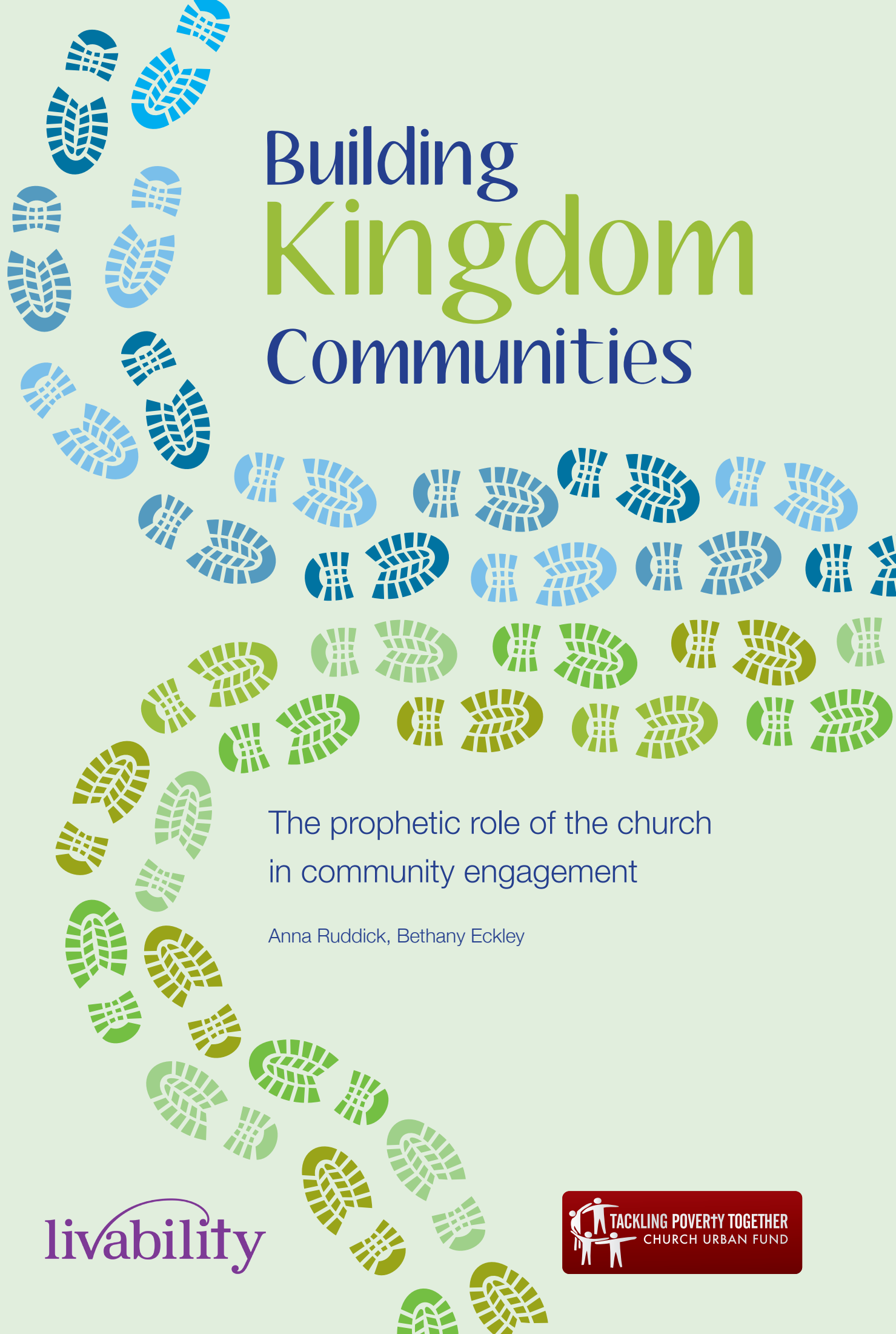




# Building Kingdom Communities

The prophetic role of the church  
in community engagement

Anna Ruddick, Bethany Eckley

*livability*



# Building Kingdom Communities

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# Introduction



The church<sup>1</sup> is called to join with God in his mission to see the kingdom come in our world. This joining with God means building *kingdom communities*: breaking down barriers between people and enabling mutually transforming relationships shaped by reconciliation, sacrificial love, friendship and grace.

As we seek to live out our faith, churches are getting involved in all kinds of activity in their communities. This is an invitation to theological reflection on your community engagement. It follows a previous report, *Fullness of Life Together: Reimagining Christian engagement in our communities*, which examined different approaches to bringing about change in communities.<sup>2</sup> In it we questioned the dominance of a service delivery model of engagement and explored two alternatives, asset-based community development and co-production, which, we argued, are more resonant with the Christian tradition.

Here, we pick up the theological threads raised in *Fullness of Life Together* and explore their practical implications. Our intention is to help those who are developing activities in their community, to reflect theologically on their practice, whether they are already active or seeking to engage for the first time.

To do this, we take a practical theology approach; we begin by examining our experiences and the way they shape our ideas about God, then reflect theologically on these experiences alongside scripture and tradition. Each section begins with a short ‘theology in practice’ reflection which offers a practical example of the ideas and issues addressed. Our hope is that these stories will remind you of your own experiences in ministry. By considering real life experiences alongside our theology, this reflective process can help us to ensure that our actions in community ministry are a true reflection of our beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this reflection, when we refer to ‘the church’, we have in mind the full spectrum of Christian communities of faith rather than any specific denomination or organisation.

<sup>2</sup> Published by Livability and Church Urban Fund in 2015. To read the full report visit: <http://www.cuf.org.uk/fullnessoflifetogether> or <http://www.livability.org.uk/fullnessoflifetogether>



This reflection has three distinct phases.

**Seeing more clearly.** If we are to reflect theologically, we first need to understand ourselves and our groups, organisations and churches with as much clarity as possible. Having an awareness of the different experiences and cultures which have shaped our ideas about God, and our community engagement, can prepare us to listen actively to people who are different from ourselves.

**Listening more deeply.** Having gained a truer picture of ourselves and our situation, we turn to careful listening, particularly to different or alien perspectives. The tendency of God to reveal himself in and through human experience, most powerfully in the incarnation itself, calls for careful discernment, and an expectation that God may well be audible in the various voices of culture and community around us.

**Living differently.** The final phase is to begin reshaping our activity in accordance with what we have seen and heard.



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3 If you find the processes and practical exercises in this paper helpful, we recommend Laurie Green's book *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology*, (2009) as a way to take them further.



