. Other estimations are indicative of the reach of this organisation: of the three hundred and twenty businesses incubated since its beginnings 60% were set up by Protestant people: of the five thousand people placed in employment through the trust's training programmes in that same time 50% were Catholic. Despite its size, larger than any other FBO in this study, it remains anchored in the local. Community participation and cooperation are ensured through a locally representative association. The community magazine, a 32 page local production, is said to reach some 10,000 readers at home and overseas each month. Projects are developed in response to the expressed needs of the community association and in consultation with professional, government and trust representation. Local people are included among board members. Local pride in the centre and ownership of its activities are high. There are 33 places for homeless families in this FBO's emergency housing units. The drop-in centre gives a place to 60 adolescents and young adults who are perceived as outside the main line in youth provision elsewhere. About 300 local people receive meals each week and 3,000 are registered at the health centre.

#### *Resourcing*

High too is the level of sophistication in public relations and ability to secure financial backing. With offices in Belfast, Dublin and New York, Flax draws the support of 63 funders from government departments, through British, Irish and American foundations to international religious organisations and many other bodies. From small early beginnings the trust has grown to become a significant player in the economics of the city of Belfast and beyond.

#### *Use of research*

Research has clearly played an increasingly important part in this rise to prominence. To take but one example, careful identification of need and documentation of indicators of deprivation are required in order to make the case for the kind of co-operative response represented by the fully fledged health centre brought into being by the trust.

#### *Linkages*

Co-operative links with bodies of all kinds are extensive. Partnerships have been entered into with statutory bodies; with health and social services in relation to the above health centre so that gaps in mainstream programmes may be plugged in this area of high deprivation: with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in connection with a housing improvement programme promoted by the community association. Partnerships have been formed with various large private sector organisations and

firms to tailor programmes in, for example, engineering and construction which guarantee jobs for those in the trust's training schemes. A partnership has been built with another FBO, the Salvation Army (SA) in order to make available supported housing units for elderly people and emergency and short term accommodation for homeless families and single women until they are resettled through the SA's rehabilitation and training programme. Over one hundred further new housing units are in the pipeline.

#### *Cross community dimension*

The trust cannot do other than reflect its majority Catholic context and beginnings. However it does give expression to a cross community dimension, from the religiously mixed body of people on its board to its joint work with the Salvation Army, from its facilitation of Protestant business entrepreneurs to its preparation and delivery of meals to all and any who need them.

### **Section 3. Social capital formation in FBOs**

Even a cursory reading of the profiles above shows that these FBOs are engaged in a spectrum of voluntary activity that goes far beyond traditional services for church members to include building local rootedness and pride in community life, enlarging channels for the empowerment of all citizens and contributing to partnerships with other agencies working for community revitalisation. The picture conveyed is one of what Albert Hirschman says 'is best described not as labor or work, but as striving' (Hirschman, 1984, p91), the effect of which is to blur the edges of any cost-benefit calculus. It is a social energy that transcends rational self interest and market transactions in order to promote social cooperation. Through the provision of support, training and other resources and the pursuit often of non-monetary goals, these FBOs are giving dignity and purpose to those who are connected with their endeavours.

In the case of Benmoe, a mainstream Protestant congregation (Profile A), the part of town in which it is located has problems associated with anti social behaviour, drug trafficking and intimidation, leading to the breakdown of social cohesion and community spirit. Sectarianism also contributes to an atmosphere in which one estate has become a place where few want to live. Local groups seem to be individually too weak to respond constructively. The Housing Executive is now demolishing dwellings instead of building them. Statutory services are perceived as having 'given up'. Far from isolating themselves, members of this congregation are seeking ways in which to engage with this situation. They have looked around for allies and are exploiting existing channels of communication with other churches and opening up to other potential linkages. In so doing they have demonstrated that they are no longer working for themselves alone. They have found new value in their own resources and have made clear their determination to put them at the service of the area. As a long-term commitment they are working towards a shared project of community building. What is envisaged, a number of houses for owner occupation built through Habitat for Humanity, means that people will have to be convinced that the neighbourhood is a good one in which to live. This in turn implies a serious attempt by this FBO and its allies to turn back the tide of social decline. In this context a process of trust building and investing in people is under way and the congregation's volunteers and money are at work through the pastoral care centre.

Oasis staff and volunteers (Profile B) are also engaged in long term trust building. As people who see themselves as having left behind Catholic and Protestant church stereotypes to join the New Church movement, they project an appreciation of and a sensitivity to the individuality of all those with whom they deal. In a predominantly Protestant part of Belfast that is struggling to recover from the near total loss of local jobs in shipbuilding and its associated trades, they are perceived as friendly and welcoming, not least because of the way in which they have been seen to go about establishing their presence in the neighbourhood. Their initial project came to nothing. They thought again and again they failed. But they were seen to learn from their failure and not to give up. Through the dialogue they developed with statutory bodies in the area, with local groups and individual people and with FBOs elsewhere they gathered information and became known for their low key listening approach. Thus they built up their own and others' confidence. They engaged with people in a non-threatening way to find out about their lives and about what might be possible to do together to improve their conditions. As they respected the humanity they had in common with those they addressed they found that trust began to grow.

