

Introducing The GRA:CE (Growth, Relationship and Action in the Church of England) Project

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Theos and the Church Urban Fund are conducting a three-year research project seeking to understand the relationship between church growth, social action and discipleship within the Church of England. This project has been made possible by the generosity of the Sir Halley Stewart Trust who are financially supporting the GRA:CE project.

Extensive qualitative and quantitative research with churches across the country will explore what they are currently doing in terms of both social action and discipleship, and how these two elements fit into strategies for church growth. In addition to research findings, the project will develop a set of responses and 'how to' documents for church leaders. Throughout the project, there will be regular blog posts to communicate the ongoing thinking and findings of the research.

Here, Hannah Rich, a researcher at Theos, shares some initial thoughts on social action, church growth and discipleship.

In his 2010 book, *Obliquity*, the economist John Kay, drawing on the ideas of the philosopher John Stuart Mill, suggests that goals are paradoxically more likely to be realised when they are pursued indirectly. He calls this idea 'obliquity'; the notion that sometimes, in order to achieve certain aims or targets, it may be more productive to look in the other direction.¹ Kay goes on to use this to claim that businesses may be more successful when they don't make financial success their sole aim.²

Kay's theory of obliquity does not mean that businesses can abandon altogether any interest in being profitable nor that they shouldn't celebrate and welcome profitability when it happens. This would clearly not be a sensible business strategy. Rather, the point is that it should not, or need not, be the primary driver of the business. There can still be an underlying desire for profit or financial success, without it being the main motivation.

Churches are not businesses, nor can we imagine them as such. But there might be lessons for us to learn from applying some of Kay's ideas from the world of business to the issue of church growth. David Goodhew rightly recognises that church growth often results from an intentional effort to grow and is rarely a complete accident.³ In a secular age, he argues, churches have no choice but to be conscious about their growth to some extent. They can't reject wholesale the 'growth agenda' or any deliberate effort to grow their congregation numerically. However, it may be that by pursuing or prioritising other aspects of church life, growth comes about organically or obliquely.

The Bishop of Kensington, Graham Tomlin, argues that in order to grow and flourish,

churches might begin by being themselves and actively seeking to reflect Jesus to their local communities.⁴ The Church as a whole exists to mirror Christ to those around it, just as Christians as individuals are encouraged to do so through their own behaviour. What that looks like might well be different according to the varying needs of individual communities and parishes, but the purpose remains the same. Church-based projects that seek to serve their community should also point implicitly to the faith that is their primary motivation.

Social action is rarely done with the explicit and main intention of growing the church; it is led instead from a desire to serve the community. These activities are worthwhile in their own right, but also for the questions and conversations they can lead to and the relationships that are built in the process. Social action projects and discipleship initiatives are both ways in which churches may seek to reflect Jesus to those around them. The relationships and connections that emerge from these actions may draw people into church, indirectly leading to the growth of the congregation.

We might also understand Jesus' words in Matthew 6 – 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added onto you' (v. 33, NIV) – as a sort of precursor to John Kay's idea of obliquity. The previous verse reminds us that 'your heavenly Father knows' (v. 32, NIV), and Jesus' message in this particular chapter is not that we can forget about 'these things' altogether, but rather one about kingdom priorities. Seek first the kingdom, and the rest is a gift.

According to Kay, a business that seeks to be a good business, rather than channelling all its energy into being economically successful, is still likely to both profitable and sustainable as a by-product. Likewise, it might well be that as a happy consequence of seeking to be an authentic, Christ-like presence in their communities, churches will experience growth in both strength and size. As Goodhew acknowledges, there is not a binary choice to make between seeking the kingdom or growing the church; both are valuable and indeed necessary in today's world. It is a question of where the emphasis lies, rather than one about whether we need consider growth at all.

Do get in touch with Hannah Rich if you would like to hear more about the project or would like to share examples you think we should know about: hannah.rich@theosthinktank.co.uk

NOTES

1. J Kay, *Obliquity: Why our goals are best achieved indirectly* (London: Profile Books, 2010).

2. For more on the implications of the idea of obliquity for social change and community transformation, read D Boyle, 'The grammar of change: Big Local neighbourhoods in action' (2017). Available at <http://localtrust.org.uk/library/research-and-evaluation/the-grammar-of-change>

3. D Goodhew, 'The Theological Foundations for Church Growth', in this issue of *The Bible in Transmission*, pp.5–7.

4. G Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* (London: SPCK, 2002).