

GETTING STARTED BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS – ADVICE FOR CHURCHES



WHY BUILD RELATIONSHIPS?

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'If we only worked with Christian organisations, we wouldn't be fulfilling what we're called to do' – St Francis and St Barnabas, Wigan.

'Don't go out on your own if you don't need to' – One Roof Leicester.

There are very few projects which can be done without the buy-in of other organisations. Interviews with churches involved in successful projects nearly always highlighted the importance of good relationships with other institutions in their community. Some projects may require proper partnerships, some may get funding, some may only need planning permission, but all will be best served by having good relationships with other organisations. This resource highlights our interviewees' top tips for successful relationships.

Some other reasons to build relationships include:

Reaching groups you may otherwise not be able to reach: churches can't always reach everyone on their own. Some people may be apprehensive of a church, while others may be from groups who already have existing relationships with other organisations.

Allowing you to do what you're good at: Dave Smith of Boaz Trust explained that working with partners allowed them to take a 'good cop, bad cop' approach with people they were helping, focusing on supporting them rather than the administrative or financial relationships that other agencies have with them.

Relationships last beyond a specific project. The Bishop of Bristol, the Right Revd Viv Faulkner, emphasised that churches can't suddenly change their area completely – they have to earn people's trust. Even if an individual project falls through, the relationships created may help your church and community.

WHO SHOULD YOU BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH?

This varies, but working with as many people as possible can really help. One Christian charity even got the army volunteering, while many have had corporate involvement.

Other churches and faith communities

If you are often helping people with another faith, it is particularly important to work alongside people from those faith communities. They may have language skills which you don't have, they can understand cultural differences, and they may help to build trust with your beneficiaries.

More generally, ecumenical and interfaith relationships can have a variety of unforeseen benefits. Your relationship might develop due to shared mission and develop into fellowship, or vice versa.

How? For advice on building these relationships, see [here](#).

Local authorities

Local authorities can be crucial to schemes – some may need planning permission in order to function, or they may be a useful source of funding. They can also refer service users to you, allowing you to help people who wouldn't normally think of approaching the church.

How? For advice on building these relationships, see [here](#).

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Housing associations

Housing associations can be integral to the viability of affordable housing. As registered providers of social housing, they are eligible to receive government grants. They have existing expertise and can buy supplies in bulk.

Building these relationships can be important even if you are managing the building project yourself. They may be able to manage the property more effectively or efficiently than you can. And **for any type of scheme**, many housing associations give out grants for local community projects.

How? For advice on building these relationships, see [here](#).

Other local organisations and institutions

From homelessness charities to Citizens Advice and even the police, good relationships with others can reduce duplication and bureaucracy, and can also ensure the best service for those you're helping. Referring people to other services can be crucial to ensuring that you help to prevent homelessness, because most users or clients will require support from a range of different organisations. Once these relationships are built, other organisations may refer people on to you, and vice versa.

The local community

You're probably embarking on a project because you want to help the community. It's important to remember that you can also do this in the way you operate the project. Can you make use of local businesses? Can you provide local people with volunteering or training opportunities?

When St Bride's, Trafford was part of a building project, 10% of the building materials were from within 10 miles, and almost all were from within 40 miles. This boosted local businesses, helped to provide jobs, and reduced the environmental impact of the build. They also made it a condition of the construction contract that apprenticeships were run for local people, using the works to give local people employment skills.

HOW TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

'With any negotiation you have to be able to offer something' – Captain John Clifton, Malachi Place.

Don't assume that secular organisations won't be interested in working with a church. There have been plenty of successful projects which bridge the divide.

Your commitment doesn't have to last forever. Churches sometimes resist getting involved in missional projects because they don't have the capacity to see them through. However, a partnership does not always require an ongoing commitment from both parties. A one-off contribution – of money, land or time – could be crucial to a scheme, or you may simply need to bring other organisations together, acting as a catalyst for their work.

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Leeds Methodist Mission in the City Centre did not feel another project addressing homelessness directly was what was needed, but they noticed that local agencies could work together better on a more preventative approach, so their Development Officer, Anna Bland, worked on a short research project to help build these relationships alongside the local council and the Business Improvement District. [Find out more here.](#)

Meet with stakeholders as soon as possible, even if they can't contribute anything at that point. You may need them at a later date, and when you have first come to them unconditionally, this second approach may be better received.