Flax Trust (Profile C), by far the largest organisation in the study, emerged as a Catholic response to inter-community violence. Two of its founding members, a parish priest and a religious sister, intended that through the Trust the church should engage directly with the social and economic causes of intercommunity hatred and violence. Central to their minds were a concern to identify with and empower those in the parish whom they saw as both deprived and oppressed and a desire to bring about structural change in society. They began with a collection that became known as the 'Mars Bar Fund', so called because it asked of each household the price of a bar of chocolate each week. This mobilised enough volunteers to cover the parish, door to door, every week. It engaged the interest and the contribution of a huge proportion of the local population and through it they generated financial leverage in pursuit of their vision. Flax has now grown to the point where it is collaborating with other interests across Northern Ireland in the creation of a community bank. Thus, out of the resources already available in the parish, a community that had been politicised and unified by the experiences of the late 1960s and early 1970s, there emerged an organisation greater in range, scope and strength than any of the founders had foreseen.

Each one of these organisations has broken new ground as each congregation began to respond in its own way to the high level of social need in its immediate locality. If there is a developmental spectrum (from 'congregation' to 'not congregation') on which they may be placed, then Benmoe is clearly at a point just past the beginning. It is a recognisable congregation still, but one that has adopted what has been called the 'project' model of mission, delegating key priorities to a semi-independent organisation (Wells, 2001a). Two years in to the project, an appropriate and mutually beneficial distance is maintained. Yet without the congregational resources of funding and people the pastoral centre will founder. Oasis is at a point where, after a decade, the project has become independent, though it still has the active support of the congregation. The Family Centre has its own legal standing and its work is firmly established and it has attracted major funding. It would be likely to survive the loss of the church base. In its quarter century, Flax is at a point where it has developed a critical mass and momentum all of its own. Its community activities remain anchored in the local, but its business interests are now international and would not necessarily be identified in the public mind with any faith base.

Each organisation may be at a different point of the spectrum, may come from a different strand of Christian faith, may take a different form, engage in a different range of voluntary activity and work in a different setting. But each shares a certain common emphasis. Each is cultivating a sense of belonging to the wider community, has assessed or reassessed what it can offer to the community and has perhaps reached a renewed understanding of its dependence upon that community. In each an emphasis on community well being is central. Each is presenting its vision of hope for the community with which it is expressing solidarity. Each in its unique context has set out to identify what people need and the social and political issues affecting them. Each has attempted to maximise the potential for cooperation in and through meeting that need and addressing those issues. This is the weight that the idea of social capital, whether understood as metaphor or empirical reality, is meant to carry.

All of these organisations are contributing to social capital in the following ways. They are mobilising resources that might not otherwise be mobilised to address community problems. They are raising consciousness about community problems among people who would not otherwise be aware or engaged. They are creating linkages between social groups that would not normally exist. They are empowering social groups that normally have little influence (Allen Hays, 2001). Bonding, bridging and linking social capital are all in evidence, producing both club and public good.

The people of Benmoe congregation (Profile A), through their bonding social capital, have come together with a strong sense of identity and mission. Bridging social capital is also becoming important in their case as they begin to collaborate with churches and other organisations in the local partnership. They are finding support and negotiating shared understanding through horizontal linkages that are as real to them as the vertical structures of their denomination. This discovery has triggered a balance of bonding and bridging social capital that is enabling a growing respect between those within and those outside a church culture. Members of this congregation are willing to be exploratory, honest about failure and ready to improvise. In the relationships and patterns of trust that have developed through the pastoral centre, social capital is providing for residents of the neighbourhood a way in to cultural, human and economic capital (Schneider, 2001).

This is true also for Oasis (Profile B). In addition linking social capital has played its part in enabling a process of learning from the practice of more experienced faith based community development groups elsewhere in the UK. It has also brought into play significant funding that has in turn enabled new forms of social association and learning through the use of information technology. Through this and through fostering innovative recruitment practices on the part of some major employers with whom it has developed partnerships, it is using linking social capital to create bridging social capital between those who are excluded from and those who are rich in work and resources.

Flax (Profile C) has pushed even further with linking social capital enabling extensive commercial interests, a full blooded business incubation drive, work preparation schemes and training and support packages beamed towards those most in need. Its

move into the provision of housing along with the Salvation Army has made it a significant player in the field. Its creation of a shopping complex, with the added attraction of a health centre in an area hitherto badly served has provided a focal point of increased opportunity for local entrepreneurs. It has also arguably done something to mitigate a sense of injustice amongst people of the area and to enhance their self esteem. A determination to see justice and to combat alienation and despair underlay the beginnings of this FBO. The population of this part of Belfast perceived itself as marginalized. Bonding social capital helped them tackle their sense of exclusion and oppression through preserving culture and providing informal support mechanisms. It generated strong local institutions that encouraged civic participation and vigorous representation at City Hall level. As to bridging social capital, on both local community issues and on the wider business front the organisation has tried to make its cross cutting links more than just paper connections.