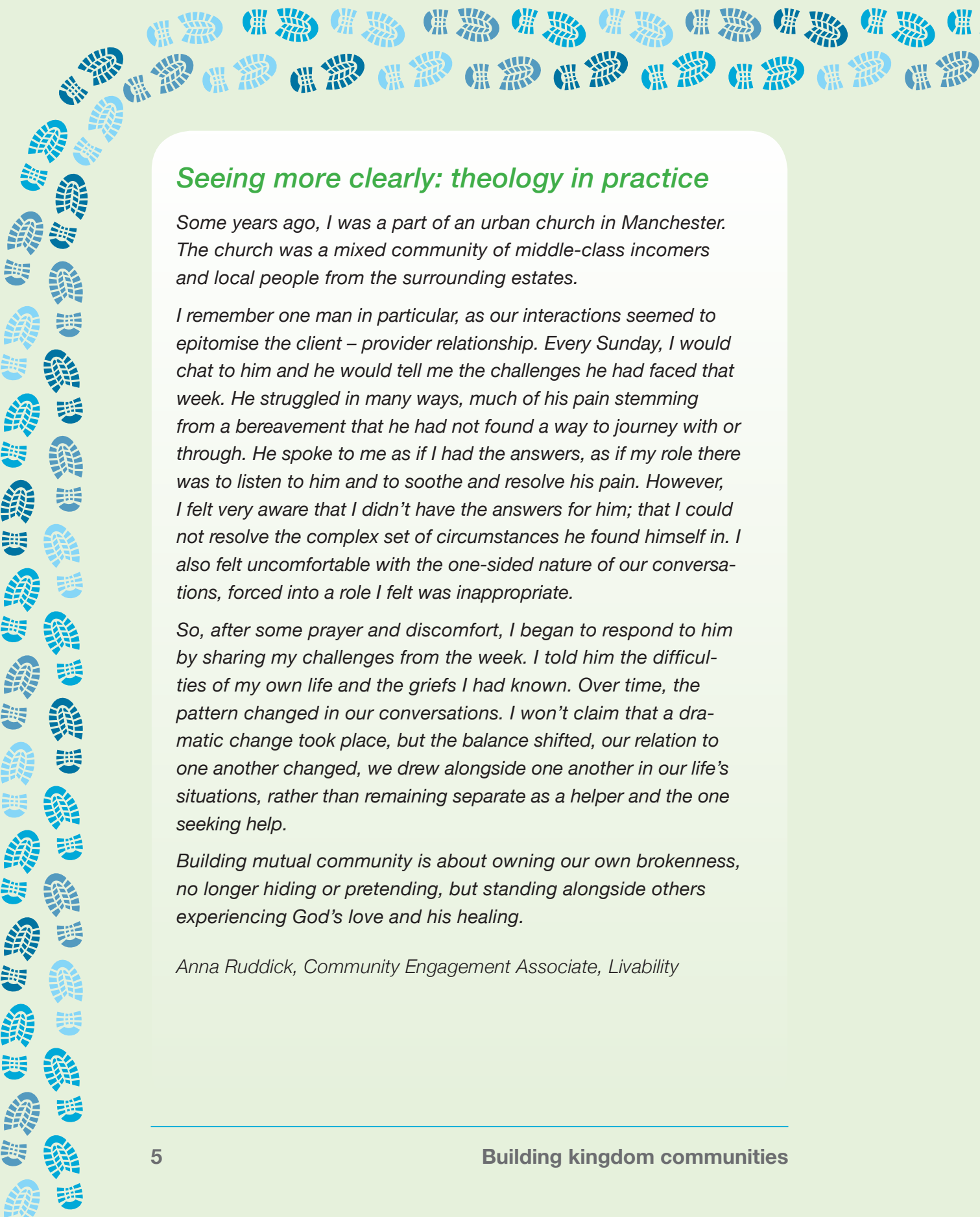
These three stages can be seen as a cycle, a process of theological reflection or, as Laurie Green calls it, ‘doing theology’.<sup>3</sup> After each stage in the process, we suggest a practical group activity which could be done with the staff and volunteers involved in your community activities, at, for example, a team meeting, missional community gathering or volunteer training session. These ‘doing theology’ exercises are intended to help your team reflect on the theology which underpins your community engagement.<sup>4</sup>

We offer this reflection and these activities in the belief that seeing more clearly, listening more deeply and adjusting our practices according to what we have learnt will further enable the church to build kingdom communities, and so live out its prophetic role in our society.



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<sup>4</sup> In their book, *Talking About God in Practice*, Cameron et al identify the ‘espoused theology’ of a local church as the theology contained in the church’s articulation of its beliefs, and the ‘operant theology’ of that church as the theology which is embedded in its practices. The difference between these theologies can be an invisible source of tension within a church community and, therefore, enabling discussion of the theological convictions perceived to be underpinning your engagement, and their implications with all those involved, can provide important ground on which to work and grow together. Cameron, Bhatti, Duce, Sweeney, & Watkins. *Talking about God in Practice*. (2010) London: SCM. p53.

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## Seeing more clearly: theology in practice

*Some years ago, I was a part of an urban church in Manchester. The church was a mixed community of middle-class incomers and local people from the surrounding estates.*

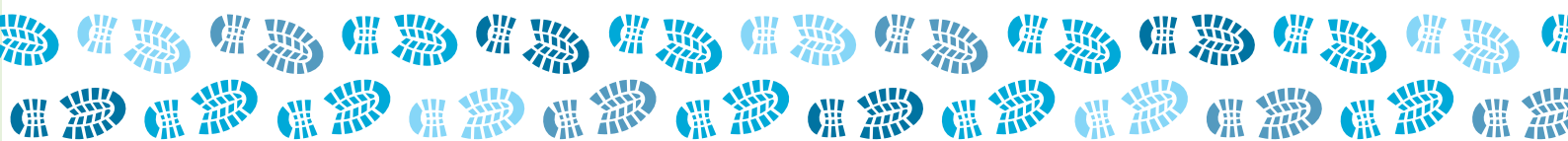
*I remember one man in particular, as our interactions seemed to epitomise the client – provider relationship. Every Sunday, I would chat to him and he would tell me the challenges he had faced that week. He struggled in many ways, much of his pain stemming from a bereavement that he had not found a way to journey with or through. He spoke to me as if I had the answers, as if my role there was to listen to him and to soothe and resolve his pain. However, I felt very aware that I didn't have the answers for him; that I could not resolve the complex set of circumstances he found himself in. I also felt uncomfortable with the one-sided nature of our conversations, forced into a role I felt was inappropriate.*

*So, after some prayer and discomfort, I began to respond to him by sharing my challenges from the week. I told him the difficulties of my own life and the griefs I had known. Over time, the pattern changed in our conversations. I won't claim that a dramatic change took place, but the balance shifted, our relation to one another changed, we drew alongside one another in our life's situations, rather than remaining separate as a helper and the one seeking help.*

*Building mutual community is about owning our own brokenness, no longer hiding or pretending, but standing alongside others experiencing God's love and his healing.*

*Anna Ruddick, Community Engagement Associate, Livability*

# Seeing more clearly



As Christians, our theology is part of our worldview, the set of beliefs, assumptions or understandings we each have about how the world works and what is true. In taking a practical theological approach, we recognise that our worldview, including its theology, can be either confirmed or challenged by our experience (what happens to us) and our practice (what we choose to do).

The journey of discipleship is to have our worldview increasingly shaped by God's 'Big Story'.<sup>5</sup> However, as members of communities and nations, our worldviews are usually a mixture of our Christian tradition, the cultural assumptions of our contemporary society and our individual contexts.

