

# Visible Discipleship

## Re-imagining Social Responsibility for Today's World

A Discussion Paper produced by the  
Social Responsibility Network, Church of England and Church in Wales



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## Foreword by Bishop of Lichfield

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This report draws on the collective wisdom of social responsibility practitioners from across the Church of England and the Church in Wales. It highlights the vital need to connect parish-based social action with diocesan and national vision.

God's calling can be heard within us, through his church, and through his world. Such a triangulation is necessary as a basis for effective evangelism, as the sharing of the gospel responds to the concerns of those around us, expressed in contemporary language. What is here aptly called 'Visible Discipleship' happens when the church listens to and engages with its social context.

Listening to the world requires both humility and discernment. As the church engages with issues of social and moral justice, so it proclaims the values of the Kingdom, forming working alliances with those who share these values with us. In particular, as we position ourselves alongside those who are excluded from visible abundance, we can from a place of vulnerability give fresh expression to the hope embodied within the gospel.

We are in the business of transforming communities together. As the national churches, we have a responsibility, alongside our fellow Christians and members of other faith communities, to work together for the common good; yet social fragmentation undermines our impact. Our credibility is dependent upon the generosity and social action of churches, communities, and chaplaincies across the nation. Such grass-roots experience validates the gospel we proclaim, and represents a serious challenge to how the church, at every level, allocates its resources. In this way, Visible Discipleship can provide a framework for learning as Christians talk about faith growing in their daily lives.

This report argues that the spiritual and numerical growth of the church is dependent on a sustained engagement with the wider community in areas of mutual vulnerability for the common good. This represents an integral part of the Renewal and Reform of the church, and I commend what follows as a thoughtful and challenging contribution to that agenda.



The Rt Revd Dr Michael Igrave OBE

## Summary

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In November 2016, the Social Responsibility Network (SRN),<sup>1</sup> met for their annual conference, the culmination of a two-year exploration of how social responsibility impacts the mission of the church. As an association of experienced practitioners from across the Church of England and the Church in Wales, the Social Responsibility Network is ideally placed to contribute to discussion of this theme, which speaks directly to challenges raised by the position of the church in post-secular society and the Church of England's ambitious response through Renewal and Reform and the Church in Wales' 2020 Vision.

### Visible Discipleship

This report offers an understanding of social responsibility as 'visible discipleship'. Visible discipleship grows and encourages Christians in their faith. Moreover, active visible disciples, from across the theological spectrum, act as a positive witness to the world, showing the substance of the church's contribution to the common good. As such visible discipleship provides a healthy corrective to an institutional tendency to place greater missional value on internal affairs than on engagement with the wider community. The further breadth, provided by social responsibility's framing of visible discipleship across the Anglican five marks of mission, ensures a comprehensive approach to mission is reimagined in its contemporary context.

### Social Responsibility as Mission

In their exploration of "how social responsibility impacts the mission of the church," SRN members and conference speakers identified five interrelated themes which, taken together, show the significance of this relationship:

- Social responsibility is at the heart of the gospel, building up the Kingdom of God.
- Through social action, the church becomes relationally engaged with the wider community, establishing credibility and discovering the presence of God within his world.
- Social responsibility is at the core of discipleship, as people live out their faith and reflect upon that experience.
- Social responsibility is an intrinsic part of healthy church growth, seeking transformation at every level.
- The challenge of social responsibility is as relevant to the church itself, as it is to the society of which the church is a part.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://srnet.org.uk>

## Diocesan Agency

Members of local churches across the Church of England and Church in Wales are involved in a wide range of social action. Some of this occurs independently, some with Christian organizations, some ecumenically, and some with their own parish church. Across the Social Responsibility Network, there is a wealth of knowledge of, and experience in, supporting grass-roots social action. The role of social responsibility officers (SR officers) is evolving in response to new challenges. Their ministry expresses hope for the church.

Sharing experience, SRN members and colleagues identified six ways in which the SR officer's role was of contemporary significance:

- Ensuring that the transformative missional impact of social action occurs throughout and beyond the church
- Bringing an acute awareness of power dynamics inherent within all social engagement
- Sharing of stories, so that the public voice of the church is informed by grass-roots experience
- Linking with the statutory and voluntary sector to bring about collaborative ventures and release resources
- 'Making things happen' through developing and sharing large project skills
- Providing high-quality practical training to support and extend the ministry of local churches

## Transformation

The national church's legitimacy to shape, and contribute to, a new understanding of Common Good is dependent upon our grass-roots parochial experience. Diocesan social responsibility functions have a vital role in connecting the national with the local, ensuring that each informs, energises and challenges the other, and so helping to fit the church for the journey ahead.

If the role of social responsibility is to be re-imagined for the future, there are three tasks to which the church must devote attention:

- i. A closer analysis of the connection between social responsibility and mission to appreciate the nature of this dynamic relationship and to identify best practice.
- ii. Promotion of discipleship which grows through and into social action as fundamental to the health of the church.
- iii. Theological reflection informed by contemporary experience to reach a new understanding of the Common Good.

# 1 Introduction

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In November 2016, the Social Responsibility Network met for their annual conference, the culmination of a two-year exploration of how social responsibility impacts the mission of the church.<sup>2</sup> As an association of experienced practitioners from across the Church of England and the Church in Wales, the Social Responsibility Network is ideally placed to contribute to discussion of this theme, which speaks directly to challenges raised by the position of the church in post-secular society, the Church in Wales' 2020 Vision,<sup>3</sup> and the Church of England's ambitious response through Renewal and Reform.



## 1.1 Changing Society, Changing Church

The Theos think tank report, 'Doing Good'<sup>4</sup> explores changing patterns of religious attendance and affiliation in Great Britain, but also charts the considerable recent growth in church engagement in social action. It reframes social engagement as 'social liturgy' – the practice of public commitment to the other that is explicitly rooted in and shaped by love for God. It suggests that this represents a healthy redirection of the understanding, even the future, of Christianity in Great Britain. The report concludes by setting out practical and theological work needed to fully ground and develop social liturgy in the life of the church and nation. Although developed concurrently, but separately, to 'Doing Good', this report, Visible Discipleship, can be seen as an initial response to that frame. Visible Discipleship focuses on what diocesan social responsibility resources can offer the development of 'social liturgy' and mission.

