

Act on Poverty

Transcript from Act on Poverty Week 4: Located Revd Dr Al Barrett, Rector of Hodge Hill Church Birmingham and Clare McLean, Street Connector with Open Door & co-leader of FAB Church

Al: So my name is Al Barrett. I am the local vicar in Hodge Hill and have been for the last 13 years.

Clare: I'm Clare, so I've lived [in] Firs and Bromford all my life - 47 years. I work for a company called Open Door and help run like a plant church called Fab Church with a lady called Zuby, and that's been running quite a while now. I love our community. I really do. I wouldn't like to live anywhere else. Firs and Bromford is somewhere where you can always go to the shop and bump into somebody. Someone's always: "Hello. Good morning. You OK?" We get to know our neighbours. We're not rich in money. But we are rich in community.

We embrace new people that move in. We've developed welcome packs for people who are new to our area, who aren't rooted in Firs and Bromford. So we go out as a street connector and we knock doors. And with this welcome pack, we want people to belong. We want them to own Firs and Bromford as their home, to be able to come out and bring their... and show up with their gifts, skills and talents.

We base ourselves in a lot of places of welcome, which can be pop-ups outside the school gate. We turn up with teas and coffee, but we always have someone who is a connector, who's there listening and ready to have a conversation. And we're all local residents and we call ourselves - well, we're neighbours. "I live around the corner. Here's my name. What's your name?" And it's just generally being there and listening and connecting people. Oh there's this group down the road ... that lady she's interested in cooking. Come along. Let's have a look and we'll even go along with them.

Al: There are various stories that could be told about a community like ours or told by a community like ours. And the story that Clare's just told is the wonderful rich human story. I guess when I first moved here in 2010, one of the stories I often heard was this is a rubbish place to live. Nothing happens here.

(Clare: Forgotten Estate). Yeah, forgotten estate. Can't wait to get off. The council could give me a house anywhere and I'd move tomorrow.

It's also been a place over the years where the media and politicians have told a certain kind of story about it. It's a council estate. Even that term is a label that has a whole load of negative kind of meanings and understandings attached to it. We've been called things like workshy, scroungers, sink estate, on the margins, all of that kind of stuff.

One of the words I really hate about communities like ours is the word "deprived", because what it often seems to do is kind of again slap a label on people, as if somehow it's our fault that we're deprived, but actually what it conceals is who's doing the deprivation. You know, what are the structures that actually mean that an area like this misses out on some stuff?

One of the phrases that I really love that I've heard friends and colleagues use is "suppressed abundance". So actually, you know we've described already, there's an abundance in this community just waiting to come out, but sometimes it's pushed down, it's kind of boxed in, barriers are put around it to stop it from kind of bursting out.

Clare: I think that's what you did when you came along, you didn't try and fix. Actually, you looked round [at] what was already good, what was already happening. So [there was] one lady, she passed away last year, Phyllis, and she was a really big part of the community and she knew people by name and just something about them. She always took her time out to ask how the little one was, she checked up her neighbours, and she'd done a lot over the years in doing street parties and raising money. So you as the church you looked at what was already good and not try to fix it, but actually let's bring it back - all the good stuff. And that's what you did start to do, [we started] seeing a change, you started to see it changing overtime.

Al: And I know you've talked already in other bits of the series about generosity, but Phyllis is a brilliant example of that generosity that, you know, she wasn't a person with much money ever (**Clare:** No). She gave away a lot of money that she had (**Clare:** Everything! And all her stuff!) to all her friends and her neighbours and animals and charities and whatever.

But actually she modelled a kind of generosity with her time and with her love, and with her attention that kind of showered that on other people, but also actually brought out the best in others as well, didn't she? (**Clare:** Absolutely.) ... And actually some of the stuff that we're doing now, like welcome packs for

people is stuff that's been inspired by Phyllis doing it like 60 years ago when she first moved on to the estate. She was the person who went and welcomed neighbours when they first moved into their houses.

One of the things that's been really important in our community over recent years has been housing issues: damp, mould, cold, vermin, like all that kind of stuff, people have had to live with from day-to-day. And so one of the things that has happened recently is that people have begun to get together and find their voice on some of that stuff.

Clare: Yeah. So [there was a] lady in a block, she lives there with her daughter. Daughter's had a baby [in] the appalling conditions and [she was] going to meeting after meeting and not even being heard. She come and approached a few of us at the hub and we sat and we listened and got in contact with a few people. And in the end we had quite a lot of people actually came into her flat and listened to her when she was telling them all: "We've got this mice problem and we've tried this," and she did feel that she was heard. We're still waiting! But there is a promise that by us being there listening and pushing forward that these blocks will be done up now.

Al: And I think I guess one of the things that's really important for me about the story about Sarah is that someone like me, as the local vicar, could e-mail the council and kind of say, you know, here's these people living in appalling conditions. What are you going to do about it? And I guess because I'm in the role that I'm in some people might take notice. But actually we believe it's much more important, much more valuable, for someone like Sarah to actually have her own voice heard within that, and literally for council officers, for the MP, to come to her flat and see it first hand and experience it and encounter her, so that it becomes not just a problem on a piece of paper to be solved, but actually another human being.

It's not about Jesus coming to the edge places like us, it's just we take it for granted that Jesus is in the middle of community life because actually that's where we experience the fullness of life that that Jesus talks about. So I guess one of the challenges that I want to throw out to the wider world and the wider church in a sense is - Look to places like ours as centres of life.