Western, educated, late-modern societies have a very particular worldview. In his recent book, Samuel Wells argues that in our Western societies the central problem of human existence is seen as 'mortality', which he defines as the limitation of life (by duration but also by illness, disability, poverty, limited natural resources etc.). As medical science has progressed and western societies have become more prosperous, many limitations on human life have been overcome. Over time, Wells suggests, our expectations have shifted from accepting limitation to finding solutions or 'fixing'.<sup>6</sup> Within this context, poverty is understood primarily as deficit – a lack of skills, knowledge or resources needed to overcome limits. Poverty, along with other social issues, then becomes a problem that needs to be fixed, something that requires outside intervention and services, in order to bring the necessary resources and expertise to impoverished people.<sup>7</sup>

The outworking of this 'mortality' worldview can be seen in the service delivery model that has become so dominant in our society. According to this model, trained staff or volunteers deliver services to meet the specified needs and problems of their users; for example, doctors treat the sick,



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5 For more on the reading of the Bible as a big story, see Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen's *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our place in the biblical story* (2014) Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

6 Wells, S. *Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*. (2015) Chichester: Blackwell. pp36-38.

7 Wells, S. *Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*. (2015) Chichester: Blackwell. p46.



social workers care for the vulnerable, qualified experts offer financial advice. At its heart, this model is about power, as those with positions of expertise or authority identify problems and find efficient ways to fix them, offering solutions to help others overcome their limits.

While there is a place for expertise and resources in responding to poverty, our argument in *Fullness of Life Together* is that recent church-based social action has been unduly influenced by the ‘mortality’ worldview and its outworking in the service delivery model. In many cases, this social action activity is playing an important role, meeting immediate needs, raising awareness of issues of injustice and bringing people together who may not otherwise have met. However, we suggest that these benefits point prophetically towards the ultimate goal of building community and that, by focusing solely on replicable models of service delivery, this deeper, more holistic task might be missed.

Here, we want to highlight three themes which demonstrate the influence of this worldview on our theology and show how it can be problematic for our community engagement.

**Firstly, a conception of the lostness of the world.** Missional church practitioners Frost and Hirsch recently invited the church to ‘recover the idea of the church as a missions movement in a hostile and unreceptive empire’.<sup>8</sup> This is just one example of the way in which, across the whole church, the world is often seen by Christians as characterised by sin and brokenness, simply in need of redemption.

**This leads to the second feature of this theological worldview: a clear distinction made between ‘us’, the saved, and ‘them’, the unsaved.**

This creates an insider and outsider dynamic with a built-in power imbalance. We, the church congregation, have something that they, the community, need. This may be food, clothing, childcare or faith in Jesus; whatever it is, this creates an unequal relationship.

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<sup>8</sup> Frost, M. & Hirsch, A. *The Shaping of things to come: Innovation and mission for the twenty-first century church*. (2013) Grand Rapids: Baker Books. p121.



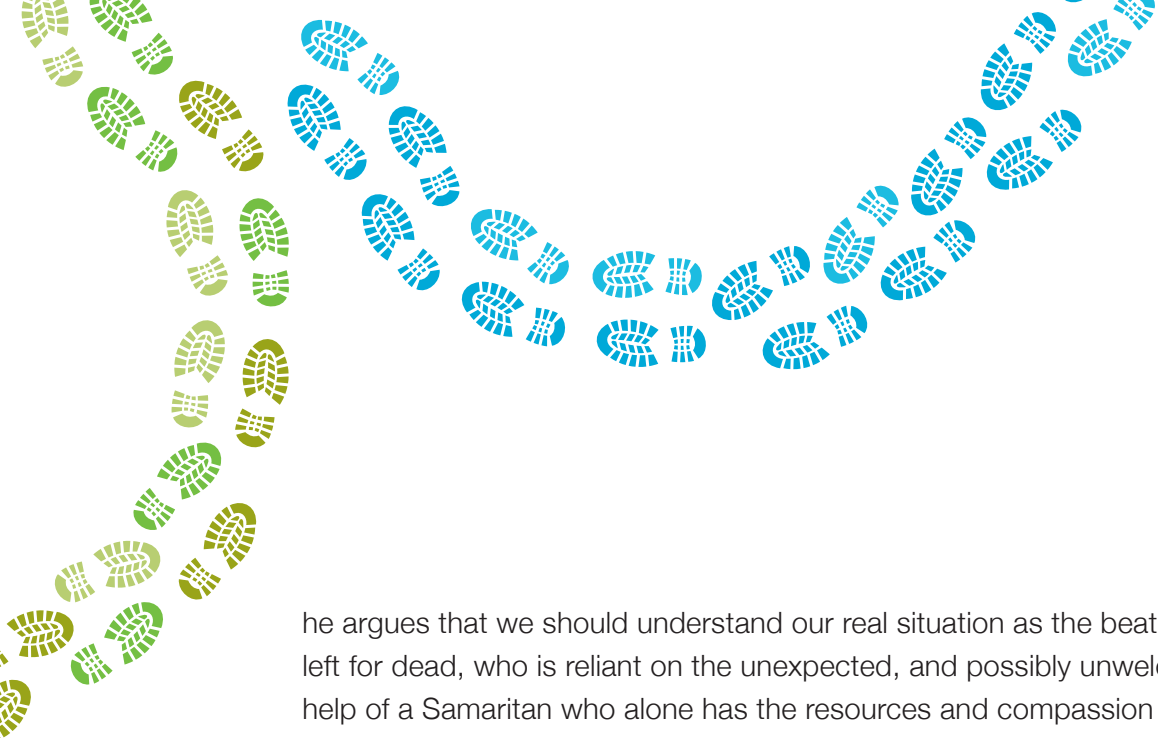


The combination of a belief in the lostness of the world with the clearly defined ‘us’ and ‘them’ results in a reluctance, or fear, to admit our own need or brokenness within the church, and a reluctance to accept, or simply an obliviousness to, the gifts our world may have to offer to us. It establishes a similar power dynamic to the one within a service delivery approach in which, at its most extreme, professionals ‘save’ service users.

***The third problematic feature of the service delivery theological worldview is its instrumental perspective*** which prioritises an efficiently functioning system over relationships. The modern focus on technological advance has contributed to widespread objectification of people as problems or tasks which need resolving, or as the means to an end in a system or process. Colloquialisms such as “I’m just a cog in a machine” express our discomfort with this sense of objectification. Within contemporary Christian practice, this has been seen in the focus on programmes, business management strategies and packaged approaches to discipleship, church growth and social engagement. Prioritising these approaches, to the exclusion of alternatives, risks communicating, even implicitly, that healing and redemption come through processes and procedures, rather than through relationship with God and others.

Seeing ourselves more clearly involves perceiving the worldview(s) of those around us, and how they may have influenced our own understanding of the world, our activities and even our theology. To what extent has our work in the community been influenced by a service delivery framework that focuses on ‘fixing’? What underlying beliefs about ourselves and others shape our relationships with those around us? Are we the fixers or the ones that need to be fixed? Only once we have considered these questions, can we move on, allowing God’s alternative story to reshape our thinking and practice.

Wells uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to challenge contemporary Christians in their responses to poverty. He asks us to consider again who Jesus is talking to, and who we might identify with in the story. Rather than see ourselves as the Good Samaritan, able to bring help to those in need,



he argues that we should understand our real situation as the beaten man, left for dead, who is reliant on the unexpected, and possibly unwelcome, help of a Samaritan who alone has the resources and compassion to bring him salvation.<sup>9</sup>

This reading of the story cuts to the heart of our service delivery approaches to community engagement. If we are the beaten man, we have nothing to give and are reliant on the resources and compassion of others to help us in our need. This perspective directly addresses the unequal power dynamic in the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide mentioned above, bringing balance to our community engagement. It reminds us that, just as we may have resources to offer, we are all fundamentally in need of the rescue that only Jesus can bring. It is also a challenge, inviting us to realise that Jesus may bring our salvation in the most unlikely of forms; in the case of this parable, in the compassion of a despised Samaritan.

