Institute for Volunteering Research

Research Bulletin

Faith and voluntary action: community, values and resources

Introduction

The UK is home to a wide variety of faith communities, each of which has its own distinctive tradition of voluntary action. Indeed, as the research upon which this report is based shows, many of these communities and their institutions seem to depend almost entirely upon voluntary action for their survival: a large proportion of community members volunteer regularly and an even larger number occasionally.

For a variety of reasons, policy makers and practitioners are taking a greater interest in faith communities and the services they provide to their members. The UK government, for example, sees such communities as potentially valuable allies in tackling social exclusion, as they can provide access to some of the most marginalised groups in society. Therefore it is inviting faith communities to open up their services to other sections of the population, and to apply for statutory funding in the same way as other local welfare providers

For its part, the UK voluntary sector is keen to discover how far the services provided by faith communities complement or duplicate those provided by other voluntary and community organisations. It also wishes to include faith communities in local decision-making about community development.

This report is based on the findings of an exploratory study that looked at:

- how people in different faith communities volunteer
- what motivates them to volunteer
- how their volunteering is organised
- how their volunteering is resourced
- what the relationship is between faith communities and local networks.

What kind of volunteering?

Voluntary action within faith communities seldom conforms to the dominant Western concept of volunteering: that is, activity that is carried out through an organisation and where the distinction between volunteer and beneficiary is clear. Instead, faith-based volunteering is often informal, evolving spontaneously out of local groups or congregations, and shows a strong bias towards mutual aid.

Our research provides no evidence that different belief systems give rise to different kinds of voluntary action. In fact, the volunteering carried out within the various faith-based communities studied has many features in common: individuals help each other out or come together in groups to tackle local issues – usually spontaneously, as an accepted part of everyday life, and only occasionally through more organised services.

The types of volunteering observed can be divided into four broad categories:

1. Routine activities
2. Welfare services
3. Festival-based volunteering
4. Responses to specific events

Routine activities. Certain regular voluntary activities help to give a structure to the life of the faith community. These include: making food offerings to co-religionists; cleaning and maintaining the place of worship; fundraising; organising cultural activities (such as language classes for young people); and running clubs (for example, martial arts, football or the arts).

Welfare services. Some of the services provided within faith communities are more specifically welfare-orientated: for example, organising care, meals, befriending and social activities for older members; running luncheon clubs for single people; and giving advice on, say, immigration or healthy eating. Some of these services are also made available to the wider local community: for example, one Buddhist community offered free meditation classes.

Festival-based volunteering. In most faith communities, however, the largest mobilisation of volunteers occurs at festival time. People are involved in a range of tasks, such as preparing food, organising special services, decorating places of worship, arranging fundraising events and raising awareness of the meaning of the festival.

Responses to specific events. Many faith communities are involved in responding to crises such as earthquakes, floods, famines and cyclones. They may focus on helping their own international faith community, or they may help other groups of affected people.

The value base of volunteering

There are also similarities across faith communities in the values that inspire their members' voluntary action.

All the faiths studied expect their adherents to give money and, to a lesser extent, time. Respondents said that they try to live according to certain guiding principles, which might be summarised as follows:

- to help others by giving time and/or money
- to live according to the spirit of one's religion and the values it proposes
- to act selflessly
- to help people in need
- to be concerned about social injustice and inequality.

Most members of faith communities view their voluntary action as 'doing God's work' – usually interpreted as providing practical help – rather than as an opportunity to attract others to the faith. Explicit proselytising is rare.

The motivations to volunteer

Volunteering by members of faith communities seems to be motivated by a combination of factors. Individuals may, for example, feel a desire to help meet local need or to pass on the practices of their faith – or they may be inspired by a sense of duty to the international

community of their faith. There is also the tendency for people of the same faith (described by respondent as the 'common core') to come together to socialise, to help each other out and to support their places of worship. Also, community leaders and local philanthropists often encourage members of the faith community to get involved.

The motivation to volunteer can also be conditioned by the following external factors:

Environmental

- How long the community has been established in its current setting
- Whether the community feels it is 'mainstream' or 'minority'
- The geographical cohesiveness of the community
- The extent of deprivation in the neighbourhood where the community lives

Socio-economic

- The resources and number of people in the community
- The socio-economic status of members of the community
- The propensity to give in that particular community

How is the voluntary action organised?

The most characteristic ways of organising voluntary activity within faith-based communities are:

- *Informal or associational groupings*, where people who share a faith, ethnic identity or gender support each other and take part in activities together, but are not organised into the sort of structures that are typical of the wider UK voluntary sector, or

- *Individual-centred*, where a person has the confidence or sense of belonging to move around communities and get things done by themselves or through others, but does not operate as, or through, an organisation..

How exactly faith communities organise themselves depends on factors such as how large the community is, whether it is working locally, nationally or internationally, and whether it is providing formal or informal assistance. In all these activities, all faiths depend to a much greater extent on volunteers than on paid workers – and some work only through volunteers.

The problem of resources

In order to provide the services described above, most faith communities have to depend upon their own resources: in other words, their own volunteers and the money they can acquire through donations from community members and collections at religious festivals. The resources they obtain from elsewhere – such as grants from local authorities, charitable foundations and regeneration agencies – are never sufficient to support the whole organisation.

In fact, with only occasional exceptions, the faith communities studied seem to have few external links of any kind, either with local or national government or with the voluntary sector. They know little about the sources of support available to the mainstream voluntary sector and often lack the contacts and the confidence to find out.

In view of this isolation, the fact that government is encouraging faith communities to seek funding to run local services should raise some concerns. Although such communities have

plenty of experience of supporting their own members, they have traditionally provided these services on a voluntary basis – so how would government funding affect their voluntary nature, their spiritual mission and their faith identity? Offering them public resources might turn out to be a mixed blessing. Some communities may turn down the offer, preferring to retain their faith identity and their distinctive approach to voluntary action.

But even if a faith community does not want statutory support, its choice should be based on knowledge rather than ignorance. So public agencies, and perhaps local voluntary sector umbrella bodies as well, need to reach out to faith-based communities and show them how they can – if they wish – secure more external resources.

Some other question marks

There are other question marks about how faith communities can be involved in delivering mainstream social welfare. For example:

- Some faith groups work solely for their own members, whereas others work for the wider local community. In view of the current campaign to encourage communities to work together more closely, how can the faith groups that wish to build bridges be helped to do so? Do communities need to bond within themselves before they can have the confidence to build bridges?

- Community practitioners have drawn attention to the fragility of religious pluralism in the UK. Conflict could arise between a faith-based community and a secular community, or between two communities that have what their members see as competing value systems. How can voluntary action between communities help to cultivate a shared sense of belonging and an understanding of each other's values?

- Many communities have specific roles for men and women, leading to clearly demarcated areas of activity. There may be pressure to challenge the traditions of some minority cultures in order to create 'bridging' as well as 'bonding' social capital.

The research

This report is based on 25 interviews with leaders and active members of faith communities carried out between November 2001 and March 2002 in Leicester, Liverpool and Luton. The following faiths were represented: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism and Sikhism.

To order your copy of the full report by Priya Lukka and Michael Locke with Andri Sorteri-Proctor, which is fully referenced (78 pages, £12.50 including p+p), or for more information about the Institute for Volunteering Research or the National Centre for Volunteering call 020 7520 8900 or e-mail instvolres@aol.com or visit www.ivr.org.uk

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