Congregations, the base groups of each of these three organisations, are made up of people from every stage of life. Over an individual's lifetime, different types of social capital may be important at different times. For example, in early childhood and frail old age, when physical and mental development or health is crucial, bonding social capital may be overwhelmingly important. In adult life, a combination of bonding and bridging social capital may be needed with an emphasis on bridging social capital at times of job search. Being able to acquire or access different types of social capital at different times in life may therefore be vital for an individual's quality of life (Halpern, 2002 p. 27). A congregation's shared belief system encourages social capital formation of both the bonding and bridging kind and may also include linking social capital. It allows members to communicate their ideas and make sense of common experiences in a way that facilitates joint action. As we have seen above, such action may both address local needs and issues and give expression to the congregation's values. And it is the 'articulation and enactment of values' that has been identified as perhaps the distinctive aspect of faith based organisations (Cameron, 2001).

The values that are nurtured in the faith tradition of the three FBOs described in this paper, relationship and mutuality, cooperation and trust are close to the core of the concept of social capital. Building social capital is not self consciously on the agenda of congregations, but when they come together for their religious purposes, they enter a space in which they are called to attend to the commitments and promises they make in relationships of mutual care and regard and to how they follow them through in daily life. One of the ways in which this call is conveyed is in the words and stories of scripture read aloud week by week. It is worth noting some of those most familiar to the Christian faith community. The command to the believer to love God and to love the neighbour as the self is perhaps one of the most familiar and powerful motors of bonding social capital formation (Mark 12; Kee, 1993). The extension of this, the assertion that for the believer, love of neighbour is a duty owed to God, has become universally familiar in the form of the story of the Samaritan, the outcast who took care of the half-dead stranger he met by chance (Luke 10; Kee, 1993). As a story of openness to the stranger and of generalised trust, it reinforces a degree of bridging social capital alongside existing bonding capital in the network of all those who hear it. That network is described in scriptural terms as one body with many members, the ideal church structure (Corinthians; Kee, 1993). The vision is of a network in which new people are incorporated and where all are valued regardless of role and all work together for the greater good. There are acknowledged norms of behaviour; there is authority and enforcement; gifts are recognised, shared and developed; there is capacity to grow, learn and adapt. This is a powerful evocation of bonding social

capital in the way that the parable of the Samaritan provides an example of the bridging kind (Pollitt, 2000).

Such language has an impact upon action. Consider 'regeneration', a word that is used in connection with neighbourhood renewal in the Policy Action Team remits (Home Office, 1999 & 2000) and is also familiar to members of faith communities for its theological heart. The church sponsored document 'Flourishing Communities' speaks of it as 'a spiritual concept which demands holistic renewal and change. Physical urban decay is mirrored and underpinned by hopelessness, rooted in individuals' and communities' lack of self esteem, sense of meaning and purpose in life' (Chester et al., 1999). Reflect upon work being done at the Benmoe project (Profile A). The people of the estate have heard outsiders speak of the intractable problems of the community and of regeneration in terms of what the estate lacks rather than of what they, the insiders, perceive it has. With negative language the only one in use, the community has come to see itself in terms of what is bad about it rather than in terms of pride in what is positive about its life. The Benmoe community worker and her volunteers have made a real impact through another understanding of regeneration. They have bypassed the professional assessment to accept and honour the reality of people's everyday lives and to speak the language of respect, affirmation and hope.

The language of hope is sustained in congregations through stories of compassion and loving relationship that are heard, studied and taught regularly and repeatedly. Empirical evidence from America suggests that it is 'in the theological teaching of most religions and on the shared and normative experience of most congregations and congregants' that activity to enhance the quality of life of others in the wider community is rooted and based (Cnaan, 1999, p 28). This teaching, as we have seen, encourages churches to engage with the world of disadvantaged people. As it bonds the members of churches together, it at the same time challenges them to build bridges to others, especially to those who are on the margins of society. When they rise to this challenge, as the profiles above demonstrate, they can be vehicles for bringing together people from different backgrounds, generations and classes into contact with each other. They can open a door to people who have been excluded elsewhere. When, in addition, they can learn to relate as one organisation within the wider community to others that have a part to play, they can become social capital networks of formidable reach, resilience and staying power.

It has been said that the real success of policies to promote human and social capital depends on the essential ingredients of partnerships, shared understandings and a culture of openness to learning and change. Hope too has its place. 'The Church is likely to have a role to play in regeneration programmes if it is recognised that it has consistently spoken the language of hope through perhaps lengthy periods of despair. It will continue to have a role to play after the financial investment has gone if it is able to recognise and face the almost inevitable reality of human weakness and sin without falling into disillusionment and cynicism' (Wells, 2001b).

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