In seeking to see more clearly, we have considered the western, late-modern worldview, and suggested the ways in which it has influenced our theology and practice. The Christian church in the UK is extremely diverse and, inevitably, the theological worldview described above will not apply universally, or to the same degree, across the country. However, we offer these as themes that will, to some extent, be recognisable for the majority of Christians. To help you and your team relate the ideas in this section to your own experiences of community engagement, try this ‘doing theology’ activity focused on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

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9 Wells, S. *Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*. (2015) Chichester: Blackwell. pp93-94.



## Doing Theology

### finding ourselves in the story

**Read together the parable of the Good Samaritan,  
Luke 10:25-37.**

Share, in a group, an experience in which you were really in need. What did you do? Who, if anyone, did you turn to? Why?

Discuss your responses to the idea of you being the man on the road and not the Good Samaritan.

How easy or difficult do you find it to ask for help? How do you respond to the idea that others can see your need and might offer you help without you having asked?

How are these dynamics played out in your community activity?

Who gives help and who receives it in your setting?

Who asks for help?

Does anyone offer help to people who haven't yet asked for it?

If you accept that you, alongside others in your community, are the man on the road, how might this change the way you relate to your community?



## *Listening more deeply: theology in practice*

*I recently worked with a church to do a listening exercise. Based on an estate in Birmingham, the church wanted to support people who were being affected by issues of low pay, unemployment and welfare reform. Instead of moving forward with an action plan, the church wanted first to listen to local people - to hear their stories, learn about the challenges they face, and understand more about how they cope with those challenges.*

*A small group from the church held some in-depth interviews with local residents, using participatory tools to stimulate conversation and gather information.*

*The group felt they had learned a great deal by listening. They had seen, first-hand, the way in which strong relationships and support networks can prevent one shock or one unexpected event from spiralling into many more. They had learned more about, and been very struck by, people's capacity to cope with, and manage on, very low incomes, and they had understood more about the lack of local support services such as childcare or benefits/debt advice.*

*Most importantly, they had experienced for themselves the importance of listening. Taking the time to sit and listen to people's stories is a powerful statement for a church to make, one that says people are important and that every single person has strengths, resources and assets they can share with others. Understanding this had been a real encouragement for them and would shape their work in the future.*

*To read more about this exercise, you can download the report *Listen Up! Connecting Churches and Communities through Listening* at [www.cuf.org.uk/research/listen](http://www.cuf.org.uk/research/listen)*

*Bethany Eckley, Director of Research and Policy, Church Urban Fund*

# Listening more deeply



The re-reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan advocated above emphasises that God may not be found where we expect. Therefore, the second phase of our reflection is to listen more deeply, particularly to the voices of those we may not normally hear, in order to gain greater insight into the character of God, his work in the world, and all that he may be saying to us.

During the twentieth century, voices within the Christian tradition increasingly called for this kind of deep listening. Arising from the Liberation Theology of Latin America, a range of contextual and political theologies from across the world have begun to influence Western ideas about God. These theologies carry two defining convictions; firstly, that God is at work in the world and in all people, and secondly, that God is most likely to be found at the margins. These convictions encourage a listening approach in ministry, and remind us to listen, particularly, to the voices of those experiencing marginalisation or oppression.

In the UK, this trend has contributed to the emergence of urban theology. Urban theology seeks to listen for, and articulate, a Christian spirituality which critiques the injustices of our society, and takes seriously the experiences of people suffering poverty and marginalisation in British inner-city or urban estate communities.<sup>10</sup> While we now work more broadly, both Livability and Church Urban Fund have their roots in this urban theological tradition.

Drawing on our experience as organisations, we suggest that the insights of these contextual theologies can help to energise and perpetuate a more relational and embedded approach to our communities than the service delivery model can achieve.

So what do we learn when we listen to our marginalised communities?

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<sup>10</sup> To read more about Urban Theology, we recommend the work of Ann Morisy (*Journeying Out*, 2006; *Bothered and Bewildered* 2011); Ken Leech (*Through our Long Exile* 2001); John Vincent (Christ in the City 2013); Laurie Green (*Blessed are the Poor?* 2015) and Chris Shannahan (*Voices from the Borderland: Reimagining cross-cultural urban theology in the 21st century* 2010).



***Firstly, we are reminded that every person is made in the image of God***

and that the world, therefore, is not completely lost, waiting for us to bring it salvation. Rather, God is at work in the world ahead of us, and he works through the most unlikely people.

The belief that every human person is made in the image of God is among the earliest teachings of the Christian church, confirmed by the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. However, due to differing understandings of the impact of sin on humanity, there have been some, throughout Christian history, who have argued that this image was lost at the fall and, as a result, non-Christians do not bear the image of God until they come to faith in Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this, there is a clear understanding, both in scripture and in the Christian tradition, that this image was not lost; rather that it is intrinsic to our humanity.<sup>12</sup> Human persons, whether Christian or not, are made in God's image and, therefore, have the potential to display elements of his character.<sup>13</sup> If this is the case, every person, of any faith or none, has something to teach us about God, whether they are conscious of it or not, and has potential for great good in the world.

Theologians debate the precise nature of the image of God in humanity, but we might ask the question 'what reminds you of God about a person?' First, that they are a person at all, a sentient being with a sense of self, a moral code (of whatever kind) and a presence, able to connect with others in community. Second, that they may exhibit goodness and kindness, may be loving, sacrificial, generous, and truthful. The attributes of God which we see in scripture are also played out around us in our communities, both in large and small ways.

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11 At the Reformation, Luther argued, against the stance of the established church, that the image of God in humanity was completely lost at the fall. This resulted in a divergence of opinion on whether the image of God is still present in those who have not found faith in Jesus. Milne. B. ***Know the Truth 2nd Edition (1998)*** Leicester: Inter-varsity Press. pp119-120.

