

STRONG FOUNDATIONS

LET'S WORK TOGETHER
TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

Faith and Spirituality

Version 0.35

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Document Status

This is version 0.35 of a working document, currently under development. The latest version of this document can be found by following a link on the web page:

- <http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>

All the details contained in this document should be understood as a working proposal; they are presented here as a basis for further discussion.

Further Details

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
- Strong Foundations: <http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>

Executive Summary

When people seek to put their faith into practice, they often get involved with a social action project. Some social action projects are strictly secular in nature, while others work from a faith basis of some kind.

When a social action project has a faith basis, questions will inevitably arise about the relationship between the faith and the activity being undertaken. There is often an assumption that the 'correct' strategy is to ensure that there is no connection between the two, and many faith based social action projects have this as their policy.

But we would like to propose a different model: one that is not only valid, but also – very often – a better model for all concerned. For this to work, the people involved with the social action project must have a shared understanding of faith and spirituality, and how they relate to the activity.

The conviction behind this document is that a simple, sensitive and common sense approach to questions of faith and spirituality will suffice in the vast majority of situations. The purpose of this document is to describe this common sense approach in sufficient detail to enable all the parties involved to have a realistic and workable set of expectations and to establish a basic agreement concerning expected and acceptable behaviour: where and how personal and corporate faith can be expressed, and how it can affect the service being delivered.

In brief, we recognise that:

- everyone will have their own approach to spirituality;
- this spirituality can be expressed in various ways;
- questions of faith and spirituality form one important aspect of a person's life;
- this aspect should occupy an appropriate place alongside all the other important aspects of life; and
- people should be able to choose when and how they engage with questions of faith and spirituality.

Introduction

For a long time, the default position in the UK health care system has been that issues of faith and spirituality are personal concerns and, as far as possible, should not affect the medical care being provided.

However, questions of faith and spirituality very quickly become relevant as soon as you move beyond a very narrow focus on physical wellbeing. It is therefore important that the people who work within a social action project agree to work within an agreed framework so that those who access their service and those who refer to it know what to expect.

We offer a short working definition of spirituality below; it can be understood as the aspect of life which cannot be adequately addressed by reference to science (including technology and medicine) or by feelings (including art). All the important questions in life (marriage, family, career) are informed by science and our feelings, but they are all essentially spiritual in nature; so, too, are our deepest hopes and fears, desires and regrets.

Science can tell us how to build a road or mend a broken leg, but it cannot tell us how to choose between building an airport or a hospital; it can tell us how to end the suffering of a terminally ill patient in a humane way, but it cannot tell us if we should. Our feelings can tell us how much we might enjoy a bacon sandwich, but they cannot tell us if we ought to become vegetarians for the sake of the planet; they can tell us how much our partner has hurt us, but they cannot tell us if we should forgive and offer them a second chance.

Spirituality is not only at the heart of our individual lives, it also is central to the choices we make as a society. Questions of value and morality are all spiritual in nature; questions of purpose are also generally spiritual in nature.

The Framework

We respect each individual's approach to spirituality

We respect each individual's approach to spirituality and the variety of ways in which this spirituality is expressed – whether their approach is to embrace some recognised form of spirituality, to follow some individual path, or to reject all forms of spirituality entirely; we also expect the people we work with to respect our spirituality and the variety of ways in which it is expressed.

We recognise that questions of spirituality are important

We recognise that spirituality and the questions it raises is an important area of life, which needs to be considered alongside the other important areas. We seek to care for people, which means that no area which is important to them can be ignored. Just as we cannot ignore issues relating to people's physical, emotional or financial wellbeing, so we cannot ignore issues relating to their spiritual wellbeing.

We are not experts in any of these areas, but in all these areas we seek to support people with whatever skills and experience we do have, recognise the limitations of what we have to offer, and signpost people to more specialised help when it is wanted.

We recognise that questions of faith and spirituality form one important aspect of any normal healthy person's life, but they often become more pressing when life is difficult and people are struggling. One role of pastoral care is to provide a safe space in which such questions can be raised and explored, and this is particularly important when people are vulnerable. At such times they need to be given the opportunity to address deep questions in their own way and in their own time, without being told such questions are invalid or pointless, and without having prepackaged answers thrust down their throats.