Another response to the need to 're-fit' the church for the changing context is the Church of England's Renewal and Reform<sup>5</sup> initiative. Renewal and Reform is an on-going programme aiming to build on the three goals articulated by General Synod in 2010 to:

- contribute as the national church to the common good;
- facilitate the growth of the church in numbers and depth of discipleship;
- re-imagine the church's ministry.

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<sup>2</sup> The work began at the SRN's 2015 conference at which SRN members contributed case-studies for shared analysis. Richard Jordan, former 'Faith in Action Adviser', Bradwell Area, Diocese of Chelmsford, included much of this material within his paper, 'Calling, Discipleship, Action'. SRN held a mid-year study day to discuss this material, and then revisited the topic at its 2016 conference with speakers bringing a range of external perspectives. Throughout this process, Dr Anne Richards, from Church of England's Mission Theology Advisory Group facilitated theological reflection. She also produced a set of resources on Social Engagement and Evangelism for the Mission Theology Advisory Group. Jane Perry attended the 2016 conference as a participant-researcher, her analysis contributing to the content and format of this report. The process was steered by David Primrose, Director of Transforming Communities, Lichfield Diocese, then chair of Social Responsibility Network and the principal author of this report, (email [david.primrose@lichfield.anglican.org](mailto:david.primrose@lichfield.anglican.org)).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/review/>

<sup>4</sup> 'Doing Good: A Future for Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', Nick Spencer, Theos, 2016

<sup>5</sup> [www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform.aspx)

This report's emphasis is on the first goal, 'contributing to the common good', but also supports and speaks to the recent work published on growth in numbers and discipleship, and on reimagining ministry.<sup>6</sup>

The resurgence of a commitment to the common good is of immediate relevance as a crisis of identity has erupted in the political domain in the UK and USA. Inequality is rising. The established political leadership is no longer trusted to deliver prosperity for all. Nationalist sentiments thrive alongside 'othering', whereby, to bolster the identity of the in-group, people of difference become an out-group. Churches have often been seen either to support the status quo or to be devoted to single issue campaigns. There is an opportunity now, in humility, to show how, with God's grace, we love our neighbour as ourselves and in doing so to contribute to the development of the public understanding of 'the common good'.

## 1.2 Social Responsibility and the 'Common Good'

The term 'social responsibility' has been popular within the church for over thirty years. Often ill-defined, it embraces social action, community engagement and development, discipleship, social justice, inter-faith dialogue and, sometimes, environmental concern.

Within the business and corporate world, social responsibility is commonly used to refer to the moral obligation of organizations to act for the benefit of wider society. In that commercial context, there is the acknowledgement of potential conflict between the growth of an organization and the well-being of the environment upon which it, and wider society, ultimately depends for its prosperity and well-being. Thus, corporate social responsibility is both the avoidance of harm and an active contribution to the common good.

In this report, our use of social responsibility is intended as an umbrella term to embrace these several related, yet distinct, concepts. The unifying theme, within a Christian worldview, is the communal nature of society. Placing the well-being of each person within their network of relationships is an important balance to the excessive individualism promoted by material consumerism. This is why the communitarian concept of the common good<sup>7</sup> is an integral part of the Church of England's quinquennial goals.

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*"According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the **common good** indicates 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily'" (Catholic Social Teaching)*

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### *Social Responsibility in the Church of England and Church in Wales*

The Social Responsibility Network is a membership association of practitioners from across the Church of England and Church in Wales.<sup>8</sup> Currently there is representation from 33 of the 40 mainland English dioceses

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform/renewing-discipleship-ministry.aspx>; and GS 2056 Setting God's People Free

<sup>7</sup> As yet, 'common good' does not appear to be comprehensively explored or defined within the Renewal and Reform programme of work. Our working definition comes from contemporary Catholic social teaching, summarised in the 2004 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, chapter 4, part II, quoting the Second Vatican Council document, *Gaudium et spes* (1965:26), this says, "According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the common good indicates 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily'" (#164) - <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=7214>

<sup>8</sup> The Social Responsibility Network (SRN) was formed in 2003. Its predecessor, the Anglican Association for Social Responsibility, began in 1986, at which time social responsibility officers were already holding national conferences.



## 2 Theology of Visible Discipleship

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Visible discipleship grows and encourages Christians in their faith. Moreover, active visible disciples, from across the theological spectrum, act as a positive witness to the world, showing the substance of the church's contribution to the common good. As such visible discipleship provides a healthy corrective to an institutional tendency to place greater missional value on internal affairs than on engagement with the wider community. The further breadth provided by social responsibility's framing of 'visible discipleship' across the Anglican five marks of mission ensures a comprehensive approach to mission is reimaged in its contemporary context.

### 2.1 Discipleship which can be seen

Visible discipleship is, by definition, discipleship which can be seen. A key text for Renewal and Reform<sup>10</sup> is Matthew 5:15, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house." Anne Richards framed theological reflections for the 2016 SRN conference around the next verse, Matthew 5:16, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

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*"No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven " (Matt 5:15-16)*

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In developing the theme of visible discipleship, Anne argued these words can be seen as a theological axis, inextricably linking mission and social engagement:

- Disciples act as illuminators, showing up what is hidden and making things seen – *let your light so shine*
- Disciples draw people forward, creating a transaction – *before others*
- Disciples provide examples of change, transfiguration, witness - *so that they may see your good works*
- Disciples shape a lens to the Father, a pathway to God – *and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

The good works inherent in lived-out discipleship light up the world around us.<sup>11</sup> The brightness of this illumination exposes what is sordid, and wrong, and in need of reconciliation. The Light of the World shines into dark corners. It shows the church the redemptive work in which it is called to share.