12 For example, Gen 9:6 and Jas 3:9 in which the language of image is used of the whole of humanity.

13 Bruce Milne ***Know the Truth 2nd Edition (1998)*** Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, pp119-120.

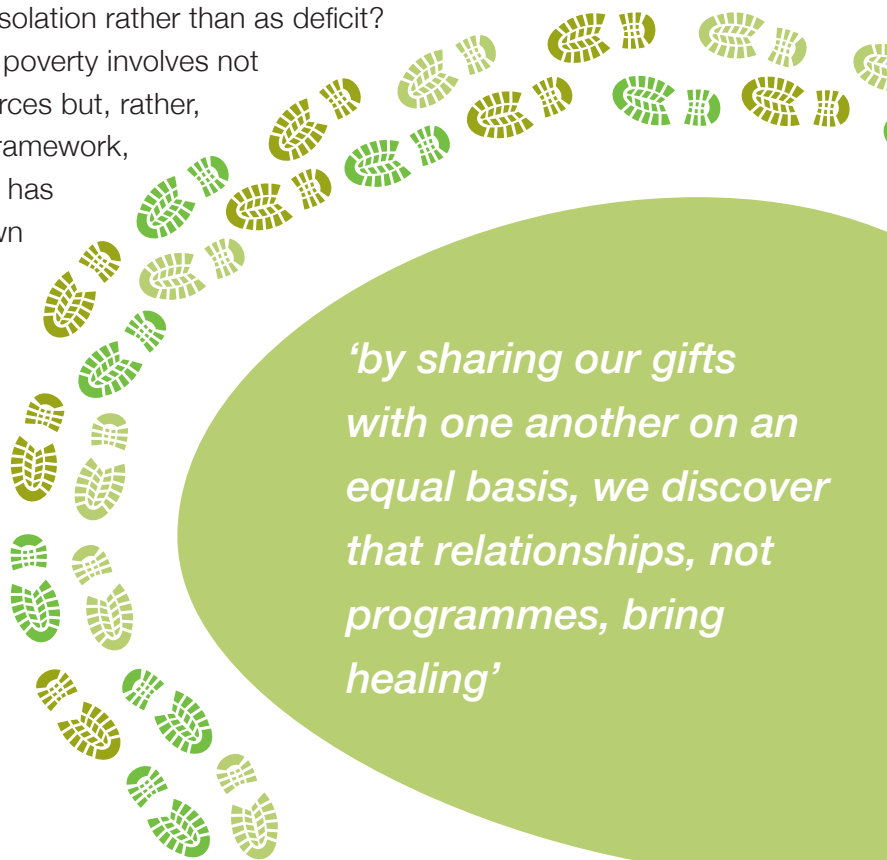


**Secondly, we learn that there is no ‘us’ and ‘them’**, that we all carry brokenness but that, equally, we all have gifts, most significantly our unique selves, to share. Having seen ourselves more clearly, in the previous section, as those in need of compassion, and by acknowledging the image of God in every human person, we find that the divisions between people can be broken down. Instead, we can come together as equals, to strengthen and resource our communities, with each person bringing their gifts and receiving what they need in the course of mutual participation in a shared goal.

**Thirdly, by sharing our gifts with one another on an equal basis, we discover that relationships, not programmes, bring healing.**

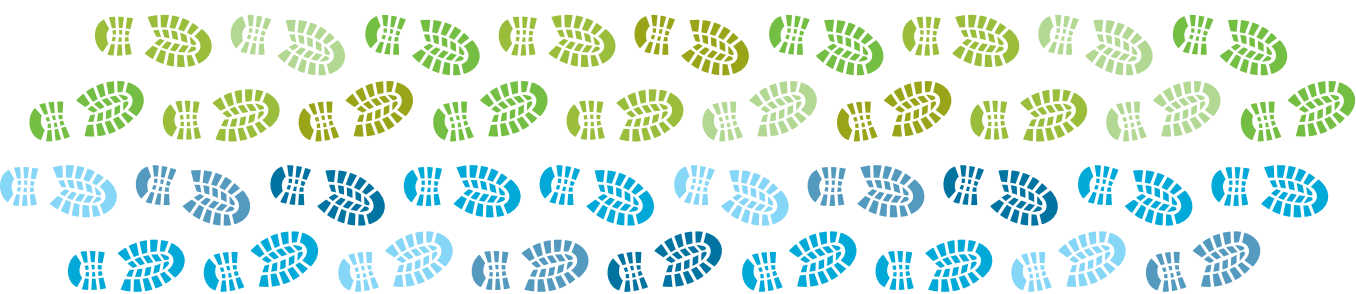
Amid the many factors that cause and sustain poverty, what if, as Wells suggests, we define poverty primarily as isolation rather than as deficit?

From this perspective, tackling poverty involves not fixing it with new skills or resources but, rather, restoring relationships. In this framework, therefore, a community already has most of what it needs for its own redemption; the answers lie in one another.<sup>14</sup> Taking this more relational understanding of poverty, coupled with the conviction that every person has gifts to offer, most significantly their very self, we can begin to envisage a community in which the strength of relationships enables needs



*‘by sharing our gifts with one another on an equal basis, we discover that relationships, not programmes, bring healing’*

<sup>14</sup> Wells, S. *Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*. (2015) Chichester: Blackwell p43.



to be met and resources to be shared. Therefore, programmes may prove helpful, but only where they serve the overarching aim of building and sustaining healthy relationships.

In *Fullness of Life Together*, we indicated that our reflection was driven by a sense of Christian faith as offering a vision of ‘fullness of life’ drawn from our reading of John 10:10. The current focus on wellbeing among statutory services, for example in the 2014 Care Act, demonstrates a new orientation toward fullness of life in the public and third sectors. Wellbeing is taken to refer to the holistic flourishing of a person or community, and acknowledges the significance of relationships, work, spirituality and self-expression for human happiness.<sup>15</sup> This marks the shift in contemporary thinking away from overdependence on service provision which we identified in *Fullness of Life Together*, in part giving rise to asset-based community development and co-production as models for engagement that are more likely to result in this holistic wellbeing.

Within Christian theology, the notion of wellbeing is often pictured as shalom. Nicholas Wolterstorff defines shalom as ‘the human being dwelling at peace with all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature.’<sup>16</sup> This describes a holistic peace in which each individual, the community as a whole, and the natural world flourish within the kingdom of God.

We have, therefore, a vision of human flourishing which is sought by statutory and third sector services; and we must play our part in bringing this vision to pass, by embodying it in our local expressions of church, mission teams and ministry projects. This is no less than seeing the kingdom come.



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<sup>15</sup> Care Act (2014). <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/section/1> accessed 16/9/2015.

<sup>16</sup> Wolterstorff, N. *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* Grand Rapids Wm. B. Eerdmans 1983 69-71



## Doing Theology

‘You know who you remind me of...’

**Agree with your team that, at your next session of community activity, you will each do two things:**

- 1 Pay attention to notice one instance where something of God’s character is seen.**
- 2 Ask someone attending that activity what they love to do/ know a lot about that they could teach someone else.**