'I knew that the relationships built up were part of the reason this worked' – Anna Bland, Leeds Methodist Mission in the City Centre

If possible, get introduced by a mutual acquaintance. This can bridge the gap between churches and the secular world.

Use resources from your denomination. Don't go it alone if you don't need to. The teams at national or regional levels in your denomination may have existing relationships with housing associations, local authorities or charities, and even if they don't, their support may add clout to your offering.

Show you mean business. Some churches still encounter a slightly patronising 'patting on the head' approach from potential partners. Getting past this is important, so professionalism is key.

Show that you are meeting a need. Organisations – particularly councils – will only fund projects if they understand that something is needed. This should be easy: you should have already thought about this! If the need being met is something that the partner already cares about, even better. Try to highlight the link to their organisation's work. For more [advice on assessing need, see here.](#)

Explain what your church is bringing to the table. If your church is investing money or time, say so. Our case study on [Malachi Place](#), below, shows that the church was meeting a need in a way that the council couldn't.

Explain what else you do. Also explain the community activities that your church provides beyond the strict confines of the scheme being discussed. Lots of partners don't know quite how much churches do. Highlighting the whole package may make building a relationship more attractive for them. Those who have worked with churches have said they can be a perfect partner, so value what you can offer!

In Blackburn, St Silas offered Nightsafe, a local homelessness charity, their old church hall for accommodating 16-25 year olds. Alongside offering the building, they have also put on a thanksgiving service celebrating the residents, knitted hats and gloves for them, a member of the congregation is teaching them cooking, and they're now looking to set up a joint gardening project.

Explain your links to the community. Many stakeholders – particularly councils and housing associations – are eager to partner with organisations who are valued in the community. Show the support for the work that you want to do. In the

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case of housing developments, this will also give partners confidence that the scheme is less likely to face opposition from the local community.

Developments can often come across strong local opposition because they're developed by big organisations. Trafford Housing Trust explained that joint projects with local churches provide a 'useful outsider' who can defend work because they are respected in their local area. [Find out more here.](#)

Showcase good practice. Church leaders have often found that organisations or individuals who are nervous about working with churches can be won over by being shown the successes churches have had elsewhere. Do you know a relevant existing scheme which has worked really well? Tell them about it. If you don't, check out [all our case studies here.](#)

Be honest about any evangelism – or the lack of it. One of the things which partners can be most nervous about is that churches have ulterior motives: that they're only really interested in mission as a means to convert people. If you want to offer to pray with your clients, then be clear about this from the start. But, be clear that you are there to serve people of all faiths and none, and that the service you provide will not be conditional on people agreeing to be prayed for. This may seem obvious to you, but it is important to dispel any potential misunderstandings, especially when you are partnering with organisations that have not previously worked with churches.

Don't give up if a partnership falls through. Partners come and go, particularly on long-term schemes. There are often other people who can step in – which is why building relationships is really important, even if there's no specific reason for them. Even if you don't have someone who can step in immediately, approach others to see how your plans can be resurrected.

Anniesland Methodist Church originally discussed redeveloping their site with one partner, but they pulled out. Don't necessarily take this as a sign that the scheme isn't viable – second time lucky, they found Sanctuary Glasgow, and the scheme was a success. [Find out more here.](#)

HOW TO MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS

Make sure that everyone is credited. Giving credit where it's due is important. Organisations – particularly churches – can say that they don't need to be given credit, because they're doing something for the good of the community. In many cases, though, this should be resisted, as it can lead to resentment or lack of commitment down the line, particularly once founding individuals have moved on. Giving credit is important **even when contributions are unequal.**

Formalities are important for building trust, but they shouldn't be used to paper over cracks in the relationship. Legal documents setting out partnerships are crucial, particularly where financial commitment is involved. By putting these together, partners can have confidence to take risks together. However, sometimes the structures behind a partnership change as they develop. To ensure that this happens well, it's important that the trust is genuinely strong in the first place.

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Ambleside Parish Centre – a joint project by the Anglicans and Methodists – was based on eight legal documents laying out their relationship. However, it was quickly realised that annually alternating the role of treasurer between the denominations was not practical. Because they already trusted one another, changing this was not an issue.

Be clear about roles. Many projects will require multiple partners – say a housing association, a developer, an architect and a church. Being clear of, for example, who is project managing can prevent tensions.

Explain church language and bureaucracy. Even people within the church get confused, so don't assume that something is obvious – or that they needn't understand. Confusion often exists about the relationships between different parts of a denomination – who owns what, and who, ultimately, makes the decisions?