### Social Engagement and Evangelism

The Church of England's Mission Theology Advisory Group,<sup>12</sup> led by Anne Richards, has shown how social engagement relates to the five new evangelistic categories of 'pursuing the human; making community; creating new news; honouring memory; and being the face of love' (see example in Figure 2). Resources created for the Social Responsibility Network, use these themes to enable churches to build trust, confidence,

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<sup>10</sup> [www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform/lay-leadership.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform/lay-leadership.aspx)

<sup>11</sup> Anne Richards on Matthew 5:14-16

<sup>12</sup> [www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/mission/mission-theology.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/mission/mission-theology.aspx)



hope and sharing as a bedrock for evangelism and social action.”<sup>13</sup> They also demonstrate the ways through which social action is integral to effective evangelism in contemporary society.

Figure 2: Social Engagement and Mission: 5 Evangelistic Categories



- *Pursuing the Human*: who died here? Who keeps bringing the flowers?
- *Making Community*: who comes to mourn here? What are they looking for?
- *Creating New News*: what story of hope can speak here?
- *Honouring Memory*: what does this shrine mean to people?
- *Being the Face of Love*: who sits here and cares for and witnesses to those who grieve?

## Mission and Discipleship

A current research project by the Saltley Trust<sup>14</sup> develops an earlier finding from their work that *‘Christian mission work is best seen not as the fruit of discipleship, but as interwoven in discipleship.’*

The Trust’s research project ‘What Helps Christians Grow’ identified four paths of discipleship, namely Church Worship, Group Activity, Individual Experience, and Public Engagement. Along with Individual Experience, there was a significant correlation between Public Engagement and ‘depth of discipleship’. The most frequently selected example was *‘trying to put my faith into practice in my daily life.’* ‘Christians in Practice’<sup>15</sup> explores how a biblical understanding of discipleship is embedded within the relationship between the twin concepts of ‘following’ and ‘learning’.

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*‘Christian mission work is best seen not as the fruit of discipleship, but as interwoven in discipleship.’*

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It follows that there is a close connection between discipleship and lay leadership.<sup>16</sup>

*“It is when people become aware of the great things that Christ has done for them and wake up to the gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed on them that a joyful and willing leadership emerges, for it is out of communities of disciples that cadres of leaders will appear. The opportunity before us is therefore nothing less*

<sup>13</sup> [www.churchofengland.org/media/2513378/anne\\_richards\\_and\\_mtag.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/2513378/anne_richards_and_mtag.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [www.saltleytrust.org.uk](http://www.saltleytrust.org.uk)

<sup>15</sup> [www.saltleytrust.org.uk/new-project-christians-in-practice](http://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/new-project-christians-in-practice)

<sup>16</sup> Simon Foster, researcher for St Peter’s Saltley Trust, contributor to the 2016 SRN conference

*than the liberation of both clergy and laity into the fullness of following Christ for the sake of the church and the world.”<sup>17</sup>*

This vision encompasses the vocation of the whole people of God, but as Alison Webster<sup>18</sup> argues the contribution of lay Christians is often undervalued because much social action takes place in their daily work or within their local community. If the context is explicitly Christian, it is often ecumenical. As a result, the church leadership can fail to recognise such activities as part of Christian discipleship. *“The hour leading a bible-study group is noticed ahead of the week teaching at a college of further education; the hospitality as a church welcomer is valued ahead of working as volunteer in the local hospital.”*

This theme is central to the first culture shift of Renewal and Reform’s Reimagining Ministry. *“Until, together, we find a way to form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel we will never set God’s people free to evangelise the nation.”<sup>19</sup>*

## 2.2 Across the theological spectrum

An indication of the centrality of social responsibility to the mission of the church may be gleaned from the breadth of theological positions adopted by practitioners. SRN members have personal affiliations to anglo-catholic, liberal and charismatic evangelical traditions. Thirty church leaders, asked about their involvement with social justice, offered biblical references ranging from gospel stories to Old Testament lament.<sup>20</sup> In the survey of a church-partnerships scheme,<sup>21</sup> participating clergy and laity identified a similar variety of motivations. They drew on the breadth of church traditions to support their engagement in social action, with many firmly rooted in scripture.

This support from diverse theological positions enables an effective unity in action. This is most easily seen in the ecumenical nature of much social action, which also *“allows engagement with those who speak differently about faith.”<sup>22</sup>* Where projects serve a larger conurbation, not only do churches of differing denominations work effectively together, but Anglican churches of contrasting traditions are in active collaboration. Such practical examples of Christian unity are a living testimony to the core of the gospel expressed in action. They mitigate public perceptions of apparent disunity and potential rivalry within and between denominations.

SR officers<sup>23</sup> recognise the importance of equipping those involved in social action to articulate how their actions connect with their Christian faith. It is this primary focus on building the Kingdom of God, with church growth as a corollary, which enables SRN members to explore the distinctively Christian emphasis of any voluntary work. This is a healthy corrective to an institutional tendency to place greater missional value on internal affairs than on engagement with the wider community.

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<sup>17</sup> [www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform/lay-leadership.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform/lay-leadership.aspx)

<sup>18</sup> “Lay Christian Engagement in Social Action and the Public Square”, by Alison Webster, Social Responsibility Adviser, Diocese of Oxford

<sup>19</sup> General Synod, February 2017, “GS 2056 Setting God’s People Free”

<sup>20</sup> Survey by Ellen Loudon, Director of Social Justice, Diocese of Liverpool

<sup>21</sup> For Richer For Poorer, Diocese of Lichfield

<sup>22</sup> Simon Foster, Saltley Trust

<sup>23</sup> Comment from Cate Williams, Mission and Evangelism Officer, Diocese of Gloucester

## 2.3 From a Global Perspective

Working together for the common good has its roots in the Anglican Communion's historic commitment to the five Marks of Mission.<sup>24</sup>

Representing the global context for the particular focus of the Church of England on its Renewal and Reform agenda, the five marks of mission allow for a continuum of generality moving from individual conversion, to discipleship within the church, to care within community, to justice within society, to global sustainability.

Diocesan staff carrying social responsibility portfolios retain a wider focus on those matters directly related to care, justice, and the environment. This sets up a healthy dialogue with other missional practitioners more focused on the first one or two marks of mission. This ensures that the comprehensive approach to mission is reimagined in its contemporary context.