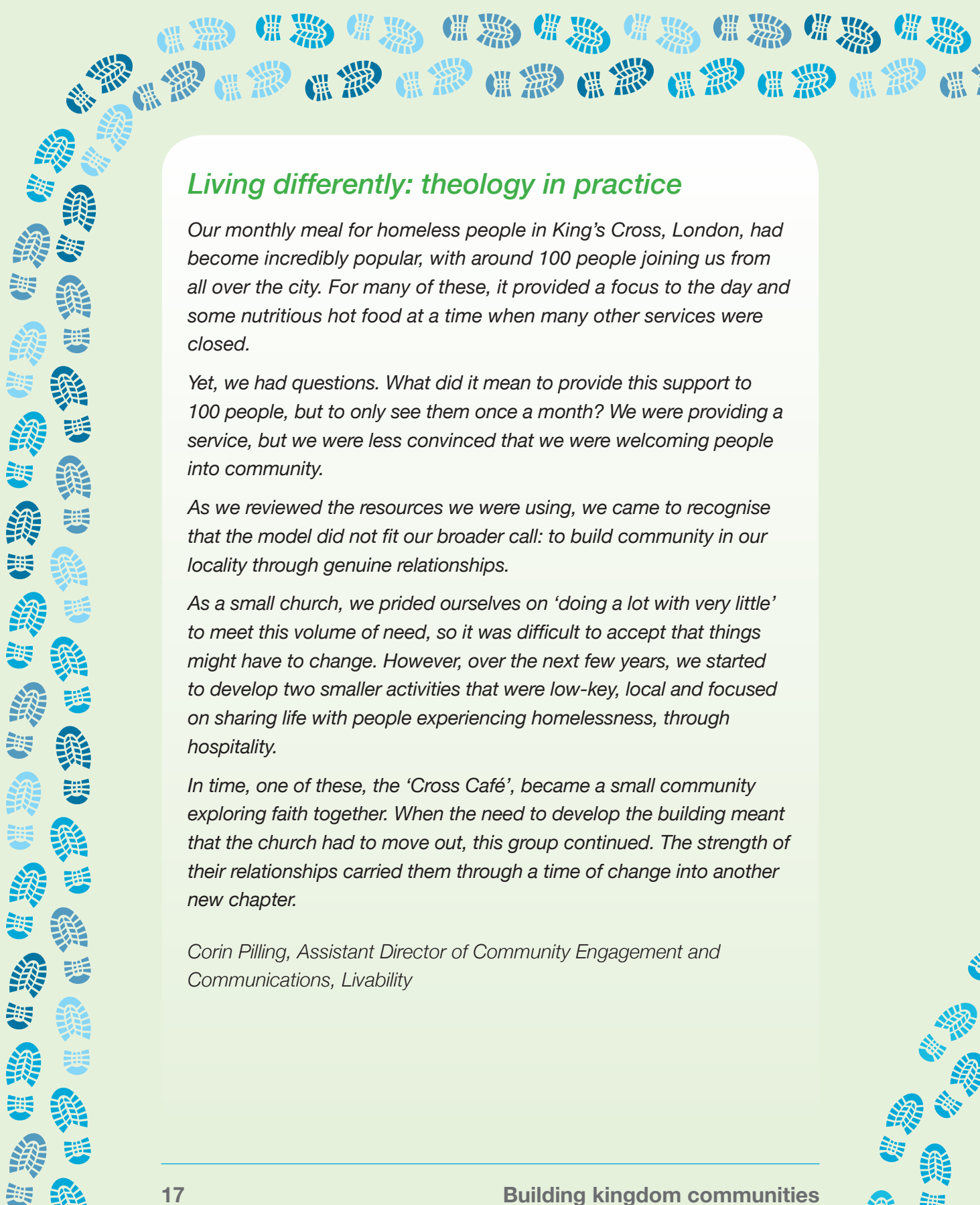
(If you are not currently doing any specific community engagement activity or don’t have a team, gather a few friends and do the same exercise over a couple of weeks in your neighbourhood. Encourage people to talk to their neighbours or others they bump into in local shops or the pub.)

Encourage everyone to note down what they heard and observed after the session.

Meet to discuss what you learned. Was there anything that surprised you or made you uncomfortable? Talk about that discomfort and try to understand why you felt that way. Are there ways you could incorporate the gifts and skills of those you spoke to in your activities? How would you feel about having the people you spoke to run a session?

Read Luke 18:35-43 together. How does Jesus’ approach to the blind man seem similar or different to your usual way of going about community engagement? How does it resonate with what you have found out in this exercise?

Spend some time in prayer together, be honest with God and with each other where these ideas seem hard or overwhelming, and celebrate where you already see God’s image in people. Ask Jesus to show you how to see this more, and how to let people in your community know that they remind you a little of him.

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## *Living differently: theology in practice*

*Our monthly meal for homeless people in King's Cross, London, had become incredibly popular, with around 100 people joining us from all over the city. For many of these, it provided a focus to the day and some nutritious hot food at a time when many other services were closed.*

*Yet, we had questions. What did it mean to provide this support to 100 people, but to only see them once a month? We were providing a service, but we were less convinced that we were welcoming people into community.*

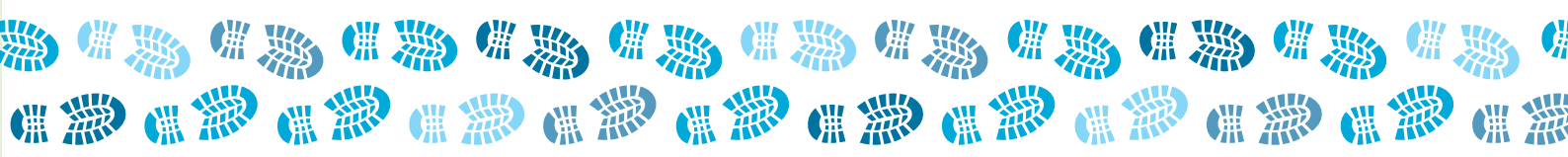
*As we reviewed the resources we were using, we came to recognise that the model did not fit our broader call: to build community in our locality through genuine relationships.*

*As a small church, we prided ourselves on 'doing a lot with very little' to meet this volume of need, so it was difficult to accept that things might have to change. However, over the next few years, we started to develop two smaller activities that were low-key, local and focused on sharing life with people experiencing homelessness, through hospitality.*

*In time, one of these, the 'Cross Café', became a small community exploring faith together. When the need to develop the building meant that the church had to move out, this group continued. The strength of their relationships carried them through a time of change into another new chapter.*

*Corin Pilling, Assistant Director of Community Engagement and Communications, Livability*

# Living differently



Seeing our inherited worldview more clearly, and listening to voices from the margins, calls for a practical response. In this section, we ask how a belief in the image of God in every person, an awareness that there is no 'us' and 'them', and the recognition that relationships, not programmes, bring healing, would change our community engagement practice.

Ann Morisy focuses on the concept of family likeness to overcome what she calls 'needs meeting'. She bases her understanding of community mission on the conviction that we are all 'brothers and sisters with one Father'.<sup>17</sup> Starting from this image of family, we suggest that there are two ways in which our practice can be reshaped to reflect what we have seen and heard: firstly, treating all people as *persons*, those bearing the image of God and, secondly, building community in *mutuality*, between persons.



*treating all people  
as those bearing the  
image of God and  
building community in  
mutuality*

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<sup>17</sup> Morisy, A. *Journeying Out: A new approach to Christian mission*. (2004) London: Continuum. p39.



## Relating as *persons to persons*

‘Personhood’ describes the unique dignity, worth, presence and gift of every individual human. If, as we have seen, every person bears the image of God, then their dignity is resonant of their divine Creator. Relating to one another as ‘persons’, therefore, acknowledges our unique worth and capacity to display something of God’s character. In practice, this involves making specific commitments in our community engagement:

***Respecting people’s perspective and experience.*** Each person is an expert in their own experience, they know what it is like to be them. Respecting this experience, and what each person feels is right for them, is an important step in honouring their personhood. It will involve listening and asking good questions, all the time seeking to spot the image of God in their character and in their story. By creating space for someone to take a step back and reflect on their story, character and values, not only can they be enabled to make stronger choices but also their sense of personhood is further affirmed.

***Giving space for people to exercise choice.*** Enabling people to exercise agency, to whatever degree they are able, questions the wisdom of having a pre-prescribed pathway or programme through which to funnel the people we meet. It means that we hold back from tying up all the loose ends ourselves. Given the opportunity to exercise their free choice, people may not make good decisions all the time; none of us do. However, unless their choice is likely to cause harm to others or themselves, the freedom to choose should be prioritised and balanced with the responsibility to others which comes with being part of a community. We are able to act but must also take responsibility for the results of our action.

Anyone who has worked with people will know that this is often complicated and difficult, and that each situation must be carefully considered on its own merits and with reference to appropriate expertise such as safeguarding guidance. However, our default position is often to give in to the temptation to simply remove the possibility of making a bad decision. Instead, we



suggest that, rather than overruling an individual's personhood, there may be an alternative way forward that involves listening to their own expertise and reflecting with them on their choices and the impact of their decisions within the community.

