

## **Covenant Relationships for Radicals: Baptists, Community Organising and Social Justice**

*Richard Weaver, Tutor in Community Leadership, Cardiff Baptist College, Wales, UK*

The focus of this paper is on Baptists, Community Organising, and social justice. In my research I have examined the theory and practice of Broad-based Community Organising, and established a critical dialogue between this approach to social change and Baptist social justice theology, ethics, and practice with impoverished, vulnerable and marginalised people.

Community Organising is an approach that originated in the US in the 1940s, and which came to the UK in the late 1980s. It has been adopted by churches from many denominations, by other faith traditions, and by many civic society institutions because of its perceived effectiveness as a vehicle for leadership development and collective action for social justice and the common good.

Michael Gecan, a Catholic, and a very experienced Community Organiser in the US, describes Community Organising as the work of enabling people to come together to build power to effect democratic change where they live and work. Through this, people are able to contribute to building community.

For Gecan, Community Organising enables people to build relationships across difference and across boundaries. It therefore puts pressure on institutions to think through how they relate to others across difference.

Church engagement in Community Organising has led to a fuller articulation of the values on which both organising and churches are based. Community Organising connects strongly with the values of churches and with Christ's teaching and practice on love and justice. Organising has enabled churches to put these values and their faith into action. Community Organising has informed other faith communities' social justice work, particularly in Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in Wales and England.

Despite much theological reflection and research by Baptists and others on social justice as a key area for Christian discipleship and action by churches, there is currently little practice of social justice by UK Baptist churches and Community Organising has not been well explored by them.

Baptists would benefit from a stronger theological ethic for social justice. I am keen to explore how Community Organising could help strengthen this.

Reflecting on my experience of Community Organising with Citizens UK and as part of the leadership of several Baptist churches, I want us to consider how the way Baptists understand assembling together and covenant relationships can strengthen a Baptist theological ethic for the practice of social justice. I will contrast the way in which Assembly is understood in Community Organising with how Baptists assemble and gather together, and how Baptists understand and practice covenants.

This paper engages with Paul Fiddes' understanding of a local church as a gathering of the 'unlike', a 'community of difference', and that includes marginalised people among the 'unlike'. It then examines what this means for how Baptist churches then gather together with

others and address the challenges faced by people and communities experiencing marginalisation and injustice.

I propose that practicing a stronger theological ethic may mean that when Baptist churches gather and assemble with others, this better reflects the ‘unlike’ coming together and building relationships across difference. Community Organising gives the pattern of working with various faith and non-faith groups, which is a challenge to Baptist churches.

Community Organising is also able to centre the perspectives of impoverished and marginalised people – another challenge to Baptist churches. So, I will argue that engaging in Community Organising can better enable Baptists to address social justice issues together with others.

We now consider how the way Baptists understand assembling together can strengthen a theological ethic. Firstly, let us consider who assembles together. Community Organising Assemblies are held in churches, mosques, schools and other settings. Luke Bretherton, a UK theologian who has engaged extensively with Community Organising, therefore highlights, ‘Community Organising literally draws you out of what is familiar and invites those who are unfamiliar into your sacred spaces’. They are about looking outwards rather than inwards. Assemblies in Community Organising seek to enable the public accountability of powerful decision-makers as well as demonstrating the people-power of organised civil society.

The Citizens alliance in Wales organised an Assembly with 700 people, from 36 of the 40 constituencies across Wales, ahead of the 2016 Senedd (Welsh Parliament) elections. This was hosted by Tabernacl Y Hayes, a large Welsh Baptist chapel in central Cardiff. People from institutions spoke about their experience of low pay. All four of the main party leaders in the Senedd were asked whether, if they became First Minister of Wales after the elections, they work together with Citizens to make Wales a Living Wage nation. Not a small ambition. Six weeks ahead of an election, all four party leaders said yes to this request.

The follow up after the election was important. The Citizens alliance met regularly with the First Minister, and others in the Welsh Government. The result of holding politicians to account for their commitments was that the Welsh Government committed to making Wales a Living Wage nation. Progress was made through working together to accredit all ten Welsh universities as Living Wage employers and to ensure that all those working in social care in Wales were paid the Real Living Wage.