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### *FIVE MARKS OF MISSION:*

*To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom;*

*To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;*

*To respond to human need by loving service;*

*To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation;*

*To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth*

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/identity/marks-of-mission.aspx>

## 3 Social Responsibility as Mission

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In their exploration of “how social responsibility impacts the mission of the church,” SRN members and conference speakers identified five interrelated themes which, taken together, show the significance of this relationship.

### 3.1 Heart of Gospel

Social responsibility is “the heart of the gospel and the core of discipleship”:<sup>25</sup>

- *“the mission of the church is not to build up the church but to build up the Kingdom of God. This is a fundamental tenet...”*<sup>26</sup>
- *“social responsibility simply ‘IS’ the mission of the church”*<sup>27</sup>
- *“it is impossible to love Jesus and not to care about welfare of people, in every respect. As a 19th Century Anglican slum priest in the East End of London put it – he said, if you love Jesus Christ, you will care about drains. Proclaiming the Good News of Jesus and seeking to transform society are two sides of the same coin.”*<sup>28</sup>

In her analysis of social projects and church growth in Wales, Carol Wardman quotes John Milbank to make explicit the link between social responsibility as mission and the Kingdom of God:

*“the more that Christians have the social dimension at the heart of their public vision, the more they pursue a particular approach which remembers that the Church is trying to be the kingdom in embryo.”*<sup>29</sup>

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*“Social responsibility simply ‘IS’  
the mission of the church”*

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This accords with Renewal and Reform’s Vision: *“Renewal and Reform is about the kingdom of God rather than fixing the church.”*<sup>30</sup> Thus social action, understood correctly as the heart of mission, *“stops the church becoming an exclusive holy club, instead it is faith in action and therefore relevant to the world.”*<sup>31</sup>

### 3.2 Relationally Engaged

Social responsibility brings church people into contact with those outside of the church:

*“One thing that we can certainly say about discipleship is that it brings us into direct contact with the world as well as the person of Jesus. The disciples become disciples when they are called – in an odd sort of a way – at once out of the world, but also into the world.”*<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Tony Oakden, Church and Community Adviser, Diocese of Guildford

<sup>26</sup> Ed Saville, Social Responsibility Officer, Diocese of Blackburn

<sup>27</sup> Alison Peacock, Transforming Communities Officer, Diocese of Manchester and Monica Weld-Richards, College Chaplain, Diocese of Liverpool

<sup>28</sup> Justin Welby, quoted by Jack Palmer-White, Archbishop of Canterbury’s Social & Public Affairs Adviser

<sup>29</sup> John Milbank, quoted in *‘Light under the Bushel’* an analysis of social projects and church growth by Carol Wardman, Bishops’ Adviser for Church and Society, Church in Wales (July 2014)

<sup>30</sup> [www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform/about-rr/vision-narrative.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform/about-rr/vision-narrative.aspx)

<sup>31</sup> Ed Saville, Social Responsibility Officer, Diocese of Blackburn

A key feature of Christianity in contemporary British society is that, contrary to the wider narratives of decline, the numbers of Christians engaging in social action appears to have risen considerably over the past 10 years.<sup>33</sup> Coinciding with the national politics of Big Society and Localism, there has been a shift in the church from social projects employing staff to community engagement reliant upon congregational participation. Estimates suggest that, each month, members of the Church of England alone give 22.3 million hours in voluntary service. Thus, many more church members are involved in social justice activities, and have direct contact with people living with vulnerabilities.

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*“Facts inform, stories transform.”*

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Many of these activities, such as foodbanks and street pastors, are ecumenical, prompting Christians to reflect on their experience with others from different churches and faith traditions. Furthermore, engagement in relational social action also reasserts ecclesial identity as an inclusive servant church and this basic attitude, in and of itself, enables the church to reach beyond its natural constituency. Many young people have an acute awareness of social justice and of environmental issues. They can resonate with a church fully engaged with these same issues. Similarly, those in neglected urban estates respond to faithful servant ministry.

The resulting transformation can be multi-dimensional: When people outside the church come into contact with the church building, institution and people, then misconceptions can be replaced with a deeper understanding of our faith in action. New relationships are built, and relationships are key to evangelism. Conversely, the personal impact of such contact means that church members are exposed to the call of God mediated through the brokenness of his world. As such, social responsibility places the mission of the church within God’s wider mission in the world, the *Missio Dei*, with social action as the dynamic frontier.

When a church listens attentively to its community, it is ready to hear God speak through that community.<sup>34</sup> When God’s call is mediated through the world, then that call becomes truly missional. God’s message flows

both ways, back and forth between church and community. This goes beyond statements of belief into personal encounters. Yet this effective engagement cannot be taken for granted. Bishop Geoff<sup>35</sup> warned, *“the gospel is impeded by anything less than total honesty.”* Jack Palmer-White<sup>36</sup> noted that, *“the Church’s authority, when it speaks on policy, comes from its role as a national church, connected to all*

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*“the gospel is impeded by anything less than total honesty.”*

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*communities ... our legitimacy to speak and to seek to influence comes under scrutiny when what is being said doesn’t match up with the experience on the ground.”*

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<sup>32</sup> Simon Foster

<sup>33</sup> Spencer 2016 ‘Doing Good’ p12

<sup>34</sup> Dr Lindsey Hall, Director of Vocations and Training, Diocese of Lichfield, and contributor to 2016 SRN conference

<sup>35</sup> Rt Revd Geoff Annas, Bishop of Stafford, was a contributor to the 2016 SRN conference

<sup>36</sup> Jack Palmer-White, The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Social & Public Affairs Adviser

### 3.3 Core of Discipleship



The theological basis for social responsibility as the core of discipleship is set out in Section 2. One contribution of social responsibility to mission is based on the transformative potential of theological reflection on that discipleship:

If you ask some-one what it means for them to be a Christian, they talk about what they do rather than what they believe.<sup>37</sup> Over the last two decades, the nature of what churches and dioceses do, in terms of social action, has been changing. SRN members have been part of this transition from service-delivery projects, often with paid staff, to more asset-based community development, mainly reliant on congregational energy. In the Web of Poverty,<sup>38</sup> loneliness and isolation have replaced death and morbidity as the focus of concern. Places of Welcome<sup>39</sup> is typical, with churches and local community groups providing a network of simple hospitality. Church members involved in such activities grow as disciples. Their faith stretches to accommodate the life-experience of others which can be so different from their own. As described above, encountering new forms of vulnerability, social action brings about the transformation of all those involved.