We give people freedom to make their own choices

We allow people to choose when and how they engage with questions of faith and spirituality. We may feel that someone has a need to address such questions, and we may ask whether they want to, but then the decision to pursue or ignore such questions is up to the individual concerned – just as it would be if the concern was about questions of finance or family relationships. And, if they choose to pursue such questions, then the extent, direction and speed of the enquiry is up to them as well.

The Language

It may be helpful to clarify what we mean by ‘spirituality’ and ‘faith’ and then consider a few relevant principles which follow from what has been said. Please let us know if anything is unclear, or if any of these descriptions need to be challenged or expanded.

To be clear: we are only explaining what we mean by these terms *as they are used in this document*; we recognise that many people will understand these terms in different ways, and no criticism of any other interpretation should be implied.

Spirituality

As we said above, spirituality can be understood as the aspect of life which cannot be adequately addressed by reference to science (including technology and medicine) or by feelings (including art). In this, it resembles the practice of law, which is common to all human societies, but the details of which vary greatly from place to place.

Spirituality often involves a belief that there is a spiritual reality and that humans are both spiritual and material beings. This is often, but not always, combined with the belief that a person will (or might) continue in some form after physical death, but it does not have to involve belief in a god or in a ‘traditional’ soul.

Questions of value and morality are all spiritual in nature (Which has the greater value: the woman’s right to choose what she does with her body, or the foetus’ right to life? How much freedom should people be given to harm themselves, or risk harming others? Should I get a job which pays well, or one which helps other people? If a law is unjust, do we have an obligation to break it?)

Questions of purpose are also generally spiritual in nature. (What should I be living for? What is the purpose of government? What should I seek to do with my life?)

Because there is a deep connection between spirituality and culture, people who have been brought up in a society which is culturally Jewish, Christian or Moslem can have difficulty in understanding other forms of spirituality, such as those found in Hinduism, Buddhism or Taoism.

Spirituality exists both inside and outside the traditional organised religions; it also exists both inside and outside a rejection of these religions: many who identify themselves as atheists or agnostics also see themselves as spiritual people.

Spirituality is hard to pin down and varies from person to person. It can be seen through at least four distinct perspectives: creed (what do I believe?), culture (how do I live?), community (who do I identify myself with?) and connection (what are my links with the people and the world around me?).

Religion and Faith

A religion is an organised expression of a particular form of spirituality. Some

religions involve belief in one or more gods, and some do not. Religions come in many shapes and sizes, and it is hard to generalise about them.

Religion is often deeply tied up with questions of culture and identity. The link between these things is hard to pin down and is often the source of deep disagreement between people who share the same religion: some will be confident that certain beliefs and practices are essential expressions of their group's spirituality, and others will see things differently.

The term 'faith' has several meanings, and people sometimes argue bitterly about which one is 'correct': the more useful discussion concerns which meaning the author intended, in any given setting.

- It sometimes means the same as 'religion': "The Christian faith has produced many works of art."
- It sometimes means something very similar to spirituality: "I am a person of faith, but I don't subscribe to any formal religion."
- It is sometimes used as an insult: "Faith is when you believe things when there is no evidence for them."
- It can be used in an entirely secular context: when we vote, we might put our faith in a politician to deliver on their promises.
- It can also be used in that secular way in a spiritual context: faith in a religious leader or movement may be functionally indistinguishable from faith in a politician or a political movement.

In general, we use the term 'faith' when we have to make a decision and have some evidence but no proof. We use it when we do not know for certain what the outcome of the decision will be but, on the basis of the available evidence, we make a choice.

Communicating Faith Appropriately

The key practical issue we have to address is how to describe the ways in which it is appropriate for people and groups to communicate their faith, and the ways in which it is inappropriate. The technical term for this activity is ‘proselytising’.

The principles below were originally written to explain the meaning of a proposed commitment for faith communities which are being paid to deliver a service to avoid using public funding to proselytise, but the same principles will apply when a faith group is providing the service free of charge. References to funded activity, in this context, distinguishes between the activity which takes place as part of the social action project and the activity which the faith community undertakes for other reasons.

Aim

It is accepted good practice that faith groups should not use public funds to deliver activities with the aim of proselytising the people who engage. There remains, however, a degree of concern from both sides about how this works out on the ground.

Our aim here is to set out some initial expectations about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and to create a context in which the referrers and the pastoral care team can communicate with each other in a productive way, so any conflict or disagreement in this area can be resolved quickly and easily.

