

**BCAN:
Working Together**

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on behalf of the BCAN Steering Group

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BCAN: Working Together

Introduction

An abbreviated version of this document is also available – see the contact details at the end. Please remember, however, that this fuller version is itself only a brief summary of some complex and deep issues. There has been a great deal of simplification to get this material into this compact form, and much of what is said should ideally be ‘balanced’ by other details.

My aim for this document is that everything here will be helpful, and everything will either be true, or will be as true as possible within the constraints of this document. If you find something that seems untrue or misleading, please ask me about it!

Social Action is Essential

Unity

Jesus prayed that His disciples should be one – that we should be united. This was highly important to Him and to the early church.

The reality is that we have seemingly insurmountable theological, organisational and procedural differences. There are three obvious responses, two of which seem to me to be dead ends.

Firstly, we can ignore Jesus’ prayer and hold onto our dividedness, justifying it by the historic necessities that brought our particular denomination or grouping into being.

Secondly, we can throw a great deal of energy into breaking down the barriers, and try to create a single ecumenical organisation that, perhaps one day, all Christians will be able to identify with.

Thirdly, we can say that the key issue is unity, and you don’t need to agree on everything to be united. Unity is the pragmatic ability to work together. This seems to me to be the only viable approach.

We may struggle to work together on purely Christian activities, such as worship and evangelism. We may find it hard to get much enthusiasm to work together on purely secular activities, such as *Britain in Bloom*. But we can usefully work together in that area where our faith and social conscience overlap – in social action projects.

Many people would argue that the key things dividing us are social and relational, and the best way to break down the barriers between different churches is for us to learn how to work together.

Holistic Ministry

Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick *and* preached the Kingdom. The prophets taught the importance both of social justice and loving God. In previous generations, the church tended to be divided into those ('liberals') who emphasised the practical areas to the exclusion of the spiritual ones, and those ('evangelicals') who emphasised the spiritual areas to the exclusion of the practical ones.

Today, evangelical churches increasingly recognise that the command 'love your neighbour as yourself' must change the way we respond to the colleague at work, the homeless addict on our doorstep, the Romanian orphan and the Sudanese farmer. And liberal churches increasingly recognise that people need to be transformed through the power of the gospel as well as having their stomachs filled. But most churches, whatever their theological persuasion, still struggle to express these truths in practical ways.

Many people within the church who are engaged in ministries to people outside the church feel that the church as an organisation has no interest in their work. It would be difficult for most churches of any size to publicly and explicitly communicate interest in and support for every valid activity every church member is engaged in. But by supporting BCAN, outlining the range of activities it represents and encouraging people to be involved with its associated projects, a church can affirm its commitment to Jesus' example of a holistic ministry, and also encourage the people who take part in such projects.

Social Action is Useful

Social Action and Prophecy

Because we are spiritual beings, there is a spiritual dynamic to everything we do. This is especially true in the area of social action.

When we care for the poor, we are making a prophetic statement to the world: see what the character of God is like! They see God in our actions, they hear His voice in our cries for justice, whether we speak His name or not.

When we care for the poor, we are also making a prophetic statement to the church: this is what authentic Christianity is like! It involves laying down your life in service for others. Nominal Christians can escape most of the usual challenges in sermons ('God has not called me to be an evangelist') but social action is the point at which spirituality gets real: this is what it means to follow Jesus.

Social Action and Evangelism

This is a massive subject, but here are a few key points.

Social action is valid without evangelism. It is a valid thing for Christians to do, even when there is no evangelistic aspect. Our motivation as Christians is to show God's love in action, but we do not always need to explain our reasons for what we do.

Social action prepares the ground for evangelism. People see what we do and respect it, so they are more ready to hear what we have to say.

Social action can involve evangelism. In organisations like Crisis Centre Ministries, one of our objectives is to bring people into the Kingdom. This is one of the main reasons why we are so effective in helping people come off drugs, keep accommodation and start to rebuild their lives: God is at work, changing them from within.

Social action provides a fertile context for evangelism. Especially when it is not one of the aims of the project, social action brings Christians and non-Christians together in a context that often brings out what is real and what is important to us. They see us responding to disappointment, frustration and failure. They see us treating people with respect even when they don't deserve it. They might even see a few answers to prayer. They see the real difference God makes in our lives, because we are engaged in real and important issues together.

Social Action and Pastoral Care

The aim of church leaders is to 'equip the saints for the work of service,' but most churches offer few opportunities for developing gifts and ministries. If you can lead worship, teach a Sunday School class or run a homegroup, there is generally an opening, but many people have gifts and callings that would not normally be exercised within the church body. They need to be presented with opportunities to serve.

They also need to understand that in caring for others, they are exercising a Christian ministry: inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it to Me. Some churches need to learn to value the practical ministries, alongside the more 'spiritual' ones: if only the spiritual ministries are noticed and encouraged, those with other ministries will probably feel they have little to contribute, and will fail to grow and develop as they should.

Sometimes a 'pastoral care sponge' will begin to grow and need much less input from others when they discover what they can do to help people who are more needy than they are. For some people, learning that they too have something to give can be a transforming experience.

Social Action Strengthens Congregational Life

Focus

None of us are called to do everything, but we are each called to do something. And we trust that if we all do what God is calling us to do, then, somehow, everything necessary will be done. This is true for us as individuals, and true for us as congregations.