This fuller appreciation of the range of social action involved in discipleship leads Alison Webster to five conclusions, each of which represents a contribution which social responsibility, expressed as visible discipleship, might make to mission:

- the rich opportunities for theological reflection stimulated through these diverse encounters;
- the extent of spiritual discernment taking place outside of the church as Christians respond to God's call, their gifts, and the opportunities;
- the need to reconnect people's experiences as part of the worshipping community with their experience of social action;
- the valuable insights to be gained from lay Christians as they apply their faith to the complexities of daily living;
- the need to ensure that the church values and learns from the practical theological wisdom being developed by its own laity.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Foster, researcher for St Peter's Saltley Trust, contributor to the 2016 SRN conference

<sup>38</sup> [www.cuf.org.uk/Pages/FAQs/Category/cuf-publications](http://www.cuf.org.uk/Pages/FAQs/Category/cuf-publications)

<sup>39</sup> [www.placesofwelcome.org](http://www.placesofwelcome.org)

### 3.4 Growth

Renewal and Reform recognises that growth in the church can encompass numbers and depth of discipleship. There is a growing recognition that kingdom-building work should result in numerical church growth, hence this latter measure can serve as one of several key performance indicators.<sup>40</sup> ‘Light under the Bushel’, the report on Social Projects in the Church in Wales,<sup>41</sup> accords with the CUF 2012 ‘Growing Church through Social Action’ and its 2014 ‘Good Neighbour’s Report’,<sup>42</sup> and ‘From Anecdote to Evidence’,<sup>43</sup> showing that churches which are growing are engaged with their local communities.

The transformative power of the relational encounters resulting from visible discipleship, however, points to a third area of growth, the renewal of creation<sup>44</sup> and social transformation. Bishop Geoff<sup>44</sup> noted that the *“primary business of church is to witness to God’s transforming power – in individuals, communities, society, nations, and the world.”* Social action is holistic. It testifies to God’s love for the whole of his creation. It brings about individual transformation for those involved, community transformation within one’s existing network of relationships, social transformation as issues of social justice are identified, and institutional transformation as the church addresses systemic failings.<sup>45</sup>

These categories of growth – numerical and transformational, for individual disciples or wider communities, society or institutions - are not mutually exclusive. However, Bishop Geoff also cautioned that, in his experience, *“social responsibility which is effective and missional has to be grown from within, by those who understand their community.”* Colleagues in the Social Responsibility Network were more blunt with their comments regarding the importance of social action for effective evangelism:

- *“if it makes what you are doing relevant to people on margins, they might come and talk to you. If it is not relevant, you have no chance.”<sup>46</sup>*
- *“no traction without action”*

### 3.5 Challenge

*“Every part of the church ... is in the public sphere. The Church holds a privileged position in the ways in which it is able to contribute, and strives to do the greatest good it can in that position. The main reason why I say that every part of the church – from parish to the national level – is in the public sphere is because the Church’s work can only be done well and effectively when it is rooted in the everyday lived experience of those whom we serve. A sense of social responsibility impacts the mission of the church because it roots our actions and engagement with political structures in the lives of real people, rather than statistics or focus groups.”<sup>47</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> However, what is measured and how is key. For example, a church member’s involvement in social action may go beyond the boundaries of their own church community, in an ecumenical venture, with a Christian charity, or linked to a secular organization, something to which we return in Section 4.

<sup>41</sup> By Carol Wardman

<sup>42</sup> [www.cuf.org.uk/Pages/FAQs/Category/cuf-publications](http://www.cuf.org.uk/Pages/FAQs/Category/cuf-publications)

<sup>43</sup> [www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report)

<sup>44</sup> Rt Revd Geoff Annas, Bishop of Stafford, contributor to 2016 SRN conference

<sup>45</sup> Richard Jordan identifies the first, third and fourth within “Calling, Discipleship, Action,” to which Simon Foster added the second

<sup>46</sup> Ed Saville

<sup>47</sup> Jack Palmer-White

As the established church based upon the parochial system, the Church of England has a presence at every level of society. So, when the church calls for changes in society, the church itself is also part of the society that has to change. The power of the prophetic voice is levelled as much at the corporate church as the wider world. *“For the Church, solidarity, based on the incarnational relationship of Jesus, of ‘God with us’, is fundamental to our approach to public policy.”*<sup>48</sup> Examples of public issues of contemporary concern would be:<sup>49</sup>

1. Refugees and asylum seekers;
2. Housing crisis;
3. Loneliness and isolation;
4. Secular perceptions of faith;
5. Church and statutory agencies;
6. Personal identity and renewal of political life.

When the church engages with these, or any other issues, the impact is disconcerting for all those around. There is a high level of autonomy in the relationship between church-members and parish priest, between parishes and diocese, and between dioceses and national church. Such challenges call for a radical response.



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<sup>48</sup> Jack Palmer-White

<sup>49</sup> Identified by participants at the SRN conference in November 2016



## 4 Diocesan Agency

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Members of local churches across the Church of England and Church in Wales are involved in a wide range of social action. Some of this occurs independently, some with Christian and other organizations, some ecumenically, and some with their own parish church. Across the Social Responsibility Network, there is a wealth of knowledge of, and experience in supporting grass-roots social action. The role of Social Responsibility Officers is evolving in response to new challenges. Their ministry expresses hope for the church.

The diocesan social responsibility role has been changing.<sup>50</sup>

Where social responsibility officers were 'experts' on a range of social issues, now people search for information on the internet or approach a para-church organisation specialising in that area of work. Project expertise is available from multiple sources. Many motivated Christians use social media to form their own support groups, so a central coordinating role is less important. For many SR officers, the current role may concentrate more on working with individual or small groups of churches on specific initiatives. It was suggested this could be particularly effective when focused on supporting churches with enough resources to be aspirational, but not so much as to be self-reliant, working around motivation, inspiration, training, and networking.