We seek to clarify what ‘good practice’ means in this context, with the hope that both the public bodies and the faith communities will be able to understand each other better, build a stronger relationship and work together more effectively as a result.

Terminology

The language used in this discussion is often indicative of the attitudes of the parties involved. For example, a fairly representative definition of the term ‘proselytise’ reads as follows.

1. To attempt to convert someone to one’s own religious faith.
2. To attempt to persuade someone to join one’s own political party or to espouse one’s doctrine.

Not all groups proselytise: a few are content to go about their own business and, if someone should choose to join them, they will be welcomed. But most groups do: if you believe that what you do is good and worthwhile, you will naturally want to encourage others to join you; almost all political discourse is proselytising. Understood this way, it is a perfectly reasonable and healthy activity.

However, the term ‘proselytising’ is generally used in a prejudicial sense. It often carries a sense that the attempt to persuade or convert someone is being undertaken in an underhand or inappropriate manner; sometimes there is a suggestion that weak or

vulnerable people are being targeted because they are easily manipulated.

It is difficult to have a productive conversation when the word is used with negative connotations: the funder says: you must not proselytise; the faith group responds: we never proselytise, we always talk about our faith in an appropriate way. The two groups never get round to talking about what each of them would consider to be appropriate, and no real progress is made.

We need to get beyond the definition and the associations conjured up by the term, and instead focus on establishing sufficient agreement on what behaviour is appropriate, and in what context.

Some initial observations

A few points should be clear from the outset.

- One starting point is that public funds should not be used to proselytise. Funding for outreach activity should, therefore, come from another source.
- Funding agreements cover the activity being funded. While they may include organisational and structural requirements (such as governance arrangements, policies and accounting procedures), they do not aim to prevent the faith community from communicating its beliefs or drawing new people into the faith community.
- It is possible that both the faith community and the funding body will undertake activities which would not be approved of or permitted by the other. This should not prevent partnership and cooperation in the areas where the aims and values of the two parties overlap.
- Healthy relationships are built on integrity and trust, so progress will be made by recognising and accepting differences, not by hiding them – through being willing to work together where possible, despite some conflicting values and areas of disagreement.
- The need for integrity extends to the tools and methods used to spread the faith: underhand techniques are not appropriate here, just as they are not appropriate when campaigning at election time. So, for example, you should not bring people into your building with the offer of housing advice, but with the aim of using that contact to try to convert them.

In short, the prohibition on using public funds for proselytising does not prevent the faith community from doing anything they would want to do.

Details

Public services

The restriction on proselytising is often applied to the ‘delivery of public services’. In the context of any funding agreement, this clearly refers to the public services (such as housing advice) which are being financed by the external body.

So any restriction on proselytising does not apply to the faith community’s own

public activities, such as services, celebrations, prayers and acts of worship which they undertake as part of their own corporate life and traditions.

Service delivery

The restriction on proselytising applies to the service delivery: the faith community must not attempt to persuade or convert an individual when that individual is seeking to access the public service being offered. If a faith community provides housing advice services, then the advice service must be offered without seeking to convert the people who come to access the service.

In the same way, people accessing the service must be able to enter the building, wait for their appointment and leave afterwards without being subject to any proselytising.

On the other hand, if the same individual comes to a different activity in the same venue, the faith community is perfectly at liberty to attempt to persuade them in any way they deem appropriate.

The restriction on proselytising prevents the faith community from initiating an attempt to convert the person accessing the service. But if the person asks questions about faith, about what the members of the faith community believe, or why they are doing this work, then it is acceptable for the members of the faith community to give appropriate answers to such questions. Members of the faith community should not normally initiate such questions, but they can respond to them.

Resources

Money given to a faith community to run a public service must be spent on running that public service. Similarly, when someone is employed with that money to undertake certain tasks, they must spend the time for which they are employed only on those tasks.

On the other hand, unless the contract says otherwise, the paid-for resources do not have to be used exclusively for the public service: a desk purchased because the public service needs one can be used for other purposes at other times, as long as it is available for use when the public service needs it.

Persuasion, symbols and branding

Persuasion is an active undertaking. Faith communities will generally have religious images and texts upon the walls: this is expected and acceptable – the public should know who is hosting and providing the service. Similarly, members of faith communities will often wear religious clothing or symbols, which is also acceptable. Expressing a faith or identifying with it is not the same as attempting to persuade someone else to join it.