These public assemblies enable people who are too often silenced in political discussions to share their experiences of an injustice and speak truth directly to powerful decision makers who can help make change on this issue. Doing justice with others, in the context of injustice in communities, and holding powerful people accountable, is emphasising acting for the world as it should be in the world as it is.

Secondly, we can contrast this understanding of assembling in Community Organising with how Baptists assemble when they are gathered together. Fiddes highlights the importance of listening to one another in Assembly, and seeking to speak a prophetic word to the principalities and powers of our society. So, this causes Baptists to consider who they assemble with, and what Baptists should do when they assemble.

Fiddes understands that when Baptists speak of a *gathered church* this is in response to the Christ who has gathered them. Later, Fiddes argues that this understanding of gathered church, ‘means that the local church is a community which gathers together a whole range of people, cutting across barriers of age, class, culture and temperament... Its strength comes from being a gathering of the ‘unlike’, people quite different from each other’.

This is important in the context of how Baptist churches then gather with others, for example in a wider Community Organising Assembly or alliance. Fiddes highlights that what binds people together in this community is not what people have in common, but it is a community of difference. So, it is not what people have in common that brings people together apart from belonging to Christ. And in fact with all people created in the image of God.

However, this only too rarely reflects the reality of local Baptist church congregations. Many Baptist churches are largely homogenous rather than churches of the ‘unlike’ coming together. Practicing a stronger theological ethic may mean that when Baptist churches gather and assemble with others, this better reflects the ‘unlike’ coming together and building relationships across difference.

Thirdly, let us consider why churches assemble together with other organisations. I argue that they should assemble in solidarity, to build relationships, to listen, to centre the margins and to seek the common good. It can be argued that Baptist churches should be challenged to do this. Austen Ivereigh, a Catholic writer and former Community Organiser, linked solidarity with Accountability Assemblies and has a chapter in *Faithful Citizens* entitled ‘Assembling in Solidarity’. He described an Assembly as, ‘a *civic congregation* where people of different faiths and none who live alongside each other express the hopes and frustrations they share for the city, commit to working in solidarity with each other for the common good, and hold people with power to account’. People who are on the margins of their communities or institutions play central roles in these Assemblies and relationships are built across difference.

Thus, it can be seen that a key question is how we enable Baptists to engage in Assemblies with others through encouraging churches to see that this is part of the Church’s mission of being Christ in and for the world and so consider how churches join in a life that is greater than their own. Practicing a stronger theological ethic may mean that when Baptist churches gather and assemble with others, this better reflects the ‘unlike’ coming together and building relationships across difference. Community Organising asks Baptists to assemble and work not just with other Baptists or other churches but with a much broader group of institutions. This is a challenge for Baptists.

Let us consider how covenant relationships can encourage Baptists to respond to this challenge. Covenants have been important for Baptists when they gather together. Firstly, let us explore the tradition and understanding of covenant and covenant relationships among Baptists and other radical dissenting traditions.

Key to covenants in the Old Testament is that God institutes them. God’s first covenant is creation itself where God establishes relationship between humans and God, human beings with each other, and human beings with creation (Genesis 1-2), but these relationships are broken by human self-centredness and the desire for power and control – to play God (Genesis 3). The covenant with Noah is with all of creation (Genesis 9). Covenants have their

origin in God, not humans. Early covenant life in the Bible was seeking to bring glory to God through showing what right relationships with God and with other people look like. The understanding of covenant in the New Testament is cosmic and is also instituted by God through the cross and Christ's resurrection (Colossians 1:15-20). Covenants then provide the fuel for the community life of those following Christ.

Covenant language was developed by Baptists and other early dissenters in the seventeenth century, in focusing on building strong relationships between members of an individual congregation in the context of persecution and oppression. These Baptist churches also brought together people who were 'unlike', and they formed covenants across difference. Baptists adopted a covenantal life to walk together and watch over each other in love.

Baptists understood that we walk together and watch over each other because Christ does. Cross-shaped agape love, rather than money, is the measure of the community. This understanding should be at the root of what Baptists see as covenant theology. However, it can be argued that Baptists have generally reduced covenant to just being about relationships between people in a congregation. So, covenant is not fully understood by Baptists and is not being lived.

Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes and Richard Kidd were leading UK Baptist theologians in the period when Community Organising was developing in the UK. They led the revival of covenant theology and took it in new directions. They proffered a more expansive and open-ended approach to covenantal relationships, and provided the grounding for working together with others.

This approach differs from the original understanding of covenant, while being rooted in it. For Fiddes, Haymes and Kidd, covenants are key to building community, and working towards the beloved community. Covenants are both a track of Baptist identity, and also a trace to follow, understanding that Baptist identity is dynamic rather than static and is developed in community.

In the context of persecution and oppression, these early covenant relationships were, of necessity, focused inwards initially. Fiddes, Haymes and Kidd develop this in asking how we can take covenant theology and make it much more outward-focused. Thus, this becomes a way for Baptists to move on from their tradition of what it means to covenant together, to understand what it would mean to covenant together with others and participate in covenant-like relationships that God forms with others in community, way beyond the church.

Fiddes understands that a covenant is not just with God, but in God. For Fiddes, the Baptist understanding of covenant, centred in the language of walking together, is relational language and implies openness, trust and being on a journey together.

Fiddes, along with Haymes and Kidd in their writing together, and separately, encourage Baptists to be more open to wider society, to connect with others, and in this they highlighted the importance of listening. As Fiddes argues, a local church, 'will always be open to listen to the voices of others, aware that it is dependent upon their help in finding the mind of Christ, whether the voices come from wider groupings of churches or from society outside the church'. Haymes argues that Baptists are called to be immersed in their wider communities, 'with all the moral and political implications that go with sharing a common life'.

Fiddes reveals that mission and covenant are intertwined. He understands that the missionary God is also the covenant-making God. Fiddes argues that this perspective has implications for the character of the mission in which the church is engaged. Thus, mission is ‘essentially relational, essentially a matter of making communion and community’. In addition, Kidd understands that covenant language ‘is still the best and theologically most consistent focus around which to be gathered, and on which to build our future strategies for mission’.

Covenantal relationships bring a Baptist theological understanding to Community Organising and provide a dynamic way to weave institutions together in acting for justice. Thus, a focus on covenant theology and ethics can be very helpful both to strengthen a Baptist theological ethic as well as something Baptists can offer other churches and other institutions engaging in Community Organising.

In Wales and England, there has been over 400 years of conversation about what it means to be Baptist. However, in the UK we have less than 40 years of conversation about what Community Organising means for churches. Up to now, Baptists in the UK have not really participated in this latter conversation as part of a Baptist conversation about justice. I propose that this is what should be the next step for Baptists.

Those who initially developed Community Organising focused on what it means to be radical and what it means for an institution to act from its roots. It can be argued that Baptists can come to acting for justice based on covenant relationships from their roots. Through these Baptists can help recover solidarity between people and institutions by walking together and watching over each other in love, and so renew their understanding of what it means to be radical in covenantal relationships with others.

People and relationships are central to Christian ethics. It considers what course of action cares best for others and strengthens relationships in seeking the common good. The Rule of the Iona Community includes the statement, ‘our commitment on justice and peace is...a point of departure. It will remain no more than a pious hope (and a false witness) unless we seek, separately and together, to put it into practice’.

Thus, it is not enough to have a Baptist theological ethic for the practice of social justice. It must be translated into reality; it must be practiced through action in the world as it is and that aims to more fully bring about the world as it should be.

In addition, it is important that Baptists and others are practicing covenant rather than just having them as a written document. The writings of Fiddes, Haymes and Kidd are very helpful in developing our thinking on covenant. However, I argue their understanding of covenantal relationships is not practiced currently by Baptists in Wales and England.

Weaving relationships together with others in distinctive ways should produce new patterns and reconfigure the quality and character of both Baptist churches and other organisations. The result will be patterns in communities that are beautiful and inspiring to others. However, we have a long way to go before our communities resemble the beloved community of Christ.

My hope is that there might be many more stories that can be told in the future of Baptist engagement in Community Organising in Wales and England, as Baptists seek to assemble together with others, and to be radical in covenanting with God, and with others, in seeking justice.