Sharing experience, SRN members and colleagues identified six ways in which the SR officer's role was of contemporary significance:

1. Ensuring that the transformative missional impact of social action occurs throughout and beyond the church
2. Bringing an acute awareness of power dynamics inherent within all social engagement
3. Sharing of stories, so that the public voice of the church is informed by grass-roots experience
4. Linking with the statutory and voluntary sector to bring about collaborative ventures and release resources
5. 'Making things happen' through developing and sharing large project skills
6. Providing high-quality practical training to support and extend the ministry of local churches.

**Figure 3: Six Contemporary SR Contributions**



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<sup>50</sup> Comments from Chris Neilson, Church and Community Officer, Diocese of St Albans

## 4.1 Transformative Mission

As explored in Section 3, social responsibility is at the heart of the Gospel, the core of discipleship and integral to church mission and growth. Its depth of relational engagement is evangelistic and offers prophetic challenge. However, when asked about their role, rather than discuss its charism, diocesan social responsibility officers tend to list activities with which they are involved. It is important to recognise the transformative impact of this charism, not just on individuals or the local community but also institutionally, on local churches, dioceses and the Church as a whole.

SR officers have a central connecting role, linking different layers of transformation: for individuals and parishes, in communities and wider society and across the institution of the Church. With the size and structural complexity of the Church of England and Church in Wales, SR officers and other central sector posts mediate between parishes and the diocese. SR officers ensure a flow of energy between grass-roots initiatives and episcopal leadership. Ensuring that the transformative missional impact of social action occurs throughout and beyond the church is a central part of the SR officer role, which needs to be illuminated, developed and valued.

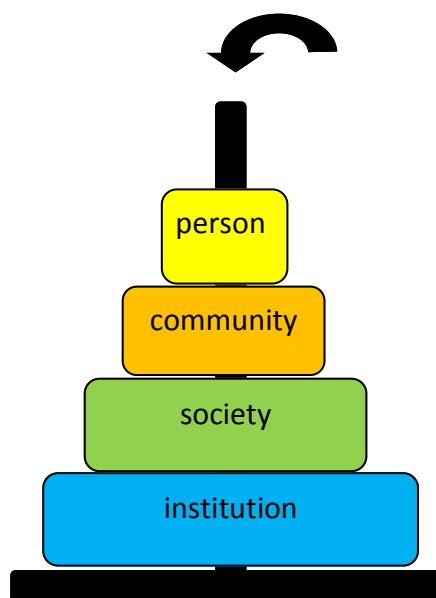
## 4.2 Awareness of Power

The four-part model of ‘doing for/doing with/being for/ being with’<sup>51</sup> highlights the value of ‘being with’ those whom we seek to serve. There is an acknowledgement of how profoundly discomfiting this experience can be, with a human reflex to revert to the more impersonal ‘doing for’ others. Anne Richards articulated the dangers of cultural imperialism when those engaged in social action imagine that they ‘know better’ than those actually living in adverse circumstances.

There is a seductive pressure to ‘do good to’ those who are vulnerable. This can further undermine people’s autonomy. When dioceses run social projects, then SR officers ensure that the ethos is that of empowerment. When churches are involved in local projects, then SR officers have a role in supporting those working for an ethos of enabling, and against one that would patronise. This can involve asking uncomfortable questions, and helping those running such projects think through the implications of their actions. For example, Oxford’s SR Department organised a conference on “Beyond Foodbanks”, with a twin focus on foodbanks as a response to, and complicit with, systemic food poverty.

In dioceses such as Chester and York, asset-based community development is being encouraged as an approach that accords with gospel values and fits well with the local nature of the parochial system. Likewise, community organising is a vehicle which harnesses grass-roots energy to good effect from London to Taunton; and Lichfield used participatory budgeting to relocate power and accountability.

Figure 4: Transformative impact of Social Responsibility



<sup>51</sup> At conference, Simon Foster referenced this from ‘Nazareth Manifesto’, Sam Wells, 2015, Wiley

### 4.3 Public Voice

SR officers support the diocesan bishop and senior leadership in their strategic oversight of the church's social engagement. This includes an awareness of the social action taking place across the diocese, as well as the potential for new initiatives. SR officers facilitate two-way communication between the central diocesan vision and locally-run grass-roots social action.

Translating the 'common good' into practical action can challenge the integrity of the church, especially where social fragmentation distorts the impact of central initiatives. Two examples serve as illustration:

- First, the Archbishop of Canterbury's high profile challenge to pay-day lending contributed to the establishment of the new Churches' Mutual Credit Union, and the work of the Just Finance Foundation. The capping of pay-day loans is a campaign success. However, SR officers have had to work hard, in the face of considerable challenges, to link their promotion of local credit unions, financial literacy, budgeting, and debt counselling with the national initiatives.
- Jack Palmer-White testified to the positive impact on Lambeth Palace of the Syrian family living there as part of the government's refugee resettlement programme. At a local level, many churches are struggling to retain public concern for asylum-seekers and refugees whose arrival pre-dates the Syrian crisis and for whom provision is much less adequate.

In dioceses and across the church, the sharing of stories is essential to ensure existing grass-roots social action receives recognition and support.

Such involvement draws attention to issues of social justice. These are to be addressed both by church leadership and by regular church members. SR officers have a role in liaising with national charities such as Church Action on Poverty<sup>52</sup> and CUF,<sup>53</sup> as well as promoting grass-roots initiatives such as Justice Mail.<sup>54</sup> They have a responsibility to challenge injustice both within the church and within wider society. Issues currently being contested by groups within the church include the development of affordable housing on church land, shrinking the church's carbon footprint, positive discrimination, and investing resources in areas of deprivation. All this requires good theology, with SR officers both contributing to, and disseminating widely, the church's thinking on contemporary issues.

SR officers work closely with diocesan communications departments. Those good news stories, which appeal to the general public, are often about social action. Likewise, when the church becomes involved in campaigning, this is usually on issues with social justice implications.