Explain your church's needs, and don't be a pushover. If someone hasn't worked with churches before, they may not notice things that are important to you. Seemingly odd requirements can often not be discussed until too late, such as the high specification for vicarage and manse buildings. If something isn't right, say so at the earliest opportunity.

St Bride's in Trafford initially went with what the architects suggested when constructing a new church building as part of a housing scheme. They made suggestions, but this was just tinkering around the edges. However, the architects had never designed a church before. When Revd Peter Matthews arrived there, he realised this issue, and stayed up late one night making a model of what he imagined the church to be like. This completely changed the relationship. Starting from the church's needs made it much more equal, and prevented silly mistakes.

Be the level-headed one if necessary. It's great to aim big, but churches can sometimes fall into the role of 'dreamers', whilst the partner – who might be funding the project – is expected to provide boundaries and realism. If the partner organisation is also aspirational, then this can lead to a cycle of unrealistic expectations. If you think that something won't work, say so.

Don't rely on just one person as a link. If they move on, you're left to start again from square one.

TACTICS WITH SPECIFIC ORGANISATIONS

Other churches and faith communities

Duplication of provision is wasteful. Is the church around the corner doing really well at amplifying tenant voice on an estate? Don't try to rival them, but instead work together, or do something else that the community badly needs. See here for [advice on how to assess the need](#) of your community.

Duplicating resources can also limit mission. Moving forward with other churches, it can also be helpful to think together about what you both have. Could you share your buildings or your computers?

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The Anglican and Methodist churches in Ambleside realised that ‘the arithmetic did not work’ for them to fulfil their mission aims while both maintaining their separate buildings. By selling the Methodist chapel, they were able to fund a new shared building from which they could both do more. [Find out more here.](#)

Don’t reinvent the wheel. Are there already ecumenical or interfaith structures? Maybe your church hasn’t been very active in the local Churches Together group, but now needs to build relationships. Start by getting more involved in the existing structures – other churches may not appreciate you acting like you’ve just invented ecumenism! If a structure really doesn’t work, don’t use it, but if it does, respect it.

Local authorities

Are you campaigning, or are you doing? Perhaps it’s a bit of both. Regardless, be clear on the approach you’re taking with the council. If you’re campaigning, see [detailed advice here](#).

Demonstrate the support for your work. All partners care about the support you have, but this is perhaps most important with councils. Can you get letters written in support? Can you turn people out at events? For more advice on demonstrating support, see the case study on [Malachi Place](#).

Again, don’t rely on just one person as a link. There’s a particular reason not to rely on one person when talking to councils. Someone you’re talking to may not have the power to make change alone. Ultimately, both political will and institutional buy-in are needed – both councillors and council officers.

Housing associations

Shop around. Not all housing associations are equal. Bigger does not mean better, but neither is a smaller housing association necessarily more suitable. Don’t just think about who will promise you the most money or units, but also their vision and the services they offer. Housing Associations should produce an annual report – easily found on their websites – including various Key Performance Indicators which can be compared with other associations.

Don’t be scared by your different models. Housing Associations generally run a surplus, which can seem alien to charities such as churches. This can lead Christians to be suspicious of their motives. However, it’s important to emphasise that housing associations are not-for-profit and are looking to help people, even if they are big. Some do that better than others, but they are all trying their hardest.

All of the advice and guidance provided in these resources is based on conversations with churches and organisations that are directly involved in responding to housing need in their local area. The advice in this sheet is thanks to:

- Ambleside Methodist Church
- Anniesland Methodist Church and Sanctuary Glasgow
- Balham Community Church
- Boaz Trust
- Diocese of Chelmsford
- Ealing Citizens: St Barnabas and Christ the Saviour, Ealing
- Fiona Mayne, Pioneer at Haywood Village, Weston-super-Mare
- Housing People, Building Communities

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- Keswick Community Housing Trust
- Leeds Methodist Mission in the City Centre
- Malachi Place and Ilford Salvation Army
- One Roof Leicester
- Right Revd Viv Faull, Bishop of Bristol and former Dean of York
- St Bride's, Trafford
- St Edward the Confessor, Mottingham
- St Francis and St Barnabas, Wigan
- St Mary's, Walthamstow
- St Silas, Blackburn and Nightsafe
- Sue Steer, Pioneer Community Worker, New Lubbesthorpe
- West London Mission