The same principle applies to literature: any literature provided as part of a public service may be branded by the faith community or contain symbols to indicate the source, but the content must relate to the service and not attempt to convert the recipient. Literature which does not relate to the service delivery may also be

accessible to the public service users, for example in a display stand or on a table in the entrance lobby, but it must not be confused with the literature provided as part of the public service.

Relationships

The faith community must not attempt to persuade or convert an individual when they are seeking to access a public service being offered, but it is valid for the community to seek to use the contact to build a relationship with the service user. It is normal for relationships to be built through ordinary human contact.

Relationships may be built in many ways: through tea and coffee being available to people alongside the service, through literature being made available for people to pick up, through people just being available to talk. Some people talk quite naturally about their faith, just as others talk about their football team, as part of normal social bonding.

Relationships may also be built through the service delivery. For some services, the relationship may be superficial and short-term, but for others, a key aspect of the service delivery may involve building deep, long-term relationships with the service users.

When building a relationship, it is often necessary to talk about yourself. When a member of a faith community talks about themselves, it is natural for them to mention their faith and related activities, alongside other areas of life. In this context, talking about faith is appropriate, and the details of the conversation are a matter of judgement for the person delivering the service.

If there is a danger that discussion of matters of faith will detract from the service which is the purpose of the meeting, the person delivering the service can always suggest that the conversation is continued after the business in hand, or on some other occasion.

Complaints

It is inevitable that different people will differ in the judgement on whether certain activities are reasonable or appropriate. Some people are deeply offended by actions or language which others find entirely acceptable.

So we need to assume that there will be criticisms and complaints, and they will need to be handled in a constructive way. When they arise, this is not itself a cause for concern: what matters is how they are handled. As always, if a person has a criticism or complaint, the best option is for them to talk about it, then and there, with the people involved; but this is not always possible.

Any service delivery contract needs to specify a mechanism for handling complaints and disputes, and there is no reason why complaints relating to matters of faith should not be handled through the usual system. People are sometimes reluctant to do so – possibly fearing that the people concerned may be unduly sensitive to questions in this area; but if secular and faith-based groups are to work together, being able to talk about this in a constructive way is one of the skills which must be learned.

Motivation

People engage in service delivery for many reasons. Helping other people is a valid expression of faith, so it should not be surprising if many people who engage in service delivery are also keen to communicate their faith in other ways. It should not be assumed that someone who wants to communicate their faith is only providing a helpful service in order to create the opportunity to proselytise.

There may be times when a recipient of the service feels that a member of the faith community has been too eager, in the context of public service delivery, to communicate aspects of their faith: such concerns must be addressed promptly and sensitively.

Motivation is an aspect of every human encounter. It is perfectly acceptable to explain that your motivation for helping people in this way comes from your religious faith, as long as the explanation is done at an appropriate time and in an appropriate way. This is something service users can be expected to be interested in, to some extent; being motivated by faith is a valid reason for helping other people, just as being being paid to do it and wanting to feel good about yourself are valid reasons.

People can sometimes become overly sensitive to the question of motivation: “I think he is only trying to help me because he wants to convert me,” is not a valid complaint. We cannot know what is going on inside the heads of other people: they should not be judged on the basis of our guesses about their motivation, but rather on their behaviour.

Judgement

Where there are disagreements about what is appropriate or inappropriate about communicating faith in the context of service delivery, this will in the end come down to a judgement call – but this does not mean that it is entirely subjective.

When used for the purpose of public service delivery, the space being used effectively becomes public space – whether it is in a public building or a private home; so the question of whether behaviour (for example) is appropriate in this context can be judged by whether or not it would be appropriate in a normal public setting.

Responding

While it is not appropriate to use public service delivery as an opportunity for seeking to convert the person using the service, it is acceptable for the people delivering the service to respond to questions about who they are, why they are helping in this way, and what they believe.

As noted before, the responses to any such questions should be appropriate; and if they are likely to take longer than is appropriate to the circumstances such conversations can be continued outside the context of the service delivery if the service user wishes.

If the public service user chooses to respond to opportunities to explore or embrace

the faith of the public service provider, no barriers should be put in their way: freedom of religion does not cease when some form of public service delivery is involved. The public service provider is not free to impose religion, but the service user is free to choose it.

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