SR officers have a role in networking practitioners and sharing local knowledge. This includes mapping and the maintenance of central directories, as parish-based initiatives are essentially 'parochial', and tend not to publish their activities beyond their own immediate circles. This grass-roots knowledge enables SR officers to encourage networking across dioceses, between parishes, and with other groups sharing similar interests. Across a diocese, there may be a small number of individuals developing a particular theme, whom the SR

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<sup>52</sup> [www.church-poverty.org.uk](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk)

<sup>53</sup> [www.cuf.org.uk](http://www.cuf.org.uk)

<sup>54</sup> [www.justicemail.org.uk](http://www.justicemail.org.uk)

officer may introduce to each other to provide mutual support. Some initiatives, such as Places of Welcome,<sup>55</sup> are replicable.

The Social Responsibility Network (SRN) has an efficient internal communications structure to seek and share information between practitioners in 33 dioceses in England and 3 in Wales. For example, SRN contributed to the identification of dementia-friendly church contacts in 32 dioceses in the Church of England. They have now been linked together. Similarly, CUF's Together Network<sup>56</sup> links development workers for Joint Ventures in 17 dioceses.

#### 4.4 Connecting for the Kingdom

SR officers have a particular responsibility for diocesan links with the public sector. Statutory agencies and churches share the same general concerns for the well-being of the whole population. They share the same particular concerns for those who are most vulnerable. This generates opportunities for collaboration. Whilst no main-land diocese is coterminous with current local authority boundaries, several dioceses have developed significant relationships with overlapping authorities. The pace of change in the delivery of statutory services, and the impact of austerity, demands fresh approaches. This is an area with great potential, fraught with danger. Parochial autonomy means that dioceses can encounter difficulties when delivering commissioned services through groups of churches. In such circumstances, they may rely on parallel structures.

SRN members are currently discussing with the statutory sector matters such as the settlement of refugees and asylum-seekers, modern day slavery, winter night shelters, community cohesion, older people's services, and loneliness. Local churches have the ability to respond quickly to new challenges, and to use congregational input and existing resources to develop innovative responses. Whilst the situation varies across the country, many SR officers speak of an open relationship with colleagues from the statutory sector. Indeed, for many the issue is more of ignorance regarding how faith organizations work, rather than suspicion or hostility towards churches.

Often those in the statutory sector who do engage with SR officers are individuals keen to make that relationship work. Jack Palmer-White was able to reflect on the national picture, when he identified three views broadly held by government officials. Some see Christians and others of faith as 'do gooders', without acknowledging the underlying religious motivation. Some focus on religious extremism, which they perceive as a threat to democracy. And then some see faith communities as just like everyone else. The religious illiteracy inherent in all three views present a challenge for the national church as it seeks to contribute to the common good.

SR officers are mindful of the diversity of the voluntary sector. Some charities have a national profile, operating effectively as not-for-profit businesses, reliant upon employed staff. Others are dependent on volunteers utilising local community resources. Churches more closely resemble the latter group. The development of franchises,<sup>57</sup> such as Trussell Trust, Street Pastors, and Christians against Poverty, has enabled many churches to use congregational resources to help people in adversity. Many of these projects

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<sup>55</sup> [www.placesofwelcome.org](http://www.placesofwelcome.org)

<sup>56</sup> [www.cuf.org.uk/together-network](http://www.cuf.org.uk/together-network)

<sup>57</sup> The Cinnamon Network [www.cinnamonnetwork.co.uk](http://www.cinnamonnetwork.co.uk) promotes many of these.

have ecumenical support. Other projects, such as Near Neighbours,<sup>58</sup> involve different faith communities, working together for the common good and building community cohesion.

## 4.5 Making things happen

Many SRN members distinguish between the work undertaken by local churches, and the work of diocesan Social Projects, the latter being dependent on external funding.<sup>59</sup> Some dioceses have established relationships with a principal local authority. For example, the Diocese of Guildford's Communities Engagement team<sup>60</sup> has been particularly successful at delivering a wide variety of services across Surrey with local authority funding. In Blackburn Diocese, external partners fund the church's work with prisoners, and refugees, and the running of Child Contact Centres and Food Banks.<sup>61</sup>

In these situations, SR officers and their colleagues are involved in raising, receiving, and managing considerable amounts of statutory and charitable funds. There are large project skills associated with such work, in bid-writing, sustainability, business planning, financial and project management, monitoring and evaluation. Managing closure well is another vital skill. Such experience and expertise is available to support parishes engaged in major projects of their own, and can mitigate some of the associated risks when dioceses inherit liability for failed parish projects.

## 4.6 Equipping the local Church for action

Through their awareness of parish concerns, SR officers are able to identify relevant training to help local churches develop and extend their ministries. Recent examples include work with themes such as asylum-seekers, disability, loneliness, dementia, and food poverty. Bishop Geoff observed *"that Social Responsibility that is effective and missional has to be grown from within by those who really do understand the nature of the community and the lives of the individuals they are trying to serve."* SR officers know the importance of acute listening to local concerns. Central sector initiatives which do not resonate with parochial concerns are at best ignored, at worst resented as intrusive pressure which manifests a lack of understanding. If training is not perceived to be of direct relevance, then local clergy and church-members opt out. Possessing a high level of grass-roots awareness is an essential aspect of the diocesan SR role. This ensures that local initiatives are encouraged and training resources effectively deployed. SR officers can also enable local churches to reflect on the missional significance of their ministries, and of the missional significance of the individual ministries exercised daily by church members.

SR officers are able to source high-quality expertise. This can come from existing parish ministries, or from colleagues in the voluntary and statutory sector. The cost to the diocese can be minimal. Participants in centrally organised training events are able to remain in contact through mutually supportive networks.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> [www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours](http://www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours)

<sup>59</sup> From a day seminar run by SRN on working with external partners.

