



COMMUNITY BUILDING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

When I arrived as vicar of Hodge Hill four and a half years ago, again and again congregation members asked me, 'why on earth do you want to come here? We haven't even got a building!' And some of you who run buildings might be smiling at this point, but for this congregation – whose purpose-built, cutting-edge bit of 1960s church architecture had been the heart of their identity, a busy church and 'centre of community' – there was a huge amount of grief, and lack, and emptiness underneath that question. So we started together with no building of our own, and no huge 'army of volunteers' as people sometimes imagine churches to have. We simply started with a question: what is going on in our neighbourhood?

So we mapped our parish, and gathered the obligatory statistics – the Indices of Multiple Deprivation that put parts of Hodge Hill in the 'top' 2% in the country – but we also went out and about, walked the streets, and visited some of those places in our parish where people gathered, or at least bumped into

each other. And we went and listened: to people's hopes and dreams for their neighbourhood, and to what people saw as good about their neighbourhood, as well as the problems, the issues, the challenges and frustrations. And we came back together bringing stories: of ordinary people – Christian, Muslim, atheist, pagan, agnostic, and even Church of England – who were busy in their neighbourhoods embodying compassion, generosity, trust, friendship and hope – exactly the things that we wanted to be as 'church', and that we recognised as being characteristics of God.

So we decided that we wanted to celebrate those people, and we invited local people to nominate their neighbours, and people who worked in our neighbourhoods, our local 'unsung heroes' – and we put on a big party, with lots of food and drink, and we told something of their stories, and we got The Lord Mayor to give them nice cut-glass awards, and there was lots of clapping, and a few tears too.



And while we had them all together, we asked them one question: 'if you could find a couple of people to join you, what would you start in your neighbourhood?' We didn't know it at the time, but it's the kind of question at the heart of something called 'Asset-Based Community Development' (ABCD). In the process, we discovered Phil, who was passionate about theatre, and were able to help him set up Bromford Theatre Group, an amazing and growing bunch of people who are now on their third Christmas panto, and have also done a murder mystery night, a ghost walk, a Community Passion Play, a World War I remembrance, and a number of other great events along the way.

We've learnt, as we've journeyed with our neighbours and learnt and practised the language of ABCD, that our neighbourhoods are rich in 'assets' or gifts: the passions, skills and knowledge of our neighbours themselves; the diverse, often under-the-radar 'associations' (most without constitutions or agendas or even 'meetings' as such) that connect people together and amplify their gifts; the local 'institutions' who choose to act as 'treasure-chests' rather than self-defensive 'fortresses'; the gifts and economies and ecologies of the place itself; and the stories of our neighbours and our neighbourhood, individual and shared.

Photo: The Bromford Theatre Group Passion Play

We've learnt to try to shift the language, the way we tell our stories, from that of deficits, and lacks, and competition for scarce resources (how many of you have filled in a funding bid or two, desperate to show how much your area, or your 'client group', is more needy, more deprived, more lacking than the others?) – to a story about unearthing and connecting the diverse and abundant gifts of our neighbourhood – the most vital task in seeking to 'build community' locally.

And in Hodge Hill we've learnt, too, that this community-building stuff is anything but 'secular' work. If it's anything, it's deeply 'spiritual' work. And as we've journeyed, and learnt, together, we've begun to articulate some of the 'spiritual practices' that this work has demanded – and I offer them to you, in the hope that they might resonate with what you are trying to be and do, where you are...

1. Patient 'presencing'

The first - and it needs to be first, I think - is what I've come to call 'patient presencing' (and I think I'd been using the phrase before *The New Parish* came out, but I think we use it in a very similar way). It's quite deliberately a verb rather than a noun, because it's so easy to slip out of 'presence' and into the busyness of 'doing', initiatives, projects and programmes. It's a continual 'coming to presence', again and again, and it needs us to stop, look, listen. It needs us to stop the programmes, the projects, the initiatives, the busyness, at the very least long enough to pause for breath. It needs us to stop and look around us - at what's there, at who's there, at what's going on independent of us, or in spite of us. And, like Moses in the Sinai desert, when we stop and 'turn aside' to look, we discover we are in fact on holy ground; we need to take off our shoes and stand barefoot, in reverence, and listen for the voice of the living God.

Just as the Rule of Saint Benedict invites monastics to make vows of stability, conversion, and obedience, so we, on the journey of community-building, discover that we must stay put in our neighbourhood, and not run away when things get tough or our neighbours are difficult (stability); that we must be constantly open to being surprised, changed, taught by the place and the people around us (conversion); and that we must learn to listen, deeply, to each other (obedience). Which brings me to the second of the 'spiritual practices' that I think we're learning, slowly, in Hodge Hill.