***Creating opportunities for people to act.*** Research on wellbeing suggests that having the opportunity to act and work towards one's personal goals, expressing one's personhood, is even more promoting of human flourishing than achieving a particular outcome.<sup>18</sup> Enabling people to take action based on their own reflection can open up new pathways into the future that may be small and faltering but are hugely significant. As we have seen, personhood comes with responsibility and, by taking action, we begin to exercise our responsibility, giving account for the dent we uniquely make in the world.

## Building and sharing in community

Personhood is not the same as individualism. A part of the image of God in us is our need for community. Our choices have an impact on others, whether personally among our friends and family, locally in our community or globally through our consumption or purchasing habits. Relating as persons, respecting choice and agency, is, therefore, set in the context of community wellbeing, with both responsibility and agency working together for the good of one another. Equally, we can learn from the experience and insight of those around us; sharing our life's story and listening to the story of others affirms us both. Together, we can often find a way forward where, alone, we could not see the path.

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<sup>18</sup> Riordan, P. *Human happiness as a common good: Clarifying the issues in The Practices of Happiness: Political economy, religion and wellbeing*. Atherton, J., Graham, E. & Steedman I. Eds. (2011) London: Routledge London. p210.





Therefore, the second way in which what we have seen and heard can have an impact on our practice is in the focus of our task and the way we seek to go about it. If poverty is not simply about deficit but is actually more to do with isolation, then, in situations of marginalisation, we need to ask fundamental questions about the aims of our engagement. We have seen that engagement is not solely about solving problems or meeting needs; rather it is more concerned with encountering people made in the image of God.

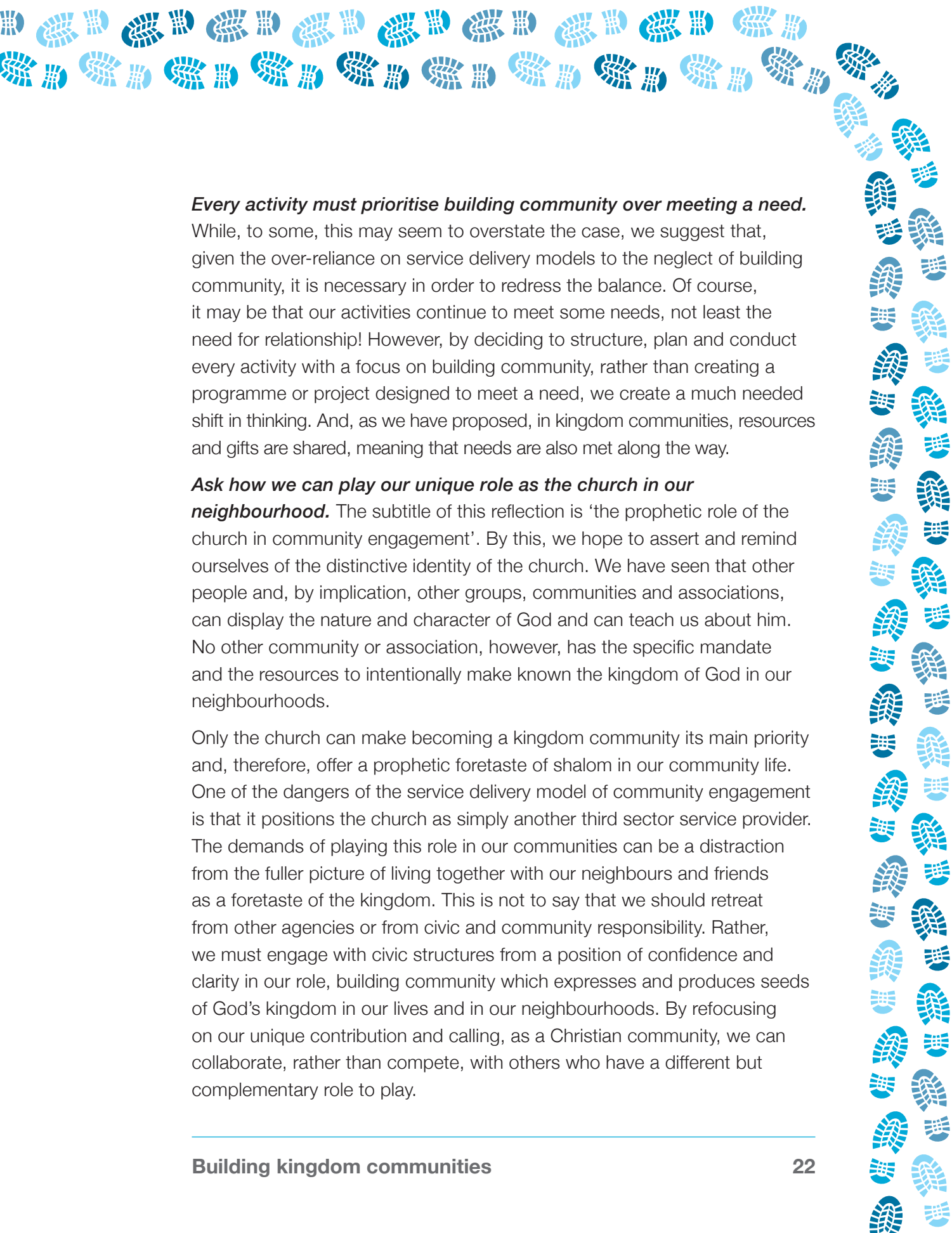
So, we come back to the primary purpose of the church: to be a worshipping community shaped by Jesus' priorities, expressing and anticipating the in-breaking kingdom of God and the future renewal of all things.<sup>19</sup> In mid-first century Palestine, Jesus did not engage with the late-modern, western organisational and instrumental approach to human life. However, even in contrast to the organisational structures of his own time, most notably the Jewish temple and the Roman Empire, Jesus' mode of acting was unusual. He built community. He gathered disciples, shared life, meals and journeys with them. Whether talking to crowds or eating in someone's home, Jesus prioritised spending time with people.

Furthermore, Jesus entered into *mutual* community, receiving food and shelter from his circle of friends. Even when faced with five thousand hungry people, he asked his disciples, 'What do you have?', rather than set himself up as the sole provider (Matthew 14:13-21). He encouraged his disciples to do as he did, and they also saw healings and miracles. Recognising this, we might make some practical decisions about our community engagement:



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19 Wright, T. *Surprised by Hope* (2007) London: SPCK. p245.