<sup>60</sup> [www.cofeguildford.org.uk/about/communities-engagement](http://www.cofeguildford.org.uk/about/communities-engagement)

<sup>61</sup> [www.blackburn.anglican.org/more\\_info.asp?current\\_id=615](http://www.blackburn.anglican.org/more_info.asp?current_id=615)

<sup>62</sup> For example, SR officers in northern dioceses have collaborated to host regional training events on various aspects of mental health. Hereford has provided high quality training on the impact of loneliness. Carlisle has arranged training on an ecumenical basis for dementia-friendly churches across the diocese, whilst Lichfield is providing deanery-based courses.

## 5 Transformation

If the role of social responsibility is to be re-imagined for the future, there are three tasks to which the church must devote attention:

- First, the connection between social responsibility and mission requires closer analysis, to appreciate the nature of this dynamic relationship and to identify best practice.
- Second, promoting the way in which discipleship grows through and into social action is fundamental to the health of the church.
- Third, a new understanding of the common good requires theological reflection informed by contemporary experience.

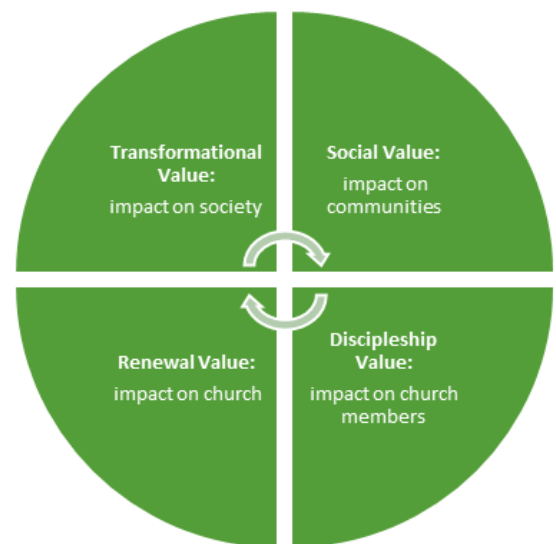
### 5.1 Research and Analysis

There is an urgent need for more comprehensive evidence regarding both the scale and impact of church initiated social action and wider visible discipleship.<sup>63</sup> In the past, research has been hindered by SR practitioners' reluctance to gather data on the missional impact of social action. When assessment was required by external funders, their requirements relied on secular measures. Social action has been presented as obedience to a gospel imperative, that we love our neighbour as ourselves, rather than as a tool for church growth. Jesus' injunction not to flaunt our good deeds<sup>64</sup> has led to their concealment. However, it is increasingly important for the Church to understand the scale of social action and to begin to compare and contrast the effectiveness of various forms. Most social action undertaken by the church is reliant upon congregational resources. Good analysis will allow church members to make informed decisions on how they give of their time and talents. Robust research leads to educated choices, to be revised in the light of on-going monitoring and evaluation.<sup>65</sup>

SRN is committed to support the thorough assessment of the impact of social responsibility, and suggests four parameters (Figure 5)

SRN offers those undertaking such research access to contemporary practice for both qualitative and quantitative studies. In group discussion in 2015, SRN members concluded: "*Facts inform, stories transform.*"

Figure 5: Four Parameters of Social Responsibility



<sup>63</sup> To be most useful, this evidence needs to be robust, but also sensitive and intelligent – encompassing, as far as possible, the full breadth and depth of Christian social action. 'Telling our stories well' will involve numerical estimates of scale and more in-depth understand of the ways in which a difference is being made.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew 6:2-4

<sup>65</sup> In Liverpool, Ellen Loudon is seeking to introduce a proximate measure of social justice engagement into annual parish returns. In Manchester, Alison Peacock is developing more sophisticated statistical analysis. Chester's Director of Social Responsibility, Debbie Dalby, is looking to collect soft data. In Oxford, Alison Webster is considering how to measure 'social liturgy'.

## 5.2 Discipleship

Christians refer to their behaviour to illustrate their faith. Often, they cannot explain the connection. Contemporary research is exploring the symbiotic relationship between social action and discipleship.<sup>66</sup> Many Christians need help to explain the relationship between their faith and their behaviour. In a similar manner, SR officers need to articulate how the grass-roots social engagement of local churches interacts with the diocesan vision. The Church of England's Renewal and Reform agenda, as well as the Church in Wales' 2020 Vision, needs to recognise the Christian distinctiveness embedded within the church's involvement in social responsibility. This should then be an integral part of strategic developments on Lay Leadership and Discipleship.<sup>67</sup>

## 5.3 Common Good

Now is the time for a more rigorous exploration of the common good. The concept of the common good had stood against the post-Enlightenment materialistic assumptions of individualistic democracy. The political consensus, which held that promoting self-interest would bring benefits for all, has now been shattered. The existing structures sought to assert 'business as usual' after the 2008 financial crisis. In 2016, people on both sides of the Atlantic rejected that stance, choosing the only alternative presented to them. That alternative thrives on social fragmentation and the alienation of others. Now is the time for the national church to reassert the common good as the essential socio-political paradigm.<sup>68</sup> However, to give lasting hope, the church needs to think afresh about what the common good means in its contemporary context.<sup>69</sup> Yet as national church, we have been identified with the very consensus which has been rejected. It is through our grass-roots parochial experience that the national church can claim its legitimacy to help shape the development and practice of common good. And diocesan social responsibility departments have a vital role in connecting the national with the local, ensuring that each informs, energises, and challenges the other.

This calls for a radical re-evaluation of what is 'common' and what is 'good'. This will explore an all-embracing commitment to the whole community and a concern for the well-being of those who are vulnerable. It will recognise the Spirit of God present amongst those who experience marginalization. It will build relationships of mutual respect and benefit. Informed by its grass-roots experience, the church can have a fresh understanding of the common good, embedded in parishes across the nation. The church now needs to invest resources in developing a theology of the common good that is both practical and credible. SRN and others can ensure that this is contextualised.

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<sup>66</sup> For example, Saltley Trust's 'Christians in Practice'

<sup>67</sup> General Synod, February 2017, GS 2056 "Setting God's People Free."

<sup>68</sup> [www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk](http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk); see also General Synod paper GS 1956, July 2014

<sup>69</sup> 'The Common Good' is the theme for Greenbelt, 2017.