As congregations, we need to identify the issues and the project that we are committed to supporting. But a corporate focus on one area does not mean we cease to care about all the other issues, or that people not committed to that area should leave and join another fellowship. So we need to have other, local projects so that each member of the congregation can respond to God's calling on their life.

Ownership

We have to be realistic about the ownership of projects. It is hard for most Baptists to get highly committed to projects run and owned by the Anglican church, or for URC projects to get much support from Methodists, and so on. Like it or not, most denominational projects struggle to get support from people in other denominations. It is easier for most non-Roman Catholics to support Christian Aid than Caritas, and the same is true for local projects – which is why we need social action projects that are not rooted in particular denominations.

Working Together

Overlap

It makes no sense for many small projects to be operating independently in the same area, trying to address the same or similar needs. There is bound to be both overlap and gaps: some needs will be addressed by many projects, and some will be missed by all of them. If we talk to each other and co-ordinate our work, we can try to ensure that the overlaps are reduced, and the gaps minimised or removed.

Critical Mass

There are certain overheads involved in running an organisation, and the more organised you try to be, the greater the overheads. One organisation employing five people will generally achieve much more than five organisations employing one person, and cost less. As legislation and red tape increase, the overheads involved in running any organisation legally are increasing all the time.

Political Impact

If we are to make an impact on the secular authorities, we need numbers and we need unity. If only a few people are involved, they can ignore us. If many people are involved, but there is no central organisation, they will ignore us. But many people working together – we become significant, and the authorities will want and need us as a partner. When we have both numbers and organisation, the world starts to realise that the church is involved in their society, and is doing something worthwhile.

Staff and volunteers

Many church-based projects used to be entirely run by volunteers, but this is becoming much less viable. Volunteers need to be co-ordinated, they need to be trained, they need to be checked, they need to be given standards and procedures, their work needs to be monitored and checked, and if you are given any support from any outside body, the results need to be measured and recorded.

It is increasingly difficult to find volunteers who are willing to do all this (understandably, they want to do something to help other people, not to spend their time filling in forms), and difficult to find volunteers with the skills and aptitudes to undertake these essential roles, so volunteers need to be backed up by paid staff who

have the necessary skills and experience to provide the infrastructure within which the volunteers can do their work.

If we are going to employ staff to do these tasks, they are best employed within a structure set up for that purpose, and if we are going to set up a structure for this purpose, it makes sense to do so with others who share the same vision, whichever branch of the Church they come from.

Potential

The needs of the city are so great, no one congregation or denomination can begin to address all those needs. But we believe that God has given His Church all the resources needed for the task He has given us. If we work together and share the resources He has given us, we can make a major impact on our city.

Making Social Action Projects Work

Expertise

Specialist social action groups can develop and share expertise. As Crisis Centre Ministries develops new standards and procedures, we share them with the other groups in the BCAN Homeless Forum, so all the groups can benefit from them – and we benefit from the comments and questions of other people in the forum.

Many areas of expertise are needed. Some areas will be about the work we engage in – for us, how to help homeless people and continue helping them so they can be re-integrated into society. Some areas will be about the local context in which we are working – we need to understand what the Council and the statutory services are required to do, and what they have committed themselves to doing. And some areas will be about the legal context – we need to understand issues such as data protection, confidentiality, reporting of suspected abuse, and many others.

Sharing this expertise is the only strategy that makes sense.

Wisdom

Christians working on their own tend to be an easy touch – well intentioned people who respond to every sob-story they hear. Eventually they realise how much they have been taken for a ride, get disillusioned and generally stop helping.

The truth is that many people are quite happy to be living off benefits, and there are many who will lie to get benefits and other handouts they don't deserve. A lot of people don't want their problems solved.

How do you learn how not to be taken in? Training is important, but practical wisdom is mostly gained by working alongside people who are experienced, and working in established organisations that are plugged in to the communication channels.

Legality

Traditionally, churches and Christian projects have not been very good at complying with legislation and red tape. In the modern world, this has ceased to be an option. We need to do CRB checks on our Sunday School teachers.

The laws, statutory instruments and guidance issued by ministers are all constantly changing. We need expert help to understand these issues, so we don't break the rules, and so we can support and advise people helpfully. This is difficult and time consuming activity, so we need to make sure that the relevant information is shared as widely as possible. If a group like BCAN does not enable such sharing to take place, who will do it?

Partnership

As well as developing in-house skills to help people directly, we need to develop effective relationships with other related groups. So, in dealing with homelessness, we find some of the key areas are accommodation, benefits, drugs, healthcare, counselling, lifeskills and employment.

As an example, at Crisis Centre Ministries we are large enough and well enough known for some officials to be interested in talking with us, but if we want to get to the more senior people, we need to be part of something larger. And for us, BCAN is the only group that can provide this for us.

Small, solitary groups do not have the resources to develop the relationships they need with all the different agencies working in these different areas. There seems to be only two options: either each and every organisation must be large enough to do all this themselves, or we need a group like BCAN through which it can be done.

The author is Paul Hazelden, General Manager of Crisis Centre Ministries, a Christian charity working in Bristol to help homeless people, alcoholics and drug addicts.

You can get copies of this document from the BCAN web site: www.bcan.org.uk, or from the Crisis Centre Ministries office at 12 City Road, St Pauls, Bristol, BS2 8TP.

You can find out more about Crisis Centre Ministries by visiting our web site at: www.crisis-centre.org.uk.

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