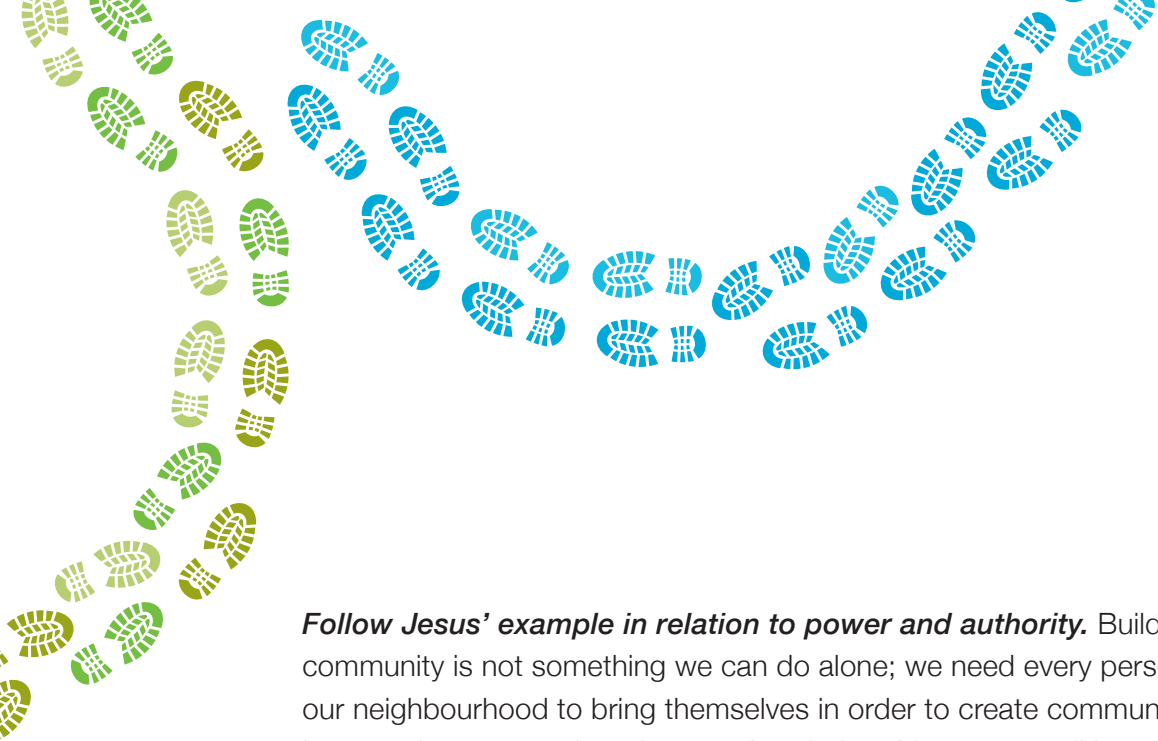
***Every activity must prioritise building community over meeting a need.***

While, to some, this may seem to overstate the case, we suggest that, given the over-reliance on service delivery models to the neglect of building community, it is necessary in order to redress the balance. Of course, it may be that our activities continue to meet some needs, not least the need for relationship! However, by deciding to structure, plan and conduct every activity with a focus on building community, rather than creating a programme or project designed to meet a need, we create a much needed shift in thinking. And, as we have proposed, in kingdom communities, resources and gifts are shared, meaning that needs are also met along the way.

***Ask how we can play our unique role as the church in our***

***neighbourhood.*** The subtitle of this reflection is ‘the prophetic role of the church in community engagement’. By this, we hope to assert and remind ourselves of the distinctive identity of the church. We have seen that other people and, by implication, other groups, communities and associations, can display the nature and character of God and can teach us about him. No other community or association, however, has the specific mandate and the resources to intentionally make known the kingdom of God in our neighbourhoods.

Only the church can make becoming a kingdom community its main priority and, therefore, offer a prophetic foretaste of shalom in our community life. One of the dangers of the service delivery model of community engagement is that it positions the church as simply another third sector service provider. The demands of playing this role in our communities can be a distraction from the fuller picture of living together with our neighbours and friends as a foretaste of the kingdom. This is not to say that we should retreat from other agencies or from civic and community responsibility. Rather, we must engage with civic structures from a position of confidence and clarity in our role, building community which expresses and produces seeds of God’s kingdom in our lives and in our neighbourhoods. By refocusing on our unique contribution and calling, as a Christian community, we can collaborate, rather than compete, with others who have a different but complementary role to play.



***Follow Jesus' example in relation to power and authority.*** Building community is not something we can do alone; we need every person in our neighbourhood to bring themselves in order to create community. If, as we have seen, there is no 'us' and 'them' but we are all in need of community and restoration, then our action must be, not just inclusive of those outside our congregations, but generated by and in the community. Paul writes that Jesus emptied himself of his status in order to become human, 'taking the very nature of a servant' (Phil 2:7). Jesus' approach to humanity was to become one of us, to grow up in an ordinary family in a poor neighbourhood, to learn a trade and earn a living so that, when he began to share his message of the kingdom, he did it as one of us, in the language of his own people.

This is a challenge to us as we think about the power dynamics in our community engagement. So often, we set up the Christian leader as the one with all the answers; we defer to them and we allow individuals or small groups of recognised 'leaders' to make the decisions. But the image of God in all, and the acknowledgement of our own brokenness, leads us to recognise that no one person has all the answers. Enacting these theological convictions means relinquishing our control in community engagement and sharing in building community with those we come alongside.

In community engagement, we have the opportunity to witness the image of God in the people of our neighbourhoods, at first hand. If we are willing to build and share in community, we can experience the character, gifts and skills each person has to bring. As they become our friends, we can also have the joy of noticing them demonstrate glimpses of the character of God as they raise their children, help out a neighbour or pick up litter on the street.



## Doing Theology

### building kingdom communities

**As a group, discuss these questions:**

- How would your community engagement change if you related to people as persons made in God's image and if you prioritised building and sharing in community?
- What excites you about this possibility?
- What troubles you about this possibility?

**Spend time praying together, asking God to illuminate your conversation.**

**Spend time discussing specific changes you would like to make to your practice.**

- What will you stop doing?
- What will you start doing?
- What will you continue to pray and reflect on together?

# Building kingdom communities

In this reflection, we have offered a practical theological process as a means to examine and explore the theology that underpins our church-based community engagement. In our three stages, of seeing more clearly, listening more deeply and living differently, we have drawn on scripture, the Christian tradition and experience, to highlight some of the current challenges faced in Christian community engagement, and to point towards some ways forward for our theology and our practice.

Having listened to some alternative voices found within our faith tradition and to the voices of the marginalised, we believe that the Christian story leads us beyond service delivery:

- To seeing every human being, of any faith or none, as a person made in God's image and with something to teach us.
- To collaborating and acting together with others, not as 'us' and 'them', but as a shared and mutual community.
- To focusing on relationships, not projects, acknowledging that it is encounter with others which transforms.

By reshaping our community engagement in line with these priorities, we believe the church can continue to become all that we are called to be. In building communities of mutual, transformative relationships which display the goodness of God's in-coming kingdom we can fulfil, even more powerfully, our prophetic role in society.





## Continue the conversation?

If you would be interested in developing the ideas contained in this reflection and in *Fullness of Life Together* in your local neighbourhood we would love to hear from you. You can contact us by email or find full contact details on our website.

**Livability:** Our community engagement team is passionate about helping churches make a difference in their local community. Addressing both the ‘why’ and ‘how’, we equip churches to play their part in making the community more ‘livable’ for everyone. We do this by providing inspiration, practical support, training and resources.

See our website: [www.livability.org.uk/church](http://www.livability.org.uk/church)

or contact: [joinin@livability.org.uk](mailto:joinin@livability.org.uk)

**Church Urban Fund:** CUF was established by the Church of England as a practical response to unmet need and has been active in local communities for over 30 years. Our vision is to see people and communities all over England flourish and enjoy life in all its fullness. Through the Together Network, a network of partnerships with dioceses, we work with churches, national and local government and others to bring about positive change in communities.

See our website: [www.cuf.org.uk](http://www.cuf.org.uk)

or contact: [hello@cuf.org.uk](mailto:hello@cuf.org.uk)



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