2. 'Hearing to speech' [1]

We're used to thinking of 'hearing' as something which follows, comes after, someone speaking - but we're invited to rethink the order, to understand that often we need to listen before speech will come; that we need to create 'listening spaces' safe enough, trustworthy enough, to enable new things to be said, silenced voices to 'come to speech'; words of lament and protest, of possibility and hope.

3. Radical renouncing ('kenosis')

To create spaces to hear others to speech, however, we need to do some relinquishing - what Christian theologians call 'kenosis', self-emptying. I'm challenged by a wonderful book by Bishop John V Taylor, 'The Christlike God'[2], who calls us to pay attention to the three temptations of Jesus in the desert - and be alert to similar renunciations demanded of us, renouncing the temptations to hold on to power...

- the power of the **provider**: the seductive power of being able to turn stones into bread, to feed the hungry and make us feel better - especially when we become the place where people come for food
- the power of the **possessor**: that it's 'our' project, 'our' programme, 'our' church, 'our' faith - and that if only we can control things, we can make the world better
- the power of the **performer**: that if only people can see how well we do things, if only people hear what we have to say, then they'll understand, they'll support us, they'll join us...

4. Vulnerable gratitude

Gratitude, because we can begin by approaching all of life as gift, to be received with thankfulness. Vulnerable, because such gratitude invites us to come into encounters with others, with open, empty hands. We're used to talking the language of 'service', of obedience to Jesus' command to wash feet. But it's easy to forget that we're first invited to let our feet be washed - and that, so often, is a whole lot harder to accept.

5. Limitless celebration

This follows on from seeing all life as gift. Every moment is an excuse for a party. Anywhere and everywhere. And if it's not our place to throw a party, then we can encourage our neighbours to host one, and come along as guests, or gate-crashers, celebrating the abundant gifts around



us.

Picture: James B Janknegt, Temptation #1 [3]



6. Expansive friendships

Our friendships can never be limited, closed, 'people-like-us': but continually extending outwards, drawing in (and being drawn in by) new and surprising strangers-becoming-friends.

7. Courageous truth-telling

Out of these solidarities-across-difference, through which new voices and new people are heard to speech, we may often find ourselves in situations where we must tell the truth - or enable the truth to be told - sometimes angrily, often courageously, challenging the powers-that-be with defiant, stubborn persistence.

8. Painstaking reconciliation

Community-building is messy. Making friends across difference, hearing new voices to speech, receiving the sometimes-difficult gifts of others - all of this means that making mistakes, putting our foot in it, is inevitable. We learn that we have to constantly engage in the painstaking work of reconciliation - of saying sorry and receiving forgiveness, of receiving the apologies of others and offering forgiveness in turn.

9. Enacting hope

We Christians, especially, are experts in 'proclaiming hope': telling other people that they should be

hopeful, explaining the deep reasons for hope, often in the face of evidence to the contrary. But we need to get a whole lot better at what Ann Morisy calls 'enacting hope': getting stuck into ways of being, doing, relating to others that make hope visible, tangible, a real experience in the present.

10. Building 'home' together

Lastly, I think we need to resist imagining that we - we Christians, we involved in this or that project - have found 'home', and are engaged in the business of inviting others to 'come home' too. One of the things we're learning in Hodge Hill, I think, is that we - we Christians, with our neighbours Muslim, atheist, pagan, agnostic, even Church of England - are on a journey together, exploring together, questioning together, working together, building 'home' together.

All this is summed up perfectly in some words from some native Australian activists, no doubt to some well-meaning 'experts':

'If you have come here to help us, you are wasting our time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with ours, then let us work together.'



Photo: One of our weekly bring-and-share 'community lunches' in action

[1] Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

[2] John V Taylor, *The Christlike God*, 2nd ed, (London: SCM, 2011).

[3] Artist James B Janknegt, *Temptation #1* www.bcartfarm.com



Al Barrett

Revd Al Barrett is a husband, dad of 2, neighbour and Rector of Hodge Hill Church (and Anglican-URC ecumenical partnership). He and his family have lived on the Firs and Bromford estate in East Birmingham (UK) since 2010. In his spare time, he is working towards a PhD searching for an 'urban christological politics', and is a Faculty Member of the *Asset-Based Community Development Institute*, Europe.